

**FAMILY BREAKDOWN AND FAMILY CONFLICT:
THE NCDS COHORT AS PARENTS**

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Abstract

The purpose of this short study was, firstly, to identify a group of NCDS cohort members who, as parents, had separated from a partner who was the other parent of their children, and to investigate the circumstances and aftermath of the relationship breakdown. The findings revealed that almost half of the mothers involved, but less than one in five of the fathers, reported that the separation in question was preceded by conflict involving physical violence. The great majority of children had remained with their mother following the break. Most of the fathers living away from their children were in contact with them, and supported them financially. Contact was rather less likely when violence had occurred in the parental relationship, and current relationships with ex-partners were less likely to be friendly.

The second aim of the study the study was to identify parents in currently 'intact' families whose relationship with their partners appeared to be in difficulty. Considerably more mothers than fathers fell into this category on the basis of self-report. These 'unhappy' parents - especially mothers - were much more likely than their 'happy' counterparts to report disagreement with their partner on a range of domestic and personal issues.

A straightforward comparison of these various groups on a number of measures of well-being showed that parents currently in unhappy relationships, especially mothers, were least likely to feel satisfied with, and in control, of their lives. As far as their children were concerned, those whose parents had separated (especially where violence had occurred), or were currently in unhappy relationships, were more likely than their peers in happy intact families to show signs of developmental difficulties .

Background

The seemingly inexorable rise in the divorce rate in Britain has brought relationship breakdown once more to the forefront of social policy concern, including the issue of how adverse effects on children can be minimised. Over the years numerous investigations in Britain and elsewhere have studied the effects on children's development of family disruption caused by parental divorce or separation (for an overview see Burghes, 1994). As Britain's longitudinal birth cohort studies have followed their subjects into adulthood, it has become possible also to trace any long-term effects of earlier family breakdown (eg Kiernan, 1992; Wadsworth, 1988).

Although research over the years has consistently revealed poorer outcomes among those from disrupted families, the precise mechanisms whereby adverse influences operate remain less than clear. For example, there is considerable evidence that the economic and social disadvantage which marital breakdown brings in its train accounts for much, though not all, of the observed differences (eg Ferri, 1976, 1984). More recently, researchers have begun to focus on divorce as a *process* rather than an *event*. Taking this perspective, the key question becomes one of disentangling the effects of experiences *before, during and after* the formal break. What are the relative contributions of i) conflict, stress or other adverse circumstances in the period preceding the actual rupture; ii) the divorce or separation itself; and iii) the changed or new relationships and socio-economic circumstances which are the likely result?

Studies both here and in the United States have found evidence of poorer development among children in *pre-divorcing* families (eg Elliott and Richards, 1991; Cherlin et al, 1991). The British research used data from the childhood sweeps of the 1958 longitudinal birth cohort study (National Child Development Study). Significantly poorer development was found

among children whose parents *subsequently* divorced than among those who remained in intact families, and this was implicitly attributed to the emotional difficulties already being experienced in families which later separated. It is worth noting, however, that no study to date has taken full account of the socio-economic circumstances of pre-divorcing families, which, as in the aftermath of divorce, may account for at least some of the difference in development. At these earlier stages of the National Child Development Study, no direct information was obtained from parents about the nature or level of conflict in their relationship. Such data is vital, however, to a greater understanding of the how the circumstances and experiences of family life influence the children growing up in them.

More recently, a study in Exeter (Cockett and Tripp, 1994) carried out in-depth interviews with both parents and children in 76 're-ordered' families (defined as having lost a parent on one or more occasions and, in some cases, acquired a step-parent), and 76 'intact' families. The latter were sub-divided into 'high' and 'low' conflict groups on the basis of parental reports of their own relationships. The findings indicated that family 're-ordering' was most closely associated with children's difficulties in a number of developmental areas, while those experiencing 'serious' conflict occupied an intermediate position between the 're-ordered' and 'low' conflict groups. Although recognising that it is detrimental for children to experience conflict in an 'intact' family, the authors concluded that divorce may not necessarily alleviate the situation for children, and, depending on what happens as a result, may in fact exacerbate it.

While this study provides new and important information about the experience and aftermath of conflict in different family situations, the numbers in the various sub-groups examined are small, and the authors also note that conflict may have been under-reported by parents in the

'intact' sample. Clearly, much remains to be learned about the nature and evolution of parental disharmony and its impact upon children, including whether or not it leads to a formal break in the family unit, and the consequences in each case.

The present study

As noted above, research to date which has identified 'pre-divorce' effects on children's development has generally involved retrospective analysis, and tended to conclude that the differences found reflected stressful relationships and difficulties in families which were 'heading for' breakdown. Few studies, however, are able to obtain samples of, and information on, 'unhappy' families at this actual stage in their life course.

This methodological problem was overcome in the latest, fifth sweep of the National Child Development Study. Carried out in 1991, the survey collected information on nearly 11,500 33-year-old cohort members, and approximately 5000 children of a one in three sample (Ferri,1993). Extensive new data covering family formation histories, partnership relations, and parenting behaviour and values, enables more probing analysis to be undertaken than before of the specific factors in family experience which affect children's well-being and development. In particular, there is an opportunity to examine the links between conflict or unhappiness in *current* parental relationships and outcomes for children, as well as the circumstances and development of those in families which have already experienced disruption. The wealth of data collected on the cohort members' own families of origin as they grew up also permit investigation of intergenerational continuities and discontinuities in patterns of family formation, disruption and influence upon children.

Aims of the study

The purpose of the present, exploratory, study was to identify two groups among the NCDS cohort at age 33: those who, as parents, had experienced divorce or separation by the time of the fifth sweep, and those parents who reported their current partnership as unhappy. Further characteristics and circumstances of these groups were examined, and also whether there were any differences between them in terms of certain indicators of both parental and child wellbeing. More specifically, the following questions were addressed:

1) Divorced/separated parents

i) Circumstances of parental separation

How many of the cohort members had separated from one or more partners who was the other parent of all or some of their children? What were the circumstances surrounding the separation in terms of the level of conflict experienced?

ii) The aftermath of separation

What were the family/household arrangements following separation (eg lone parenthood, remarriage, cohabitation) by the time of the fifth sweep? What was the outcome of separation in terms of subsequent contact and relationship with the former partner? Was this related to the circumstances of the separation?

