# Chapter 5. Unmarried Parenthood, Family Trajectories, Parent and Child Well Being

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## Introduction

The structure of British family life has undergone substantial changes over recent decades. Rises in extra-marital childbearing, cohabitation and parental separation coupled with declines in marriage have translated into more diverse, complex, transient and often inequitable family settings for children.  Very large movements in financial circumstances of families can often be associated with these family changes and family changes can also affect the emotional well-being of family members. Consequently, there has been growing concern about the instability of family life and the impact on the well-being of children which has led to a plethora of inquiries, reports and initiatives around children for example, Good Childhood Inquiry (2009), Social Justice Policy Group (2006), Every Child Matters (HM Government, 2004), and the Children's Plan (DCSF, 2007).

A substantial body of research already exists on the consequences of divorce and remarriage for British children both in the short and the long term (see Rogers and Pryor, 1998; Kiernan, 1997) but much less is known about the potential consequences for children of being born into different family settings and whether subsequent family trajectories matter.  This chapter explores these issues. We start by looking at changes over the first 5 years of the children's lives and map the family trajectories of children born into four different settings: to married parents, cohabiting parents and to solo mothers who were in a relationship with the father at the time of the birth and those who were not in a relationship at that time.  By following the partnership behaviour of these parents over the first five years of the child's life we can assess the extent to which there is stability or change in the lives of the Millennium Cohort children.  Given there is a good deal of ethnic diversity in the parental context within which children are born we also examine the trajectories for mothers from different ethnic groups. Frequent accompaniments to family transitions are changes in the economic circumstances of families and in the emotional well-being of the parents and children; the second half of the chapter is devoted to these issues.

## Family context at birth and age 5

At the first interview, carried out when their baby was around 9 months old, a parent of the child, usually the child's natural mother, reported the family setting in which the child had been born (see Table 5.1). Fifty-nine per cent of children were born to parents who were married to one another, 25 per were born to parents who were cohabiting and 16 percent were born to solo mothers. Amongst these solo mothers, 7 per cent reported they were closely involved with the father (i.e. intimate) and 8 per cent were not, including those who were just friends, not in any relationship, or were separated or divorced. These different types of relations between the parents could be deemed to represent a hierarchy of bonding or commitment between parents at the outset of the child's life. Earlier work showed there were marked differences across these groups with respect to socio-economic characteristics (Kiernan and Smith, 2003), the extent of father involvement in the children's lives (Kiernan, 2006) and health behaviours (Kiernan and Pickett, 2006). For example, compared with unmarried mothers those who were married were more likely to have planned their pregnancies, given up smoking, breastfed and were less likely to suffer post-natal depression. They were also on average more educated, much less likely to become mothers at a young age and they also had higher household incomes than unmarried mothers. There were also marked differences across ethnic groups in the extent to which they had babies in different partnership contexts which we discuss further below.

For those children followed up, a cross-sectional snapshot of the family situation at age 5 (Table 5.1) showed that slightly more were now living in married parent families (60 per cent compared with 59 per cent); fewer were living with cohabiting parents, (15 per cent compared with 25 per cent);  and more were living in a lone parent family, (19 per cent compared with 16 per cent). The remaining 5 per cent were living in step families formed through remarriage or cohabitation. However, this simple comparison of the situation at the time of the birth and the situation when the children were 5 years old only provides a partial picture of the family dynamics occurring over the first five years of the child's life.

