

# The Long-Term Effects of Parental Divorce or Separation on Childhood, Adolescent and Adult Psychosocial Health in UK

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**Abstract :** Parents' marital conflicts are often linked to various emotional and behavioural difficulties of their children but rarely known about later adolescent and adult lives. This study was undertaken to examine if serious parental conflict such as divorce and/or separation in childhood was associated with emotional and social performance during later adolescent and adult lives. The research literature on divorce was briefly reviewed. The data was derived from the National Child Development Study (NCDSS 1974/age 16 - 1991/age 33) which followed the lives of 17,500 individuals born on March 3 - 9, 1958 in England, Scotland and Wales. Regression analyses indicate strong evidence that the experience of parental divorce or separation in childhood negatively affects the child's emotional and social performance in their subsequent life. The higher likelihood of having emotional problems, being less competent at their job, experiencing health/disability problems, being a lone-parent, unemployed, and homeless were strongly associated with parental divorce or separation experienced in childhood. Intervention is desirable to address the concerns influencing socio-psychological performance amongst children who have experienced parental divorce or separation.

**Key Words :** Parents' marital conflict in childhood, emotional and behavioural problems, later socio-psychological performance

## I. Introduction

The increase in divorce and separation has been one of the most significant social trends in many industrialized countries. In 2000, there were 12.7 divorcees per 1,000 in England and Wales (National Statistics, 2001), whereas only 4.1 divorcees in US (National Vital Statistics Report, 2001). Although the divorce rate decreased slightly compared to that in 1999, these changing

family patterns have produced a total of 142, 457 victimised children aged under 16, 2000 in England and Wales (Ibid). The problem becomes worse when considering the separation rate. Official separation data is not available but according to the National Child Development Study (NCDSS, 2000), it is estimated that there were between 56,085 to 67,302 victimised children produced by permanent separations, excluding short-time separation.

Many researchers question concerning the

mental and social development of children from fragile families, suggesting that children from single-parent families or stepfamilies may have difficulties in socializing (Biblarz and Raftery, 1993; Aston and McLanahan, 1991; Garvin et al 1991). Since the socio-economic disadvantages of single parents (Simons et al 1994) as well as parental conflicts itself may undermine better opportunities for quality parenting. It is also found that children from fragile families are more likely to show lower levels of academic attainment and higher rates of dropping out of school (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). Furthermore, parents' marital disruption increases the likelihood of physical abuse to their child, resulting in emotional and behaviour disorder in adolescence (Cohen et al. 2002). Therefore, marital conflict and the subsequent problems are based on the expectation that children who have experienced parental divorce or separation would be more likely to internalise experienced familial conflicts and socio-economic disadvantages in the socialization process, and to externalise those problems in their emotional and social performance, possibly during their adolescence and adulthood compared with those in healthy families.

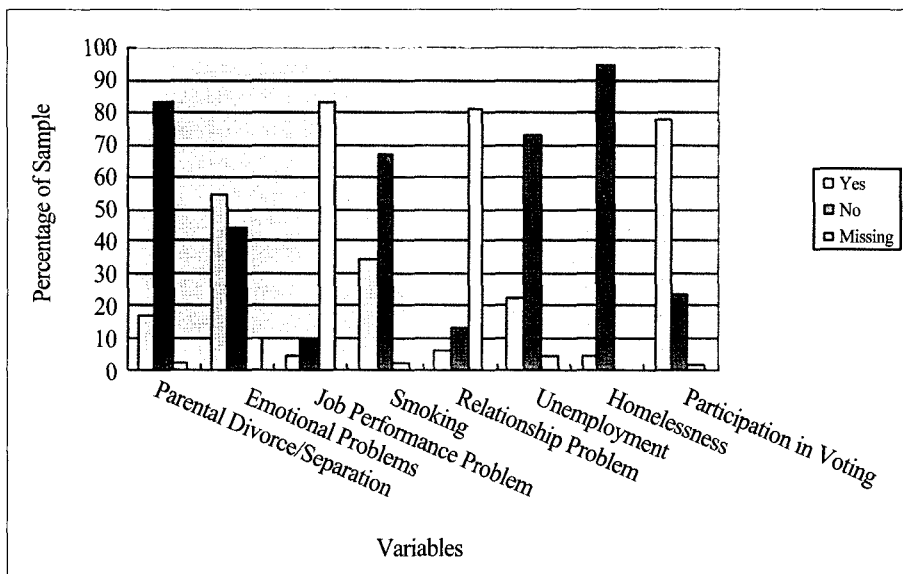
Although the evidence of the vulnerability on children from fragile families and the barriers to the social development of such children have been well established, the scope of impact parental divorce or separation in childhood has on the child's emotional and long-time social performance at a later time is little known. Thus the current study attempts to contribute to the existing literature on the impacts of parental divorce or separation on the child's later life,

centring on the question 'If the poor outcome of fragile families can put the child at higher risk of emotional difficulties and lower levels of social performance during adolescent and adult lives?'