2) 'Unhappy' intact partnerships

How many mothers and fathers claimed that their current partnership was less than happy? What did their responses to the survey tell us about other aspects of their relationship, including areas of disagreement, especially relating to childrearing? Future follow-up surveys of the cohort will indicate whether these cohort members represent a 'pre-divorcing' group,

but it is particularly important to look at their *current* responses, to present a picture of the circumstances, characteristics and parenting behaviour of a sample which is difficult to obtain by other methods.

3) Partnership experience and parent and child outcomes

The final stage of the project explored any links between these different partnership experiences and a limited number of outcomes relating to the well-being of both parents and children. As already indicated, this represented very much a preliminary analysis: time did not allow for further characteristics of the families, such as their economic and social circumstances, to be examined, and any relevant differences in these to be taken into account.

FINDINGS

Experience of relationship breakdown among the NCDS cohort

The great majority of the NCDS cohort (89 per cent of men and 93 per cent of women) had lived in a partnership at least once by the age of 33 (Ferri, 1993). Three out of ten (30 per cent) of those who had done so had also experienced at least one separation from a spouse or cohabitee (table 1). Slightly more women (31 per cent) than men (28 per cent) had had broken relationships, no doubt reflecting the younger age on average at which women enter partnerships, and thus the longer period 'at risk' of separating. However, similar proportions of men and women (seven per cent in each case) had experienced more than one separation, and slightly more men had had two or more.

The cohort members were asked during interview about the frequency of arguments preceding separation, and also on whether or not violence was involved. The first step was to

identify the total numbers who, on the basis of their responses, could be said to have experienced 'conflictful' and 'non-conflictful' separations, how many of these involved parents, and the number of children concerned.

Not surprisingly, the great majority of separations were said by the respondents concerned to have involved arguments, with women claiming a rather greater frequency of arguments than men (table 2). A quarter of the women, compared with 17 per cent of the men, stated that they had argued at least every day, or many times a day, in the year preceding the separation; while 16 per cent of men, and just 11 per cent of women, reported that they had 'never argued'. However, a much more marked difference between the sexes emerged when respondents were asked if these arguments ever ended in physical violence: more than three times as many women (37 per cent) as men (12 per cent) gave an affirmative answer to this question (table 3).

No further information was asked for about the nature or circumstances of these reported violent episodes, and so these findings need to be treated with caution. However, the discrepancies in the replies of men and women are important, and need explaining. Despite recent media preoccupation with the notion of abuse by females, it is reasonable to assume that in most cases of domestic, as in other forms of, violence, the perpetrator is male. Could these discrepant figures therefore indicate a denial by a proportion of male cohort members that violence had taken place? Or a difference between men and women in what they *perceive* as physical violence? Or, perhaps, a mixture of both? Whatever the explanation, the fact that nearly four out of ten women stated that they had experienced violence in their relationships is a disturbing finding.

Relationship breakdown among parents

The next step involved narrowing the focus to look at which cohort members were parents when their relationship(s) ended, and whether the partner from whom they had separated was the other parent of their child(ren). Identifying these groups involved complex computing procedures, and so this subsequent analysis was restricted to those who reported separations from up to two partners. Those having three or more were comparatively few overall (n=156), and this number would have been reduced considerably more by including only those who were parents and whose former partner was the other parent of their child(ren).

First separation

A total of 1163 cohort members (726 mothers and 437 fathers) had separated from a first partner who was the other parent of all or some of their children (table 4). In the great majority of cases, the couple had been married (89 per cent of fathers and 87 per cent of mothers), and by the time of the follow-up study, most of these had divorced (82 per cent of the fathers and 85 per cent of the mothers). Cohort members who were parents appeared to have experienced rather more frequent arguments in the year prior to separating from their first partner than was the case for the sample as a whole. Again, there was a marked gender difference: 24 per cent of fathers and 35 per cent of mothers claimed to have argued at least once a day or more. Fewer than one in ten parents (10 per cent of fathers and eight per cent of mothers) said that the period leading up to the break in their relationship had been free of such conflict.

As was the case when the whole cohort was examined, there was a marked sex difference in the proportions claiming that conflict between the couple had involved physical violence (44 per cent of mothers and 17 per cent of fathers) (table 5). What is also striking, however, is

that for both sexes, the proportion of parents reporting violence was higher than that for the cohort as a whole, where the figures had been 37 per cent for women and 12 per cent for men.

The higher levels of reported physical violence by mothers and fathers than by childless women and men also requires comment, although, again, this can be no more than speculative at this stage. One hypothesis might be that the presence of children increases the stress and pressure on the parental relationship. It might also be the case that parents remain longer than childless couples in dysfunctional relationships - 'for the sake of the children'? - and that the tension between them is consequently increased. Alternatively, further analysis might indicate other ways in which the characteristics and circumstances of parents and non-parents differed and which were also related to the reported experience of violence in partnership relations. The NCDS survey data would enable a number of possibly relevant factors to be explored, although more in-depth, qualitative information would also be needed to investigate the key areas of family dynamics and family functioning.

Second separation

The number of parents who had separated from a second partner, who was also the other natural parent of all or some of their children, was, predictably, smaller than the first group, involving 127 mothers and 86 fathers (table 6). Looking at the levels of reported violence associated with these breakdowns showed that the figure for mothers was similar to that for all women (38 per cent), but for the fathers, it was slightly higher than for those in first separations (20 per cent and 17 per cent respectively).

Since the numbers who had experienced a second separation were comparatively small, and in order to simplify the computing tasks involved, the subsequent analyses focus on first separations only.

Number of children involved in parental separations

Table 7 shows the number of children born to mothers and fathers in first partnerships which had since ended. The great majority in both cases had had just one or two children, with, as might be expected, mothers having slightly more children than fathers (since all cohort members were the same age and women have children at younger ages than men).

Table 8 looks at the nature of the separation from the first partner - whether it involved violence, argument only or, in a small minority of cases, no apparent conflict - according to the number of children involved. This shows that for mothers, there was no consistent relationship between the number of children of the partnership and whether or not it was reported to have ended in violence. For fathers, however, the proportion reporting a violent end to the relationship increased with the number of children.