Table 5.1: Relationship between natural parents at the time of birth, and family structure at age 5, for UK children in MCS surveys 1 and 3

| Relationship between natural parents at birth (%) | |
| --- | --- |
| Married | 59.1 |
| Cohabiting | 25.2 |
| Closely involved | 7.4 |
| Not in a relationship | 8.2 |
| Un-weighted sample size | 18,474[a] |
| Family structure at age 5 (%) | |
| Married | 60.3 |
| Cohabiting | 15.1 |
| Lone natural mother | 18.7 |
| Lone natural father | 0.5 |
| Natural mother and other parent | 5.0 |
| Natural father and other parent | 0.2 |
| Neither natural parent | 0.2 |
| Un-weighted sample size | 14,678[b] |

[a]not reported for 78 families, sample percentages weighted to correct for sampling design and non-response to MCS 1 survey.
[b]including families in survey 3 from the original sampling frame, sample percentages weighted to correct for sampling design, non-response and sample attrition up to survey 3

# Family trajectories

The story was more complex when we analysed the more detailed information collected on family situations and changes. At each of the three surveys, at 9-10 months, age 3 and age 5, information was collected on whether natural or social parents were resident in the household and the type of relationship between the co-resident parents.  This information, together with that derived from reports on periods of partnerships and lone parenthood,  provided the basis for our trajectories.  Given that a full partnership history was not collected in the surveys our family trajectories are derived from the relationship between the natural parents at the time of the child's birth, the living arrangements and relationship of parents at the age 5 survey, and any reported intervening family transitions.

For those who were married at the time of the birth we have identified four trajectories shown in Table 5.2: stably married, currently married but had periods of separation, and two types of separated families those headed by a lone parent, typically the natural mother, and those where a parent has re-partnered and the child has a social parent, typically the natural mother and a social father. For those who were cohabiting at the birth of their child we have an additional category of families namely those who had married by age 5 and continued to live together. Identifying periods of separation for subsequently reconciled married and cohabiting parents indicates another dimension in the instability of family life not normally captured in cross-sectional surveys. For the group of mothers who had a child outside of a co-residential union we identified five trajectories from birth to when the child was 5 years old: stable lone motherhood; marrying the natural father and currently living with him; starting to cohabit with the natural father and currently living with him; living with a partner who is not the natural father; and currently a lone mother but has had periods living with a partner over the five years since the baby was born. Among the children born to solo mothers a very small proportion were living with a lone natural father, or the natural father and other social parent by age 5, these families are also shown in the table.

It is clear from Table 5.2 that parents who were married at the time of the child's birth were more likely to remain living together than those who were cohabiting at the child's birth. Cohabiting parents were more likely to have separated and to have re-partnered than were married parents. Eighty eight per cent of the married parents were still married and living together when their child was age 5 whereas, amongst parents who were cohabiting at the child's birth 67 per cent were still living with each other 5 years later, with 43 per cent continuing to cohabit and 23 per cent having married.   A greater fragility of cohabiting unions compared with marital ones has been observed across most developed nations (Andersson, 2002; Kiernan, 2004). In the MCS sample, children born to cohabiting parents were almost three times as likely as those born to married parents  to be no longer living with both these parents when they were 5 years old (28 per cent compared with 10 per cent respectively).

Amongst the mothers who were neither married nor cohabiting at the time of the child's birth, not surprisingly those who were closely involved with the father of their child were more likely to marry or cohabit following the birth than those who were not in a relationship with the father. Mothers who were not in a relationship at the birth of their child were more likely to continue to live as a lone parent family or to live with another partner than those in a closely involved relationship. Among mothers who were in a close relationship with the other natural parent at the child's birth, just over a third were living with the father when their child was 5 years old, with more cohabiting (25%) than married (12%); just under a third lived as a

stable lone parent family over the five years; and 23 per cent had lived in a partnership with the father or another partner for a period of time but were living as a lone parent at the age 5 interview; and 10 per cent were living with another partner at this time. Among the lone mothers who were not in a close relationship with the father at the child's birth: just over one half (53%) continued to live as a lone mother, 16 per cent were living with the father when the child was 5 years old, with more cohabiting (11 per cent) than married (5 per cent); 16 per cent were living with another partner; and 15 per cent had lived in a partnership at some time since the birth of the baby but were lone mothers at the time of the interview. Given sample size constraints for the analyses that follow we have combined the two sets of mothers who were solo at the time of the birth.

