

The Importance of Childhood Experience in relation to Problems of Marriage and Family-Building

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INTRODUCTION

Previous reports (1 and 2) have shown that very simple questions to a mother about her own childhood, particularly whether she was ever separated from one or both parents, can identify a group of women who are likely to experience difficulty in managing their baby.

During the last interviews of this research, it became clear that more than one of the women in the 'control' group had in fact experienced separations from one or both parents in their childhood which they had for some reason denied or forgotten at the beginning of the investigation.

As the object of the original investigation had been to identify women ante-natally who might be especially vulnerable to emotional stress, and this had been achieved to some extent, it was thought that direct investigation of the childhood of the women who were still available might be useful. We expected some blurring of our previous results as the consequence of this investigation.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

Of the 89 women who remained in the earlier study it was possible to visit 79 again. The same interviewer (G.O'S.) this time used a detailed questionnaire enquiring into the mother's childhood, its events, her feelings about it, and any consequent conclusions that she might have reached about bringing up her own children.

Of the 79 women, 40 belonged to the original 'separated' and 39 to the 'control' group.

Although the interviewer by this time knew the mothers and their circumstances well, it was of as great interest to know how many were coping without undue difficulties, despite a difficult childhood, as to confirm that problems in infant management and marital difficulties tended to exist where the mother had experienced separation from her parents in childhood. It is therefore unlikely that one mother

would have been more closely or persistently questioned than another. This is made even less likely by the fact that the questionnaire was carefully and rigidly structured, and gave less opportunity for impressionistic judgements than did the earlier ones.

By undertaking this further investigation, we were trying to demonstrate whether separations in childhood from the family were significantly associated with problems of emotional attachment and family building in adult life, and, if they were, whether there were any outstanding features in the childhood experiences of the women in our sample that seemed to be more or less associated with such problems than any other.

Definition of separation

For the purpose of this study we defined separation as parental death or any event which entailed the mother as a child sleeping away from home, or one or both parents doing so. The question was put in terms of 'having to be away from home', a term that was employed when asking about the woman or her parents. There were also specific questions about hospital admissions for her or her parents, and about her placement away from home in a foster or children's home or elsewhere. Any such separation that had taken place *before* the woman's eleventh birthday—defined as 'before you were eleven' was counted in the same way as had been done in our earlier study.

In each group, the women were now subdivided into those who had more than one minor management problem with the infant during the first year of his life, and/or marital problems, and those with no marital problems and at worst one minor management problem; these two categories were called 'problem' and 'no problem' groups.

Management problems with the infant's sleeping, feeding or crying, were regarded as minor if they caused slight upset to the mother, but major problems if they caused a constant state of family upheaval.

The control group was then subdivided into women who had in fact experienced a childhood separation and those who had not. Two women who had experienced separation in our terms only after their eleventh birthday were found in the original proband group.

This gave eight sub-groups as follows:

From the original PROBAND group

- 'Separated' women with problems
- 'Separated' women without problems
- 'Non-separated' women (i.e. separated after age 11) with problems (of which there were none)
- 'Non-separated' women (i.e. separated after age 11) without problems (of which there were 2)

From the original CONTROL group

- 'Non-separated' women with problems
- 'Non-separated' women without problems
- 'Separated' women (who had originally denied separation experience) with problems
- 'Separated' women (who had originally denied separation experience) without problems

It should be emphasized that the present investigation is of a totally different kind from the prospective study that was reported earlier (2). There we were interested in finding a simple method of identifying vulnerable women who might need extra support in their marriage and family building during their child's early years. That investigation did identify a sufficiently large number of such women to make the routine use of such a simple questionnaire as we had devised worthwhile.

In the present investigation we were concerned to discover how far a more extensive knowledge of the women's background, which it would be impracticable to obtain during the course of busy ante-natal clinics, could throw light upon their present problems.

In addition to actual separation experiences, we asked the women about the atmosphere in the home in which they grew up, whether they would rate it as happy or not, and how their parents had related to each other and to them. Statements about the parents were written down verbatim, and both aspects of their relationships were also rated. Where quarrelling had led to a divorce and there had been a subsequent remarriage, the quarrelling was scored although it applied to the earlier marriage.

The answers were grouped under three main headings:

- (1) Good relationship between parents;
- (2) Tension, e.g. an account of repeated or persistent arguments, remarks such as 'they never seemed to agree about anything';
- (3) Severe quarrelling between parents which included physical violence, rows that led to the departure of one or other parent from home, or in several instances to the woman's departure from home as a child.

The woman's relationship to her father or father substitute was rated as:

(1) Good, if the home was said to have been happy and harmonious;

(2) Poor, if there had been physical violence from the father to her as a child, e.g. one father who persistently hammered only the one daughter because she resembled his mother, whom he disliked; or if the woman expressed a fixed dislike for her father, e.g. 'he made me shudder', or 'they were both miserable bleeders'.