These findings, like those reported above, are difficult to interpret without a great deal of further information and analysis. However, with regard to the pattern among fathers, they do raise similar questions to those considered earlier about the relationship between the presence of children and the level and nature of conflict between parents. It is worth noting here that fathers with larger numbers of children were more likely to have become parents at a younger age (Ferri and Smith, 1996); also that there is an association between larger family size and parental unemployment (Ward et al, 1993). Such factors may not only be linked with a higher risk of family breakdown, but also with more extreme conflict in the period preceding it.

The aftermath of separation

Although the tables referred to above have shown the number of children born to broken first partnerships, not all of these children were in the care of their cohort member parent by the time of the 33-year survey. Not surprisingly, there was a very marked gender difference in outcome here, with 89 per cent of the mothers who had separated from their first partner having all the children concerned in their care, compared with just nine per cent of fathers (table 9).

Among the mothers, there was a slight tendency for more of those whose separations had involved violence to have all or some of their children living elsewhere, while for the comparable group of fathers there was an equally slight trend in the opposite direction - ie for a higher proportion to have all the children of the partnership living with them. Whilst these trends appear somewhat puzzling, it should be emphasised once again that, since nothing else is known about the circumstances of violence, or its relationship to subsequent events and arrangements, no firm conclusions can safely be drawn from these figures.

Children living away from cohort member

Where the cohort member was *not* the caring parent following separation, details were available of his or her subsequent involvement with the children, including financial support, whether there was any contact between them, and where and with whom the children were living.

Those cohort members who were living apart from the children of their first partnership were asked where the children concerned were now living. Predictably, the great majority (93 per

cent) of the children of the NCDS fathers were living with their natural mother (table 10). About half of these mothers were said to be married or cohabiting by the time of the follow-up survey, and about half were unpartnered. In just two per cent of cases (n=7), the fathers concerned said that they did not know the whereabouts of their children.

In contrast, only about 50 per cent of the absent children of cohort mothers were living with their natural father, about half of whom were with a new partner and half on their own. In a further quarter of cases (n=11), the children involved had been adopted (all but two by non-relatives), probably indicating that they had never, or only for a short time, lived with their biological parent(s). As with the fathers, in two per cent of cases (n=1) the mother did not know where the child was now living.

Contact with absent children

The cohort members were also asked whether they currently saw the children of their first partnership who were not living with them. About three quarters (73 per cent) of the fathers said that they did see all the children concerned, and just over a fifth (22 per cent) saw none of them (table 11). The remainder (five per cent) indicated that they saw some but not others. Further analysis would indicate the length of time which had elapsed since the separation from the first partner; the figures reported here, however, would seem to indicate a rather higher level of continued contact than the research (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991) which reported that 50 per cent of fathers lose contact with their children within two years of family breakdown.

Among the much smaller group of mothers who were not living with the children of their first partnership, there was a lower level of continued contact. Just over half said they saw their

children nowadays, and four out of ten said they did not see any of them. This probably reflects the number of children who had been adopted (see above), but there may also be something in the circumstances of separation from the mother, as opposed to the father, which makes subsequent contact less likely.

A further analysis looked at whether the *nature* of the separation was linked in any way to whether parents' currently saw children of the partnership who were living elsewhere. This showed that in cases which had involved physical violence, non-custodial fathers and mothers were *less* likely to see the children concerned than those who had only argued (table 12). However, it should also be noted that half of the mothers and 62 per cent of fathers in the 'violence' groups were in contact with their children.

Financial support

Parents who were living apart from the children of their first partnerships were also asked if they currently made any financial contribution to the children's maintenance. (It should be recalled here that this survey was carried out in 1991, prior to the introduction of the Child Support Agency). Six out of ten fathers said that they did provide such support, and the great majority of these (86 per cent) also saw their children (table 13). About a quarter of the fathers said that they saw the children but made no financial contribution, and the remainder (16 per cent) neither saw nor supported them.

Just one in five of the mothers concerned saw their children and paid towards their maintenance; twice as many had contact with them but made no financial contribution. The remaining 40 per cent did not see or support their children - including, presumably, the group whose children had been adopted.

Further information, not analysed for this study, was obtained relating to the level and regularity of maintenance payments, and whether these were made under a court order.

Contact with former partners

Overall two out of three of the cohort members concerned said that they saw their former partner, with fathers rather more likely than mothers to be in contact (70 per cent and 62 per cent respectively) (table 14). As might be expected, mothers who claimed that the relationship had involved physical violence were less likely to see their former partners than those who had experienced just verbal conflict (or no arguments), although it is worth stressing that even where violence had occurred, half the mothers currently saw their ex-partners. For fathers, the pattern was less clear-cut: those who claimed violence had taken place were rather *more* likely to see their former partner than those whose relationship was reported as argument-free.

Cohort members who were in touch with their former partner were asked to rate their current relationship on a five-point scale ranging from 'very friendly' to 'very unfriendly'. For mothers, there was a clear link between their assessment of the present relationship and the circumstances of the earlier breakdown. Where violence had occurred, the current relationship was much more likely to be rated negatively than where there had been little or no conflict (table 15). Even so, it should be noted that four out of ten mothers who had experienced violence rated their current relationship as 'friendly' or 'very friendly'.

For fathers, on the other hand, no clear pattern emerged at all, except for a tendency for a higher proportion of 'very friendly' current relationships among the small group who claimed that they had not even argued with their former partner.

These findings add to the intriguing gender differences discussed above concerning the reporting of physical violence in the cohort members' first partnership, and also point to the perception and meaning of violence as a very complex factor in the domain of personal relationships.

The cohort members' current contact with their former partners was also analysed in relation to the domicile of the children from the partnership (table 16). A similar level of contact was found among both fathers and mothers whose children were living with them, and fathers whose children were elsewhere. Only the small group of mothers who were living apart from their children were less likely to see their ex-partner, which no doubt links with the finding reported earlier that they were less likely to see their children also.