We have described these family trajectories in some detail as this is the first time that we have such detailed information on family changes for a nationally representative sample of children. These trajectories clearly highlight how cross-sectional snapshots of children's living arrangements can disguise the dynamics of family living arrangements and some of the complexities of family situations experienced by these children even over this relatively short time span.

Table 5.2: Relationship between natural parents at the time of birth and subsequent family trajectories to age 5, for UK children in MCS surveys 1 and 3

| Family trajectory | Married % | Cohabiting % | Closely involved % | Not in a relationship % | Total % | (Parents resident at age 5 if not both natural parents) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Married at birth** | | | | | | |
| Stable | 88.1 | | | | 52.3 | |
| Periods of separation | 2.1 | | | | 1.3 | |
| To lone parenthood | 7.6 | | | | 4.5 | (4.3% lone mother, 0.2% lone dad) |
| To re-partnered | 2.1 | | | | 1.2 | (1.1% natural mother and social parent, 0.1 % natural dad and social parent) |
| Total % | 100 | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| **Cohabiting at birth** | | | | | | |
| Stable | | 43.4 | | | 10.9 | |
| To married | | 23.2 | | | 5.8 | |
| Periods of separation | | 5.7 | | | 1.4 | |
| To lone parenthood | | 20.5 | | | 5.1 | (4.9% lone mother, 0.3% lone dad) |
| To re-partnered | | 7.3 | | | 1.8 | (1.7% natural mother and social parent, 0.1 % natural dad and social parent) |
| Total % | | 100 | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| **Solo at birth** | | | | | | |
| Stable | | | 30.6 | 52.8 | 6.6 | (6.6% lone mother, 0.02% lone dad) |
| To married | | | 12.0 | 5.3 | 1.3 | |
| To cohabiting | | | 24.8 | 10.6 | 2.7 | |
| To new partner | | | 10.0 | 16.2 | 2.1 | (2.1% natural mother and social parent, 0.01% natural dad and social parent) |
| Periods of partnership | | | 22.6 | 15.1 | 2.9 | (2.9% lone mother, 0.04% lone dad) |
| Total % | | | 100 | 100 | 100 | |
| | | | | | | |
| Total sample % | 59.3 | 25.0 | 7.6 | 8.1 | 100 | |
| Un-weighted sample size | 8,706 | 3,407 | 1,241 | 1,240 | 14,594[a] | |

[a] including families in survey 3 from the original sampling frame, sample percentages weighted to correct for sampling design, non-response and sample attrition up to survey 3. 54 families excluded where relationship at birth was not reported and 30 families excluded where child was not living with either parent at age 5

# Ethnic diversity in family trajectories

The United Kingdom is a culturally and ethnically diverse society and there were some noteworthy differences across ethnic groups in the context within which their children were born and the types of family trajectories that followed. For this study we used the reported ethnic status of the mother. The great majority of mothers in the Millennium Cohort Study were white ( 89 per cent), the next largest ethnic group were those of South Asian origin (6.1 per cent), 2.6 per cent of the mothers were black, 1.0 per cent were of mixed race and 1.7 per cent other ethnic origins. Across the ethnic groups there was a good deal of variation with respect to the partnership context within which the baby was born (Table 5.3- top section). South Asian mothers were much more likely to be married at the time of the birth (and the great majority were married) than either the white or black mothers. Having a child within a cohabiting union was rare amongst the South Asian groups and was less common amongst black mothers than amongst white mothers. The groups who were the least likely to have been in a partnership at the time the baby was born were the black and mixed origin mothers; amongst these groups non-partnered parenthood was more or almost as common as marital childbearing. Amongst the set of black and mixed ethnic origin mothers, those of Caribbean origin had the highest proportion of non-partnered births; one in two of these mothers were not in a co-residential partnership when they had their baby

Given that the family contexts within which children were born varied substantially across ethnic groups we looked at the trajectories separately for the married cohabiting and solo motherhood groups so that we were better placed to compare families with the same starting point. These are shown in the lower three parts of Table 5.3.