## II. Methods

The present study used the fifth sweep of the National Child Development Study (NCDSS 1974/age 16 - 1991/age 33) which followed the lives of 17,500 individuals born in England, Scotland and Wales on March 3 - 9, 1958. In regard to this study, 8 items from the NCDSS data were selected for analysis. The high degree of association between parental divorce (or separation) in childhood and the selected sample items demonstrated the reliability of the measurement.

<Figure 1> describes the characteristics of the emotional and social performance of the sample. Over 15 percent of the study sample was found to have experienced parental divorce or separation in their childhood. About 55 percent claimed to have suffered from emotional problems since 1981, at the age of 16. In addition, 3.8 percent with long-term health problems and disabilities claimed that it affected their work performance, wage level and where they worked affect the kind or amount of paid work they can do or the location in. Also 10.1 percent of the sample reported to have been a lone parent during a consecutive period of one month or more and 33 percent are currently smoking. Only 6 percent reported to have had a steady relationship during the last 10 years. During 1971 and 1991, 21.7 percent and 3.8 percent were respectively unemployed and homeless for one month or more.



<Figure 1> Characteristics of Cohort Members in NCD55

And 23 percent of the sample reported to have not participated in the last general election (June 1987).

The independent and dependent variables assessed during the age 33 interview are described in <Table 1>. The independent variable was parental divorce or separation in childhood and the dependent variables included emotional problems, the job performance of people with health and disability problems, lone parenthood, smoking, steady relationship with partners, unemployment, homelessness and citizenship participation.

Regression analyses were used to assess the relation between permanent parental divorce/separation in childhood and emotional/social performance in adolescence through to adulthood.

### III. Results and Discussion

The regression results for the associations

between 'permanent parental divorce or separation experienced in childhood' and 'emotional and social performance in their adolescence and adulthood' overall varied (see Table 2).

#### 1. Emotional problems

The results indicated that children who have experienced parental divorce or separation are more likely to have emotional problems during their adolescent and adult period than those from healthy families {male/OR=1.588,  $p < .001$ , (1.364, 1.848); female/OR=1.383,  $p < .001$ , (1.188, 1.611)}. This is consistent with the previous research (Weiner and Kupermintz, 2001) suggesting that children of divorced parents will continue to have a more difficult time finding emotional support to buffer the childhood disadvantages. The result also indicated that boys are more likely to feel worse about themselves and their family situation

<Table 1> Variables Used in This Study

Variables	Questionnaires
Parental Divorce or Separation Experience in Childhood	Were the respondents' parents ever permanently separated or divorced?
Emotional Problems	Since March 1981 have the respondent ever suffered (occasionally or frequently) from any of the following emotional problems: feeling low/depressed, sad; feeling anxious, jittery; feeling anxious or scared about objects or situations; feeling overexcited, overconfident; feeling compelled to repeat actions or thoughts; hearing or seeing things; problems with drinking or drugs; other feelings of worry, tension, anxiety, depression or nerves?
Job Performance of People with Health and Disability Problems	Do long-term health problems and disabilities affect his/her occupation, salary and work place?
Lone Parenthood	Have the respondents ever been a lone parent one month or more?
Smoking	Do the respondents smoke cigarettes presently?
Relationship with Partners	Did the respondents have a steady relationship for the last ten years?
Unemployment	Have the respondents ever been unemployed or job searching for a month or more since March 1981?
Homelessness	Have the respondents during the last 10 years become homeless (having to move out of a place and having no permanent residence)?
Citizenship Behaviour	Did the respondents vote in the last General Election in June 1987?

throughout their adolescent and adult period than do girls. These findings little support the common idea that girls compared to boys tend to internalise and, accordingly, are more likely to become depressive and anxious (Veijola, et al 1998). Only two studies (Bergman and Scott, 2001; Stansfeld et al 1993) have challenged this common idea with the argument that high emotional problems correlate with male life events rather than females. In keeping with this challenge, one possible explanation about the increased likelihood of emotional problems amongst children of divorced and separated parents in later adolescent and adult period might be that the cognitive-behaviour mechanism of male children of divorced and separated parents interact more negatively and

consistently with their childhood life events throughout their later life than do females.