Cohort members' ratings of their current relationship with their first partner were also examined according to where their children were living. Mothers and fathers whose children were *not* living with them showed almost identical responses, with just over half in each case saying that the relationship was friendly (table 17). Mothers whose children *were* with them gave similar replies, but the small group of custodial fathers were much less likely to describe their current relationship as friendly. As suggested above in respect of the relatively low level of contact between mothers and children living apart from each other, this may indicate something about the nature of the separation which results in the children staying with their father.

Partnership situation at 33

Information was also available about the *current* partnership situation of those parents who had experienced separation from their first partner. This showed that, overall, fathers were slightly more likely than mothers to be remarried or cohabiting at age 33, (58 per cent and 51 per cent respectively, table 18). Both fathers and mothers whose children from their first partnership were living with them were less likely to have formed new partnerships by age 33 (42 per cent and 50 per cent respectively) than were those whose children were living elsewhere (60 per cent and 64 per cent).

Family situation at 33

From the analyses carried out so far, it was possible to arrive at an approximate calculation of the various family arrangements in which the children of cohort members' broken first partnerships were currently living. (Note that the unit of analysis here is the cohort member - ie it does not take account of the number of children involved). Nearly half (46 per cent) of the NCDS mothers were living as lone parents with the children concerned, and a similar proportion with a new partner, ie in a stepfamily (table 19). In just four per cent of cases the children were with their natural father (half of whom were alone and half repartnered).

Among the NCDS fathers, in four out of ten cases, the children were living with their natural mother alone, and a similar proportion in a stepfamily with their mother and her new partner. Just nine per cent of the fathers had the children of their first partnership living with them, with roughly equal numbers alone or with a new partner.

Thus, by the time the cohort members reached the age of 33, their children from broken first partnerships were equally likely to be living in a lone parent family or a stepfamily. In both cases, however, the great majority were with their natural mother (either a female cohort member or the ex-partner of a male cohort member). This pattern reflects the fact that, in most 'reconstituted' families, the step-parent is male, and that 'social' as opposed to 'biological' parenthood is a role largely, and increasingly, undertaken by men. This is an important issue which needs further exploration in studies of the nature and impact of family life and parenting in today's society.

Unhappy relationships

The other group of parents in which this study was interested were those who, at the time of the survey in 1991, were living with a spouse or cohabitee, and any children from the union, but who indicated that the relationship with their partner was not a happy one.

One of the questions on the What Do You Think? self-completion questionnaire asked the cohort members to rate how happy they were with their present partnership on a seven point scale ranging from 'extremely happy' (7) to 'extremely unhappy' (1). The replies across the whole sample showed that the great majority of both sexes expressed positive views: nearly eight out of ten scoring six or seven. Just five per cent of both men and women indicated that they were less than happy (giving a rating of 3 or less). Very similar figures emerged when parents, rather than the whole sample, were examined, with 80 per cent of fathers and 79 per cent of mothers scoring at the 'very happy' end of the scale (table 20).

A number of further questions provided further information about the cohort members' feelings about their relationship, and also how harmonious it was. Analysis of these responses indicated that those who rated their relationship '4' on the above scale ('neither happy nor

unhappy') closely resembled those who more clearly indicated their unhappiness. Consequently, these groups were combined to form a sample of cohort members who appeared dissatisfied with their relationship - comprising 234 fathers and a considerably larger number of mothers - 420.

Other aspects of happy and unhappy partnerships

Looking first at family size showed that 'unhappy' mothers were more likely than their 'happy' counterparts to have three or more children (31 per cent and 23 per cent respectively), while 'unhappy' fathers were slightly more likely than those in the 'happy' group to have just one child or three or more (table 21).

The responses to further questions about their relationships with their partner revealed striking differences between the two groups - especially among mothers. More than a quarter of the unhappy mothers said they frequently wished they hadn't married, as did one in ten unhappy fathers (table 22). The figure for their contented counterparts was less than one per cent in each case.

Eight out of ten of those who were happy in their relationship said that they would marry the same person if they could live their life again (table 23). Only a quarter of the unhappy mothers were of the same view, although the corresponding group of fathers were rather more likely to contemplate repeating their previous choice (41 per cent).

Similarly, whilst eight out of ten happy parents claimed to share all or most of their problems with their partner, only half as many unhappy mothers did so, while the figure for unhappy fathers fell mid-way between (six out of ten) (table 24).

A further series of questions on the self-completion instrument asked cohort members to indicate the level of consensus with their partner on a number of key topics, using a five point scale ranging from 'nearly always agree' to 'nearly always disagree' A further possible response was 'we never talk about it'. The topics listed covered the intimate side of their relationship, domestic issues, the couple's social life and views about parenthood and child-rearing (table 25).

In summarising the findings, the first point to note is the very large overall difference on all topics between the happy and the unhappy groups in their level of agreement with their partners. The majority of the former agreed 'often or nearly always' on every subject listed, and their consensus was especially high in relation to having and bringing up children. Interestingly, these were two of the few matters on which a majority (albeit far fewer) of the unhappy parents appeared to agree; on almost every other topic, between a quarter and a third of the unhappy group indicated that they disagreed or never discussed the subject. It is worth noting that non-communication was much more characteristic of the unhappy group generally - especially in the views of the mothers.

In general, there seemed to be no marked gender differences in the views expressed - especially among the happy group. Among the unhappy parents, however, there were one or two differences which are worth noting. Mothers were more likely than fathers to see the sharing of household tasks, and how children should be brought up, as areas of conflict.

It must be pointed out that no causal link is implied in these findings: ie it cannot be concluded that specific disagreements lead to unhappiness in relationships, or, conversely, that they are the outlet for underlying dissatisfaction with the partnership.

What was also striking here was the very high level of correspondence in the replies of happy fathers and mothers, and the discrepancy of views recorded by unhappy fathers and mothers. The fathers in the latter group seemed less likely than the mothers to reflect their general unhappy view of their relationship in their replies to more concrete questions. Is this a denial of, or reluctance to acknowledge, particular problems, or, perhaps, a lower level of awareness of areas of conflict in their relationships?

Outcomes for parents and children

In the final stage of this exploratory study, we examined a number of outcomes for both the parents and the children in the groups experiencing the different family circumstances which have been described above.