Amongst all the children born into married families 88 per cent were still living with both parents at age 5; high rates of continuity were to be seen amongst the white, South Asian and mixed ethnic origin mothers. Fewer, but still the great majority, of the black Caribbean and black African married mothers were still married. Becoming a lone mother following the break-up of the marriage was most common amongst black mothers; with 20 per cent of mothers with Caribbean origins and 17 per cent with African origins having become lone mothers as compared with 8 per cent of the white mothers. Periods of separation were much less common amongst the white and black Caribbean families than amongst the other sets of families. Very few of the initially married mothers had re-partnered, but where they did it was more common amongst the white and Bangladeshi families than amongst mothers in other ethnic groups.

Cohabiting at the time of the birth was very rare amongst the South Asian mothers so we confine our comparisons to the white, black and mixed origin mothers. Stable cohabitation was most frequent amongst the white, mixed origin and black African mothers and was less frequent amongst the black Caribbean mothers. A transition from cohabiting into a lone mother family was most frequent amongst the black Caribbean mothers and periods of parental separation were more prevalent amongst black African and black Caribbean mothers than amongst white and mixed origin mothers.

Fifteen per cent of the babies in the MCS were born to parents not living together at the time of the birth. It is clear from Table 5.3 that South Asian mothers in this situation were the most likely to be married to the natural father at age 5 and it may be that there were particular geographical constraints that had prevented the parents being together when the baby was born. Black Caribbean mothers were the least likely to marry the natural father and black

African mothers were the most likely to continue to live as a lone mother compared with other ethnic groups.  There is also an interesting contrast in the behaviours of the black Caribbean and black African mothers with respect to moving in with the father.  Black African mothers were more likely to marry whereas the black Caribbean mothers were more likely to cohabit with the father of their child.  From our trajectories we also identified a subset of mothers who although lone mothers at the time of age 5 interviews had periods of living with a partner since the baby was born. Around one in five of these mothers of white, black and mixed origin had had periods of partnership since the birth of their baby.  Most data sources fail to capture this added instability in family life.

In sum, it is clear that there are marked differences in the partnership behaviours of mothers from different ethnic groups. Overall the most unstable family lives are found amongst black mother families, particularly those of Caribbean origin, regardless of whether they were married or not when they had their baby. Marriage is central to South Asian family life but these families are no more stable than white married families, at least over the first five years of children's lives. Stable cohabiting unions are most frequently found amongst white and mixed origin families, rare amongst South Asian families and such unions are the most  prone to breakdown amongst black mothers.

Table 5.3: Relationship between natural parents at the time of birth and subsequent family trajectories to age 5 according to mother's ethnicity, for UK children in MCS surveys 1 and 3