## **2. Job performance of people with health problems and disabilities**

Having experienced permanent parental divorce or separation during childhood increased the odds ratio of achieving lower job performance for people with health problems and disabilities. This implies reveals that children of permanent parental divorce or separation may be more likely to show less work competency than those from healthy families, as they face unexpected health crises. As was the case with the emotional problem, there were slight gender differences suggesting that boys

<Table 2> Regression Analyses on Emotion and Social Performance in Later Life

Independent Factor	Dependent Problems									
	Emotional Problems									
	Male					Female				
	B	S.E.	OR <sup>a</sup>	95.0%	C.I.	B	S.E.	OR	95.0%	C.I.
Parental Divorce or Separation In Childhood	.462	.077	1.588***	1.364	-1.848	.325	.078	1.383***	1.188	-1.611
	Chi-square=36.010 for 1 df					Chi-square=17.923 for 1df				
	Job Performance of People with Health and Disability Problem									
	Male					Female				
	B	S.E.	OR	95.0%	C.I.	B	S.E.	OR	95.0%	C.I.
	.623	.192	1.864***	1.280	-2.713	.473	.209	1.604*	1.065	-2.415
	Chi-square=10.137 for 1 df					Chi-square=4.942 for 1df				
	Lone parenthood									
	Male					Female				
	B	S.E.	OR	95.0%	C.I.	B	S.E.	OR	95.0%	C.I.
	.409	.262	1.505	.901	-2.514	.700	.086	2.013***	1.699	-2.385
	Chi-square=2.258 for 1 df					Chi-square=62.580 for 1 df				
	Smoking									
	Male					Female				
	B	S.E.	OR	95.0%	C.I.	B	S.E.	OR	95.0%	C.I.
	.573	.078	1.773***	1.522	-2.066	.522	.074	1.686***	1.458	-1.949
	Chi-square=52.919 for 1 df					Chi-square=48.720 for 1 df				
	Steady Relationship with Partners									
	Male					Female				
	B	S.E.	OR	95.0%	C.I.	B	S.E.	OR	95.0%	C.I.
-.562	.240	.570**	.356	-.913	-.329	.244	.720	.446	-1.161	
Chi-square=5.914 for 1 df					Chi-square=1.899 for 1 df					
Unemployment										
Male					Female					
B	S.E.	OR	95.0%	C.I.	B	S.E.	OR	95.0%	C.I.	
.347	.087	1.414	1.192	-1.678	-.017	.092	.983	.821	-1.178	
Chi-square=15.274 for 1 df					Chi-square=.034 for 1 df					
Homelessness										
Male					Female					
B	S.E.	OR	95.0%	C.I.	B	S.E.	OR	95.0%	C.I.	
.680	.170	1.973***	1.413	-2.755	.588	.157	1.801***	1.323	-2.452	
Chi-square=14.218 for 1 df					Chi-square=12.731 for 1 df					
Citizenship Participation										
Male					Female					
B	S.E.	OR	95.0%	C.I.	B	S.E.	OR	95.0%	C.I.	
-.343	.084	.710***	.602	-.837	-.406	.083	.667***	.567	-.784	
Chi-square=16.089 for 1 df					Chi-square=23.154 for 1 df					

from non-traditional families are more likely to report being depressed about their work competency when faced with a health crisis {Male/OR=1.864,  $p < .001$ , (1.280, 2.713; Female/OR=1.604,  $p < .05$ , (1.065, 2.415), respectively). Again, in the light of Bergman and Scotts' (2001) observation that growing up in fragile families affects male somatic complaints considerably more than female ones, this back up the explanation that boys from divorced and separated families experience more difficulties in dealing with another unexpected life event than do girls during adolescence and adulthood.

### **3. Lone parenthood**

The finding showed that children who have experienced serious parental conflict have a high probability of becoming a lone parent {OR=2.013,  $p < .001$ , (1.699, 2.385)} during their adolescence or adulthood. This supports the thesis that victims of parental conflict in childhood tend to follow a similar life cycle with their parents than those from healthy families (Herrenkohl et al 2000). When consistently exposed to negative parental attitudes toward marriage (McLanahan and Garfinkel, 2000, pp.27) in childhood, being a lone-parent could be an option in which they may adopt in adulthood. Furthermore, the enhanced vulnerability of emotional and social adjustment of children from broken families results in more frequent marital conflicts with partners than those among children raised in healthy families: those problems may have put a steady relationship with partners at risk, thus, increasing the likelihood of becoming a lone-parent.