In the initial proposal for the study it had been envisaged that those who had experienced a separation from a partner might be sub-divided according to whether the relationship breakdown appeared to have been 'conflictful' or 'amicable'. However, the preceding findings have shown that few relationships had ended without conflict, and that a perhaps surprising proportion were said to involve physical violence. Although there was nothing to suggest that the children concerned had been directly involved in violent episodes, it was considered important to look at these groups separately, since a number of studies have established a link between family violence and negative outcomes for children (eg Amato and Keith, 1991; Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986).

Parental outcomes

In the analyses of parental outcomes, comparisons were made between the following groups:

parents who had experienced separation involving:

-violence

-argument only

-no conflict

parent's in current relationships rated as:

-happy

-unhappy

It should be remembered that the 'separated' group are defined as having separated from their first partner, who was also the parent of some or all of their children. No account is taken at this stage of their *current* partnership situation at the time of the survey.

Three items were selected from the self-completion What Do You Think? questionnaire to give some insight into the cohort members' feelings of well-being and satisfaction with their lives at age 33. The first question asked them to indicate how happy they were - 'all things considered'. Their responses showed that the biggest differences were in the currently 'intact' families, between the group who were satisfied with their partnership and those who were not. Just 12 per cent of both fathers and mothers in unhappy relationships said that they were 'very happy' generally, compared with 40 and 53 per cent respectively whose relationships were happy (table 26). Parents who had separated from their first partner occupied an intermediate position, and there was little difference associated with the nature of the

separation, except that fathers whose relationship had ended in violence were rather more likely to say they were unhappy than those who had experienced no conflict.

In response to the question 'How satisfied are you with the way your life has turned out so far?', the same pattern emerged in the case of mothers: those currently in unhappy relationships were much more likely to be dissatisfied than any other group (50 per cent, compared with less than a third of those in the various separated groups, and just five per cent of mothers in happy relationships, table 27). Fathers who were unhappy in their relationships and those whose first partnerships had ended violently were the least likely to be satisfied with their lives to date, although the differences were less marked than among mothers.

The final measure examined in relation to the parents concerned their expressed sense of control over their own lives. Interestingly, the most striking finding again concerned the mothers currently in unhappy relationships, who were less likely than any other group to feel that they were in control over what happened to them. Just two out of three gave a positive response to this, compared with 80 per cent or more among the groups who had been separated and 90 per cent of mothers in happy partnerships (table 28). A similar, although again less marked pattern was found among the fathers.

These findings suggest that the cohort members' previous relationship experience was less closely linked to their present emotional state than was their perception of their current relationship. From these measures, parents, especially mothers, in unhappy relationships seemed disproportionately likely to be generally unhappy and dissatisfied with their lives, and to feel they were not in control.

A key question here concerns the links, if any, between parents'/mothers' emotional state and other aspects of their parenting behaviour, and developmental outcomes in their children. We were not able to explore these relationships any further in this study, but this is clearly an area in which further investigation is needed.

Outcomes for children

Finally, we look at the relationship between parents' partnership experience and some developmental measures relating to the children of the cohort members concerned. The NCDS fifth sweep collected a wealth of data on the physical, educational and social-emotional development of all the natural and adopted children living with a one in three sample of the cohort at the time of the survey. The cognitive assessments administered to all those children aged four or over at the time of the survey included measures of vocabulary, verbal memory, mathematical skills, reading comprehension and recognition, and memory for digit span. For the purposes of this exploratory study, however, a simple analysis was carried out of the relationship between their cohort member parent's partnership experience and the following measures of the children's social and emotional development:

-whether any child had seen a psychologist or psychiatrist regarding any behavioural, emotional or mental problem, or learning difficulty;

- whether any child over five was not completely dry at night;

- whether any child had ever had attacks of asthma or wheezing;

- how well the children got on with other children;

- *how well the children behaved with their parents.*

The cases included in this part of the analysis were those taking part in the 'Mother and Child' part of the fifth sweep -ie a one in three sample of cohort members. Thus, the numbers in our sample groups were considerably lower than was the case for the previous analyses involving the cohort members themselves. As a result, the sub-groups containing those whose first separations had involved arguments only, or no conflict at all, were combined, since the latter was too small to consider separately. Also, since the number of fathers who had separated from their first partner and whose children from that partnership were living with them were very small, only mothers who had experienced separation were included at this stage. The numbers in the sub-groups for the analysis of child measures were as follows:

Mothers separated from first partner:

violence involved: yes 115

no 143

unhappy current relationship:

fathers 61

mothers 146

happy current relationship:

fathers 774

mothers 957

Although the analyses carried out earlier had established how many children had been born to cohort members' first partnerships, the computing work involved in identifying these

individual children in the Mother and Child study was too complex to undertake in the time available. Consequently, the child measures examined here relate to *all* the cohort members' children living with them at the time of the survey. It should be borne in mind, therefore, that some of these may be children of subsequent partnerships. It should also be noted that the information obtained about the children was collected from *mothers* during the Mother Interview. For female cohort members this would have been the cohort member herself, but for males, the respondent would be their wife or partner.

Table 29 shows the proportions in each of the comparison groups whose *children had seen a professional regarding some emotional, behavioural or learning difficulty*. The highest proportion (one in five) was among mothers whose separation from their first partner had involved violence. Mothers whose separation had not involved violence, and both mothers and fathers who were unhappy in their current partnerships, had very similar levels of contact with professionals (between 11 and 13 per cent), while the level was much lower (five and seven per cent respectively) among fathers and mothers in happy relationships.

Clearly, one must be extremely cautious in drawing any conclusions from these simple comparisons. However, it is interesting to note that there appeared to be very little difference between separated, and unhappy intact families, in the number of children who showed these signs of developmental difficulty.

These findings differ somewhat from those reported in the Exeter study (Cockett and Tripp, *op cit*), in which 'high conflict' intact families had more referrals to psychologists or psychiatrists than 'low conflict' families, but fewer than 're-ordered' families. Although the definitions of the family groups in the two studies are not identical, our findings suggest that

the circumstances of the disruption in the family of origin may be of particular importance to subsequent well-being.