| Mother's Ethnicity | White | Mixed | Indian | Pakistani | Bangladeshi | Black Caribbean | Black African | Other | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sample % | (88.5) | (1.0) | (1.9) | (3.1) | (1.1) | (1.1) | (1.5) | (1.7) | (100) |
| **Relationship between natural parents at the time of birth** | | | | | | | | | |
| Married | 57.4 | 42.2 | 90.7 | 91.7 | 93.7 | 30.8 | 45.9 | 74.3 | 59.2 |
| Cohabiting | 27.6 | 19.3 | 1.8 | 1.3 | 0.7 | 16.5 | 13.4 | 9.1 | 25.2 |
| Close | 7.2 | 20.8 | 4.9 | 1.9 | 0.6 | 30.2 | 14.8 | 10.1 | 7.4 |
| Not in a relationship | 7.9 | 17.7 | 2.6 | 5.2 | 5.0 | 22.6 | 25.9 | 6.6 | 8.2 |
| Total % | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Un-weighted sample size | 15,477 | 190 | 475 | 891 | 370 | 263 | 376 | 382 | 18,424[a] |
| **Family trajectories up to age 5 among parents who were married at birth** | | | | | | | | | |
| Stable | 88.4 | 87.2 | 92.5 | 85.8 | 88.9 | 78.4 | 75.5 | 88.6 | 88.2 |
| Periods of separation | 1.8 | 5.9 | 2.5 | 4.5 | 5.7 | 1.9 | 7.3 | 4.8 | 2.1 |
| To lone parenthood | 7.5 | 6.9 | 4.7 | 8.8 | 4.0 | 19.7 | 17.2 | 6.7 | 7.6 |
| To re-partnered | 2.4 | 0.0 | 0.3 | 0.9 | 1.4 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 2.1 |
| Total % | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Un-weighted sample size | 7,111 | 47 | 321 | 589 | 252 | 58 | 124 | 182 | 8,684[b] |
| **Family trajectories up to age 5 among parents who were cohabiting at birth** | | | | | | | | | |
| Stable | 43.9 | 29.5 | 29.1 | 48.4 | 50.1 | 18.7 | 30.2 | 32.8 | 43.4 |
| To married | 23.4 | 5.3 | 13.2 | 0.0 | 49.9 | 17.5 | 26.4 | 33.2 | 23.2 |
| Periods of separation | 5.4 | 7.4 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 19.9 | 26.8 | 10.9 | 5.7 |
| To lone parenthood | 20.0 | 51.5 | 16.9 | 51.6 | 0.0 | 42.6 | 16.6 | 15.3 | 20.4 |
| To re-partnered | 7.3 | 6.3 | 40.9 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 1.4 | 0.0 | 7.8 | 7.2 |
| Total % | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Un-weighted sample size | 3,266 | 23 | 6 | 4 | 2 | 33 | 35 | 27 | 3,396[b] |
| **Family trajectories up to age 5 among solo parents at birth** | | | | | | | | | |
| Stable | 40.7 | 50.5 | 33.4 | 43.4 | 23.3 | 52.4 | 62.1 | 36.3 | 42.0 |
| To married | 6.6 | 4.7 | 55.7 | 41.2 | 44.0 | 2.9 | 15.6 | 41.2 | 8.5 |
| To cohabiting | 18.8 | 13.7 | 0.0 | 1.4 | 27.9 | 18.4 | 4.4 | 6.6 | 17.5 |
| To new partner | 14.9 | 9.0 | 0.0 | 2.0 | 4.9 | 2.3 | 0.4 | 4.3 | 13.2 |
| Periods of partnership | 19.0 | 22.2 | 10.9 | 11.9 | 0.0 | 24.0 | 17.5 | 11.5 | 18.8 |
| Total % | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Un-weighted sample size | 2,050 | 60 | 34 | 52 | 15 | 84 | 118 | 60 | 2,473[b] |

[a] not reported for 128 families, sample percentages weighted to correct for sampling design and non-response to survey 1
[b] sample percentages weighted to correct for sampling design, non-response and sample attrition up to survey 3

# Family environment at age 5

The next question addressed is whether families with differing trajectories vary in their circumstances five years after the birth of their child. Our focus is on two aspects that are well known to be related to changing family circumstances namely levels of family income and the psychological well-being of parents and children. It is well-established that family transitions are associated with declines in income when parents split and increases when parents re-partner (Jenkins, 2008). Here our focus is on the bottom end of the income distribution and an examination of the extent of poverty in families with different family histories. Changes in mental well-being of parents and children also occur with family changes. There is evidence that separations lower the mental well-being of mothers and re-partnering can enhance it (Acock and Demo, 1994; Pevalin and Goldberg, 2003). Here we examine whether the mothers with different partnership histories vary in the extent to which they exhibit depressive symptoms. Poverty and maternal depression are two aspects of family life that have also been found to be very important in accounting for variation in children's cognitive and emotional development (Downey and Coyne, 1990; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000; Petersen and Albers, 2001) and this was the case for the MCS children at age three (Kiernan and Huerta, 2008; Kiernan and Mensah, 2009). Moreover, there is ample evidence from the extant literature, including our earlier work using the MCS, that poverty and maternal depression are inter-related and this needs to be borne in mind as it is not directly addressed here.