If the relationship with one father-figure had been positive and not with another, e.g. stepfather, the one was taken to be more significant which had persisted for the longest time.

(3) A few women had had a positive relationship with their father, but not with their mother. These were included with the first group in the table.

Separations of the parents as the result of quarrelling were noted and scored regardless of the age at which either parent had walked out of the home, and whether this was temporary or permanent. It was considered indicative of the quality of inter-relationships between them.

It seemed to be of interest whether the woman had, as a child, experienced a poor relationship between her parents with or without also having a poor relationship with her father. All the women who had experienced tension, or serious quarrelling between their parents, and/or had themselves a poor relationship with their father or father-substitute, were included in this category.

From the point of view of the present enquiry, it seemed mainly of interest to find out what was the incidence of these various factors as between the two main groups of women, i.e. those who had 'problems' within our definition during the first year of their first infant's life and those who did not. Accordingly, Table I was drawn up.

Where there were comments that money worries had featured largely in conversations and parental quarrels during the woman's childhood, or that she had to 'go without' from time to time, e.g. one father who fed his children only on dry bread and occasional fried eggs, this was noted as 'financial stress' in childhood.

RESULTS

The Table shows that while there is a trend for many factors, such as poverty during childhood, or parental death, or quarrelling, to be associated in the women with problems, this does not reach statistical significance. When serious parental quarrelling and/or a poor relationship with father are taken together, however, the difference becomes statistically

TABLE I

A comparison of childhood factors of women who were classed as having problems in the first year of their infant's life and those who had no problems

Total sample	Problems	No problems	Total	P
	49	30	79	
Mother dead by 11	3	0	3	NS
Father dead by 11	5	5	10	NS
Mother dead after 11	3	0	3	NS
Father dead after 11	10	4	14	NS
Either parent dead (any age)	21	9	30	NS
Parents separated (any age)	12 + (+1)*	1	13	<0.05
Minor parental tension	13	6	19	NS
Serious parental quarrels	7	1	8	NS
Good relationship with parents	32	23	55	NS
Poor relationship with father, or father-substitute and/or Parental quarrelling	12	1	13	<0.05
Separated before 11	44	17	61	<0.01
Not separated before 11	5	13	18	<0.01
Financial stress in childhood	15	8	23	NS
Early sex problems in marriage	10	8	18	NS
Persistent sex problems in marriage	12	2	14	NS
Present marital problems	22	0	22	<0.001
Depression	35	7	42	<0.001
Major baby problems	28	0	28	<0.001
Minor baby problems	20	16	36	NS
Highly participant husband with baby care	26	18	44	NS

* Mother separated from father, then from stepfather.

significant. The marked increase of depression in the 'problem' group is also noteworthy, regardless whether this was causal in the existence of marital or baby management problems, or their result.

It was interesting to find that there is a statistically significant difference in the incidence of marital and management problems within the original 'control' group, between women who were in fact 'separated', though originally they had denied or forgotten this, and those who were not (18 out of 23 women with problems had been separated, and only 5 of 16 without $p < 0.01$).

DISCUSSION

Far from blurring the earlier results, this investigation only confirms though it does not help to explain them.

Recently, there has been a good deal of systematic investigation into the effects of

separation from parents on children (3) and it seems that the quality of home life from which the child is separated is at least as important as the circumstances of the separation, at least for the immediate and short-term adjustment of the child.

We are not aware, apart from Harlow's work (4), of any study of adult emotional capacity in relation to childhood experience, with which we could compare our results.

Depressive symptoms are clearly an important factor in the troubles of these women, whether they cause their problems with the infant, are reactive to, or are merely helping to maintain them; and as some of these illnesses in our sample had not fully developed until the child was over a year old, these symptoms must probably be actively looked for for much longer than the first few weeks post partum in young mothers who have had a deprived childhood. Effective treatment of these alone might lead

to a considerable improvement of the life of the whole family.

We seem to have stumbled on the tip of a far larger iceberg than we expected. Apart from the preventive aspects that open up, and the evident need for much greater activity in bringing atypical puerperal depressions to light, and ensuring treatment, for them a large-scale investigation extending our pilot efforts is clearly needed. This would require very large resources but would possibly bring rich dividends. Meanwhile, questions to mothers about their childhood and possible separation experiences will shortly be incorporated in the ante-natal case-schedules of the Obstetric Department at St. Thomas' Hospital. The Borough Public Health Staff and Health Visitors have been fully informed, and it is hoped to be able to test the usefulness of such a question as a predictive factor with their help in the field.

SUMMARY

An investigation into the childhood experiences of two groups of mothers is described. One group (probands) had previously acknowledged separations from parents, the other (controls) had denied them. However, it was found that many of the control group had also experienced childhood separations from their parents within the definition used here.

There were significantly more marital and infant problems among the 'separated' women than among those not separated.

Implications for mental health and further research are briefly discussed.

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