Bed-wetting among children above an age at which this would normally have ceased may be indicative of emotional problems. Mothers of children over five were asked during the interview if they were completely dry at night. There appeared to be little relationship between this problem and their family experience, since exactly 12 per cent of cohort mothers in all the groups examined said that all or some of the children concerned wet their beds (table 30).

It has also been suggested that stress or emotional disturbance may be among the factors linked to asthma (Pilling, 1975). Combining the figures for those experiencing *asthma and wheeziness in the chest* showed that in around a quarter of cases within each group, all or some of the children suffered these symptoms (table 31). The differences between the groups were not large, but the highest proportion of sufferers (30 per cent) was among those whose mothers had experienced violent relationships with their former partner.

Few marked differences between the groups appeared when the mothers were asked to rate whether they thought that their *children's behaviour with them was 'better' 'the same' or 'worse' than that of other children*. However, those in families where the cohort member was happy in their current partnership were slightly more likely to consider their children's behaviour as better than that of other children (about three out of ten, compared with less than a quarter of those in unhappy relationships and about one in five of those who had separated from their first partner, table 32).

Similarly, very little difference was found in the parents' ratings of their children's relationships with other children. Around a quarter in each group felt that their children got on better than others with their peers, and virtually none thought that they were relatively unsociable (table 33).

Conclusion

Overall, these preliminary findings do not point to any marked behavioural difficulties associated with family disruption or conflict. However, no firm conclusions can be drawn from such an exploratory analysis. We have looked at only at a few specific outcomes: further analyses should compare the cognitive development of the children in the different family groups, as well as other aspects of their social and emotional development, and taking due account of other relevant background factors. It will be important also to trace in more detail the pathways of family experience of those whose parents had separated, eg periods of lone parenthood and re-partnership.

There is thus scope for much more thorough investigation of the issues examined here, including a more detailed examination of the antecedents, correlates and consequences of the different family experiences we have identified. Of particular importance, perhaps, because of the relative paucity of existing information and evidence, are those families in which adult relationships appear problematic, and which may or may not subsequently break down. What characteristics, expectations and experiences have the cohort members in these groups brought to their own roles as partners and parents? How do their economic and social circumstances compare with their counterparts in apparently successful relationships? What kind of support networks are available to those in the different groups and how important are these to the wellbeing and development of the parents and their children? Finally, a particular

strength of the NCDS dataset is the opportunity it presents to examine the contribution of early circumstances and experiences in the cohort members' families of origin to the pattern of their own adult relationships and family lives.

Despite the widespread concern with family functioning and the influence of parenting behaviour, legislative and policy interventions which seek to minimise the adverse effects of family disruption on children largely focus on the process of divorce and its aftermath. There may be a need for support at an earlier stage in the life cycle of troubled families to safeguard the interests of their children. The information already collected on the NCDS cohort can offer a great deal of insight into these issues, while future follow-ups will provide invaluable longitudinal data on the unfolding life history of these families.

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APPENDIX: Tables 1-33

Table 1 Experience of partnership breakdown among NCDS cohort at 33

	men %	women %
no. of separations		
1	22	23
2	5	5
3	1	1
4	<1	<1
5+	<1	-
no separation	72	69
total	100 (n=4988)	100 (n=5403)

Table 2 Frequency of arguments in cases of partnership breakdown

	men %	women %
many times a day	8	11
at least every day	9	13
several times a week	25	28
once a week or less	42	37
never	16	11
total separations	100 (n=1791)	100 (n=2105)

Table 3 Number of cases of separation in which arguments ended in violence

	men %	women %
violence:		
yes	12	37
no	88	63
total	100 (n=1519)	100 (n=1868)

Table 4 Frequency of arguments among parents who separated

	fathers	mothers
	%	%
many times a day	12	16
at least every day	12	19
several times a week	33	31
once a week or less	34	27
never	10	8
total	100 (n=437)	100 (n=726)

Table 5 Number of cases of parental separation in which arguments ended in violence

	men	women
	%	%
violence	17	44
argument only	73	48
no argument	10	8
total	100 (n=437)	100 (n=726)

Table 6 Number and nature of second separations involving NCDS parents

	men	women
	%	%
violence	20	38
argument only	62	53
no argument	19	9
total	100 (n=86)	100 (n=127)

Table 7 Number of children born to broken first partnerships

	fathers	mothers
	%	%
1	46	45
2	43	41
3	9	11
4+	2	3
total	100 (n=437)	100 (n=726)

Table 8 Number of children from first partnerships by nature of separation**a) fathers**

	number of children		
	1	2	3 or more
	%	%	%
violent	12	19	24
argument only	76	72	69
no argument	12	9	8
total	100 (n=200)	100 (n=186)	100 (n=51)

b) mothers

	1	2	3 or more
	%	%	%
violent	45	42	46
argument only	45	51	49
no argument	10	7	5
total	100 (n=326)	100 (n=299)	100 (n=101)

Table 9 Current location of children of first partnership, by nature of separation

a) fathers

	violence %	argument %	no argument %	total %
all with father	15	8	12	9
some with some away	1	2	2	2
all away	84	90	86	89
total (n=437)	100	100	100	100

b) mothers

all with mother	86	91	92	89
some with some away	4	3	3	4
all away	10	6	5	8
total (n=726)	100	100	100	100

Table 10 Current location of children who were *not* living with cohort member

	Fathers %	Mothers %
with other parent:		
alone	43	28
remarried/cohabiting	45	24
other situation	5	2
relatives	2	11
adopted:		
by relatives	<1	4
other	1	20
special school or home	1	-
other	1	9
not known	2	2
total	100 (n=386)	100 (n=54)

Table 11 Do parents see children living apart from them?

	fathers	mothers
	%	%
sees all	73	53
sees some	5	7
sees none	22	40
total	100 (n=386)	100 (n=55)

Table 12 Contact with children and nature of separation

	violence	argument	no argument
fathers:	%	%	%
sees child(ren)	62	80	84
does not see	38	20	16
total	100 (n=61)	100 (n=289)	100 (n=37)
mothers:			
sees children	50	68	100
does not see	50	32	0
total	100 (n=30)	100 (n=22)	100 (n=3)