### **4. Smoking**

Data concerning parental divorce/separation and smoking also shows significant group differences. Experiencing permanent parental divorce or separation in childhood has a considerable effect on the likelihood of smoking amongst both boys and girls during adolescence and adulthood {male/OR=1.773,  $p < .001$ , (1.522, 2.066); female/OR=1.686,  $p < .001$ , (1.458, 1.949)}. This is consistent with the higher levels of smoking behaviour reported by adolescents of lone parents or other families (Bergman and Scott, 2001), but the current analysis further addresses the fact that adolescent smoking behaviour stimulated by parental conflict may encourage victimised children to be involved in substance abuse in subsequent years. Thus the impact of serious parental conflict on childhood emotions continues to shape risky health practices during adolescent and adult years, reflecting past and current unhealthy cognitive-behaviour patterns.

### **5. Relationship problems with partners**

In regard to the relationship with a partner, the regression analysis (see Table 2) indicates that childhood experience of parental divorce or separation might continue to affect the child's later marital relationship. In contrast to the comparative group, experiencing permanent parental divorce or separation lowered the possibility of a steady relationship with partners amongst males {OR=.570,  $p < .001$ , (.356, .913)}, which suggests less competence in solving marital conflicts in this group. A previous study (Jekielek, 1998) showed

that parental conflict has a negative impact on the child's emotions later on. In parallel to this research, the present finding highlights the fact that the childhood experience of serious parental conflict might have a consistent impact on emotional and behavioural functioning even a decade later, aggravating a marital relationship.

## 6. Unemployment and homelessness

Being homeless due to serious parental conflict in childhood was also noteworthy, whereas parental conflict experience in childhood did not differ employment status in later life. People who have experienced permanent parental divorce or separation in childhood were much more likely to be homeless {Male/OR=1.973,  $p<.001$ , (1.413, 2.755)}; {Female/OR=1.801,  $p<.001$ , (1.323, 2.452), respectively} during their adolescent and adult period, than those who grew up in healthy families. These findings reinforce previous studies suggesting that victims of child neglect, disrupted families and troubled relationships with step-parents are more likely to become homeless (McLean et al. 1999; Robertson and Toro, 1998); being a runaway and a homeless seem to increase in a context where troubled relationships between children and step-parents escalate the possibilities of verbal and physical abuse and in turn, breaks family bonding.

## 7. Citizenship and voting participation

Interestingly, as shown in <Table 2>, children who have experienced permanent parental divorce or separation are less likely to participate in

citizenship activities such as voting than those who grow up in healthy families {Male/OR=.710,  $p<.001$ , (.602, .837); Female/OR=.667,  $p<.001$ , (.567, .784)}. The low participation of this group is consistent with the other low social performance patterns analysed in this paper.

## IV. Conclusion

While previous studies of parental divorce have not produced comprehensive findings on the impact of parental conflict on the emotional and social performance of the children's future, the 1958 British birth cohort made it possible for the present study to identify the several key characteristics of emotional and social performance regardless of existing difference between children who have experienced parental divorce/separation and those from traditional families. The consistently negative odds ratios across the emotional and social variables of this study characterized people from families in conflict: children from brokenhomes are more likely to show lower levels of psychological and social performance in their adolescence and adulthood. As familial disadvantages followed by serious parental conflicts are experienced and internalised in the socialisation of such children, it appears that those risk factors are more likely to continue to be prominent in the long-term emotional and social functioning of children in their adolescent and adult lives. Therefore, academic experts should take the initiative to address the concerns of children of divorced and separated families, especially paying careful

attention to developing strategies that treat various forms of negative factors and potential effects on children and adolescents due to serious parental conflicts. Scholars also need timely assessments for appropriate intervention before problematic emotional or behavioural performance emerges. Grounded in well-designed approaches, this may be able to reduce the level of subsequent harm that can help the victimised children to adjust.

As long as parental conflict continues to evolve in society, its internal/external power is more likely to spread in the long run and negatively affect the emotional and social health of children and young people. If they were able to find adequate support to counteract the perceived psychosocial disadvantages created in early childhood, the impact of parental divorce and separation would be eased. Further research is therefore necessary to answer the following question: 'To what extent can scholars define and provide effective countermeasures for children who have been victimised by serious parental conflict?'

Although this study has produced some useful insights into the continuing effect of parental conflict on the child's later emotional and social performances, a number of study limitations suggest that caution is necessary with regard to the conclusions. First, it may not be possible to generalize the results of this study outside England, Scotland and Wales, because the sampling was conferred to the populations within the UK. Second, the validity of each measure may be questioned as the measures used in this study are based on self-reports. However, the analyses of the causal relationships between parental conflict and the child's later life are validated because of the

involvement of researchers, and the nationally representative and longitudinal nature of the data.

## Acknowledgement

I thank ONSSSRD (UK) for being generous in allowing me to use the 'National Child Development Study Sweeps One to Five' as data.

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Received October 12, 2004

Accepted December 8, 2004