*Poverty* From Table 5.4 we see that at the time of the age 5 interview 30 per cent of the MCS sample of children were estimated to be living in income poverty, with poverty defined as living below 60 per cent of equivalised median income (Ketende and Joshi, 2008). By far the lowest proportion of children living in poverty at age 5 was of those who had lived with both their natural parents, either continuously married to each other or initially cohabiting but then married; 15 and 16 per cent respectively of these families were living in poverty. The next most advantaged group were families with continuously cohabiting parents, 23 per cent of these families were in poverty. Compared with married families with children, cohabiting families were found to be more likely to be economically disadvantaged since the early 1990s when comparisons were first made and cohabitation was less frequent (Kiernan and Estaugh, 1993). Living in a lone mother family raises the chances of living in poverty but we also observed a significant gradient with previously married lone mothers being less likely to be in poverty than their cohabiting contemporaries (52 per cent compared to 67 per cent) who in turn were less likely to be in poverty than families where the mother has been a lone mother since the birth of the cohort child (79 per cent). Interestingly, solo mothers who subsequently married or cohabited with the natural father, although their circumstances improved relative to other women who started out as lone mothers, t were not in as advantaged circumstances as married or cohabiting natural families or cohabitants who had made the transition into marriage. All the mentioned differences were statistically significant from one another. There was also some evidence that solo mothers who married the natural father were somewhat less likely to be poor than those who were cohabiting with the natural father (35 per cent as compared with 43 per cent respectively). In sum, it appears from this analysis that the chances of a family living in poverty are associated with both the partnership context at the time of the birth as well as with subsequent partnership.

*Maternal Depression* The story was somewhat different with respect to whether the mothers were exhibiting depressive symptoms when their child was 5 years old. Depression was assessed from the mother's responses to the Kessler 6 item screening scale for psychological

distress (Kessler, et al 2002), which was fully completed by mothers in 92 per cent of the families. In an evaluation on a general population of US adults, scores of 13 or more have been taken as denoting serious mental illness (Kessler, et al 2003). On this basis 3.3 per cent of the responding mothers in the MCS 3 survey reported serious mental illness. On a less stringent definition of 7 or more points, 14.0 per cent of the responding mothers could be deemed have high levels of psychological distress.  It is this latter categorisation that we use here.

From Table 5.4 we see that all the married mothers regardless of whether they were cohabiting or solo at the time of the birth had similar levels of depression which were also the lowest rates.  Marriage it seems is associated with lower reported levels of depression, but we cannot say from this analysis whether this arises from selection of the less depressed into marriage or that being married lessens the chances of depression.  Cohabitation on the other hand does not appear to bestow the same level of benefit.  It is also apparent that women who became lone mothers after the breakup of a marriage or a cohabiting union or at the birth of their baby had relatively high and similar rates of reported depression when their child was 5 years old.  The highest levels of reported depression occurred amongst the solo mothers who had periods of time living with a partner but had reverted to being a lone parent at the time of the 5 year old survey. These mothers and their children will have had amongst the most unstable family lives; 33 per cent of these mothers had high levels of distress compared with 25 per cent of the stable solo lone mothers.