Table 13 Do parents contribute financially to the maintenance of children living elsewhere?

	fathers	mothers
	%	%
sees and pays	53	20
pays, doesn't see	8	-
sees, doesn't pay	23	40
neither sees nor pays	16	40
total	100 (n=387)	100 (n=55)

Table 14 Does cohort member see his/her first partner nowadays?

a) fathers

nature of separation		sees partner		total
		yes	no	
violence	%	63	37	100 (n= 73)
argument only	%	72	28	100 (n=321)
no argument	%	60	40	100 (n= 42)
total	%	70	30	100 (n=436)

b) mothers

violence	%	51	49	100 (n=316)
argument only	%	70	30	100 (n=348)
no argument	%	67	33	100 (n= 61)
total	%	62	38	100 (n=725)

Table 15 Current relationship with former partner by nature of separation

a) fathers

	violence %	argument %	no argument %
very friendly	26	19	40
friendly	24	29	20
neutral	26	31	24
unfriendly	13	12	12
very unfriendly	11	9	4
total	100 (n=46)	100)n=232)	100 (n=25)

b) mothers

very friendly	10	20	29
friendly	29	31	29
neutral	31	32	34
unfriendly	13	12	-
very unfriendly	17	5	7
total	100 (n=162)	100 (n=243)	100 (n=41)

Table 16 Contact with former partner by location of children

a) fathers	all children with father	some with	none with
	%	%	%
contact:			
yes	66	67	70
no	34	33	30
total	100 (n=41)	100 (n= 9)	100 (n=387)
b) mothers			
yes	63	60	44
no	37	31	56
total	100 (n=645)	100 (n=26)	100 (n=55)

Table 17 Current relationship with former partner by location of children

a) fathers	all with father	none with father
	%	%
friendly	21	53
neutral	64	25
unfriendly	15	22
total	100 (n=33)	100 (n=270)
b) mothers		
friendly	47	54
neutral	32	25
unfriendly	21	21
Total	100 (n=422)	100)n=24)

Table 18 Current partnership situation of those who had separated from first partner

a) fathers

	all children with	some/all away	total
	%	%	%
remarried/cohabiting	42	60	58
unpartnered	58	40	42
total	100 n=41)	100 (n=396)	100 (n=437)

b) mothers

remarried/cohabiting	50	64	51
unpartnered	50	36	49
total	100 (n=645)	100 (n=81)	100 (n=726)

Table 19 Family situation at 33 of those who had separated from first partner

children with:	Fathers	Mothers
	%	%
cohort member alone	5	46
" " + new partner	4	46
other parent alone	39	2
" " + new partner	41	2
other situation	11	4
total	100 (n=427)	100 (n=699)

Table 20 NCDS parents' rating of relationship with spouse or partner

		fathers		mothers	
		%		%	
extremely unhappy	1	2		2	
	2	1		1	
	3	2		2	
	4	5		7	
	5	10		9	
	6	33		32	
extremely happy	7	47		47	
total		100		100	
		(n=3708)		(N=4090)	

Table 21 Number of children of parents in happy and unhappy relationships

	fathers		mothers	
	unhappy	happy	unhappy	happy
	%	%	%	%
1	33	29	22	23
2	44	53	47	54
3+	22	18	31	23
total	100	100	100	100
	(n=234)	(n=2312)	(n=420)	(n=2861)

Table 22 Do you ever wish you hadn't married?

	fathers		mothers	
	unhappy	happy	unhappy	happy
	%	%	%	%
frequently	10	<1	27	<1
occasionally	40	9	36	9
rarely	31	37	25	38
never	20	54	12	53
total	100	100	100	100
	(n=233)	(n=2305)	(n=408)	(n=2854)

Table 23 Would you marry the same/different person if you could live your life again?

	fathers		mothers	
	unhappy %	happy %	unhappy %	happy %
same person	41	79	28	81
different person	9	1	16	1
would not marry	19	2	15	2
don't know	31	18	40	16
total	100 (n=232)	100 (n=2300)	100 (n=411)	100 (2840)

Table 24 Do you share your problems with your partner?

	fathers		mothers	
	unhappy %	happy %	unhappy %	happy %
all	17	34	13	43
most	36	46	27	45
some	33	16	41	11
none/hardly any	14	3	18	1
total	100 (n=233)	100 (n=2306)	100 (n=412)	100 (n=2853)

Table 25 Levels of consensus with partner on various topics

	fathers		mothers	
	unhappy %	happy %	unhappy %	happy %
<i>Deciding if or when to have children</i>				
nearly always/ often agree	60	83	61	84
sometimes agree	18	11	20	10
nearly always/ often disagree	10	2	7	2
never talk about	13	4	12	4
total	100	100	100	100

Table 25 (contd)

	fathers		mothers	
	unhappy	happy	unhappy	happy
<i>How children should be brought up</i>				
nearly always/ often agree	62	83	50	77
sometimes agree	24	14	29	19
nearly always/ often disagree	13	3	20	4
never talk about	1	-	2	-
total	100	100	100	100
 <i>Showing affection for each other</i>				
nearly always/ often agree	27	65	30	73
sometimes agree	41	29	36	22
nearly always/ often disagree	24	5	22	4
never talk about	8	1	13	1
total	100	100	100	100
 <i>Having sex together</i>				
nearly always/ often agree	37	64	31	69
sometimes agree	34	30	36	26
nearly always/ often disagree	24	6	22	4
never talk about	5	1	11	1
total	100	100	100	100

Table25 (contd.)

	fathers		mothers	
	unhappy	happy	unhappy	happy
<i>Outlook on life</i>				
nearly always/ often agree	39	69	33	68
sometimes agree	35	26	33	27
nearly always/ often disagree	22	5	28	5
never talk about	4	1	7	1
total	100	100	100	100
<i>Behaving generally in the right and decent way towards other people</i>				
nearly always/ often agree	63	82	55	83
sometimes agree	24	15	25	14
nearly always/ often disagree	10	3	17	3
never talk about	3	-	3	-
total	100	100	100	100
<i>Handling family finances</i>				
nearly always/ often agree	46	69	42	73
sometimes agree	35	26	35	22
nearly always/ often disagree	16	4	17	4
never talk about	3	1	6	1
total	100	100	100	100
<i>Sharing household tasks</i>				
nearly always/ often agree	51	58	37	59
sometimes agree	28	31	26	29
nearly always/ often disagree	20	10	32	10
never talk about	2	1	5	2
total	100	100	100	100

Table 25 (contd.)

	fathers		mothers	
	unhappy	happy	unhappy	happy
<i>How to spend your spare time</i>				
nearly always/ often agree	33	55	35	67
sometimes agree	35	35	36	28
nearly always/ often disagree	28	9	23	4
never talk about	3	1	6	1
total	100	100	100	100
<i>Liking the same friends</i>				
nearly always/ often agree	36	62	35	65
sometimes agree	35	30	30	29
nearly always often disagree	26	8	30	5
never talk about	3	1	5	1
total	100	100	100	100
<i>Relationships with parents or parents-in-law</i>				
nearly always/ often agree	41	63	41	67
sometimes agree	36	28	34	27
nearly always/ often disagree	21	8	20	5
never talk about	2	1	6	1
total	100	100	100	100
average n=	232	410	2300	2850

Table 26 'All things considered, how happy are you?

fathers	<i>first separation:</i>		<i>no conflict</i>	<i>current relationship:</i>	
	<i>violent</i>	<i>argued</i>		<i>unhappy</i>	<i>happy</i>
	%	%	%	%	%
very happy	33	27	24	12	40
fairly happy	50	59	68	72	59
not very happy	17	11	5	14	1
not at all happy	0	3	3	2	0
total	100	100	100	100	100
(n)	(66)	(291)	(38)	(233)	(2306)
mothers					
very happy	32	33	37	12	53
fairly happy	54	57	52	64	47
not very happy	13	8	11	20	<1
not at all happy	1	2	0	3	0
total	100	100	100	100	100
(n)	(296)	(322)	(54)	(419)	(2852)

Table 27 How satisfied are you with the way your life has turned out so far?

fathers	<i>first separation:</i>			<i>current relationship:</i>	
	<i>violent</i> %	<i>argued</i> %	<i>no conflict</i> %	<i>unhappy</i> %	<i>happy</i> %
very satisfied	14	10	10	7	25
satisfied	48	60	66	60	68
dissatisfied	32	27	21	30	6
very dissat.	6	4	3	2	<1
total	100	100	100	100	100
(n)	(65)	(290)	(38)	(231)	(2301)
mothers					
very satisfied	18	16	26	6	36
satisfied	52	53	43	44	59
dissatisfied	24	27	30	44	5
very dissat.	6	4	--	6	<1
total	100	100	100	100	100
(n)	(292)	(320)	(53)	(415)	(2840)

Table 28 'I usually have control over my life...'

fathers	<i>first separation:</i>			<i>current relationship:</i>	
	<i>violent</i> %	<i>argued</i> %	<i>no conflict</i> %	<i>unhappy</i> %	<i>happy</i> %
yes	83	85	84	77	89
no	17	15	16	23	11
total	100	100	100	100	100
(n)	(65)	(286)	(38)	(229)	(2290)
mothers					
yes	80	83	82	67	90
no	20	17	18	33	10
total	100	100	100	100	100
(n)	(293)	(314)	(54)	(407)	(2814)

Table 29 Contact with a professional about behavioural, emotional or learning problem among cohort members' children

mothers	<i>first separation:</i>	
	<i>violent</i> %	<i>not violent</i> %
all children	3	4
some children	17	8
no children	80	87
total	100	100
(n)	(106)	(143)

current relationship:	fathers		mothers	
	<i>unhappy</i> %	<i>happy</i> %	<i>unhappy</i> %	<i>happy</i> %
all children	3	2	3	3
some children	8	3	10	4
no children	88	95	87	93
total	100	100	100	100
(n)	(60)	(749)	(143)	(944)

Table 30 Prevalence of enuresis among cohort members' children aged 5+

mothers

first separation:

	<i>violent</i> %	<i>not violent</i> %
all/some	12	12
none	88	88
total	100	100
(n)	(103)	(135)

fathers

mothers

current relationship	<i>unhappy</i> %		<i>happy</i> %	
	<i>unhappy</i> %	<i>happy</i> %	<i>unhappy</i> %	<i>happy</i> %
all/some	6	16	12	12
none	94	84	88	88
total	100	100	100	100
(n)	(48)	(515)	(125)	(761)

Table 31 Prevalence of asthma or wheeziness among children of cohort members

mothers

first separation:

	<i>violent</i> %	<i>not violent</i> %
all/some	30	27
none	70	73
total	100	100
(n)	(106)	(143)

fathers

mothers

current relationship:	<i>unhappy</i> %	<i>happy</i> %	<i>unhappy</i> %	<i>happy</i> %
	all/some	28	22	24
none	72	78	76	74
total	100	100	100	100
(n)	(61)	(774)	(146)	(957)

Table 32 Mothers' ratings of how children behave with their parents compared with other children of same age

mothers

first separation:

	<i>violent</i>	<i>not violent</i>
	%	%
all better	19	21
all same	62	58
all worse	3	6
mixed	17	15
total	100	100
(n)	(101)	(137)

	fathers		mothers	
current relationship:	<i>unhappy</i>	<i>happy</i>	<i>unhappy</i>	<i>happy</i>
	%	%	%	%
all better	23	30	23	31
all same	57	57	58	57
all worse	-	2	4	2
mixed	20	11	15	9
total	100	100	100	100
(n)	(51)	(597)	(126)	(837)

Table 33 Mothers' rating of how children get on with other children compared with those of same age

mothers

first separation:

	<i>violent</i> %	<i>not violent</i> %
all better	24	20
all same	54	57
all worse	2	2
mixed	20	21
total	100	100
(n)	(104)	(135)

fathers

mothers

current relationship:	<i>unhappy</i> %	<i>happy</i> %	<i>unhappy</i> %	<i>happy</i> %
all better	22	26	24	22
all same	63	60	60	60
all worse	-	1	2	3
mixed	16	13	20	16
total	100	100	100	100
(n)	(51)	(602)	(127)	(835)