Table 5.4: Family trajectories up to age 5 and poverty and mother's psychological well being at MCS survey 3

| Family trajectory | Family experiencing income poverty[a] | Mother experiencing psychological distress[b] |
|---|---|---|
| | % | % |
| **Married at birth** | | |
| Stable | 15.4 | 9.5 |
| Periods of separation | 31.1 | 15.4 |
| To lone parenthood | 52.1 | 24.1 |
| To re-partnered | 36.1 | 15.6 |
| **Cohabiting at birth** | | |
| Stable | 23.2 | 14.5 |
| To married | 16.4 | 11.6 |
| Periods of separation | 42.2 | 11.9 |
| To lone parenthood | 66.5 | 20.1 |
| To re-partnered | 38.5 | 22.1 |
| **Solo at birth** | | |
| Stable | 79.3 | 25.4 |
| To married | 35.0 | 12.1 |
| To cohabiting | 43.2 | 21.6 |
| To new partner | 50.0 | 21.1 |
| Periods of partnership | 82.0 | 33.0 |
| Total | 29.7 | 14.0 |
| Un-weighted sample size | 14,579[c] | 13,115[c] |

[a] Income poverty, less than 60% of the median equivalised household income (intreg variable)
[b] Psychological distress, mother reporting 7-24 points on the Kessler scale
[c] sample percentages weighted to correct for sampling design, non-response and sample attrition up to survey 3

# Children's emotional well-being

We now turn our attention to the emotional well-being of the children in these families. In particular we examine whether children with different family experiences are more or less prone to emotional and behavioural problems. Our measures come from assessments derived from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997), a 25 item behavioural screening questionnaire on 5 different dimensions of children's behaviour: conduct problems, inattention-hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, peer problems, and pro-social behaviour. Each attribute was rated by the mother using a scale from 0 to 2 (not true, somewhat true, and certainly true). Responses were summed to provide a total score for each dimension. In this study we examine the externalizing (behavioural problems) and internalizing dimensions (emotional problems) of the children's behaviour, the former includes the responses to the sections on conduct problems and inattention/hyperactivity, and the latter responses to the section on emotional symptoms. We divided the children according to whether or not they were in the top quintile of the internalising and externalising scales. It may be the case that depressed mothers are more likely than non-depressed mothers to report more negatively on their children's behaviour and consequently the association between maternal depression and child behaviour problems may be not clear cut or uni-directional (see Smith, 2004 for a clear exposition of these issues).

Logistic regression was used to compare the odds that children with different family histories would be in the upper quintiles of the distributions for externalising and internalising difficulties. The results are shown in Table 5.5. In all models the reference category was families where the parents had been continuously married since the child was born. In model 1 the estimated odds ratios were adjusted for the child's gender and age; in model 2 experience of poverty and maternal depression were also taken into account; and in model 3 a number of other controls were taken into account including: mothers educational attainment, age at first birth, parity and ethnicity; whether English is spoken in the home; number of children in the household, parent's work history, housing tenure, and type of pre-school care and education experienced by the child..

Compared with children living in stable married families, virtually all the other children with different family histories were more likely to be reported to have externalising behavioural problems at age 5 (Table 5.5). The most marked differences were to be seen for children born into cohabiting families where the parents had separated and solo mothers who had not married the natural father, where children were around three times more likely than children in stable married families to be exhibiting behavioural problems. Taking account of the mental well-being of mothers and family poverty attenuated the differences and the introduction of additional controls attenuated them still further. However, there are still indications that children born to cohabiting parents who separate and children of solo mothers who cohabit with the natural father or partner another man are more likely to be exhibiting behaviour problems.

The story was somewhat different with respect to internalising emotional problems. From Table 5.5 we see that children born to lone mothers who subsequently married or cohabited with the father and were still living with him at the time of the age 5 survey were not significantly different in their emotional well-being from those who had lived with their married parents from the outset. But, compared with children living in stable married families those who were living in lone parent families were more likely to be exhibiting

emotional problems, as were children of separated cohabiting parents and solo mothers who had re-partnered.

However after taking into account whether the family was living in poverty or the mother was exhibiting depressive symptoms then no significant differences were to be seen between the children with differing family trajectories and children living in stably married families. This suggests that the association between the family trajectories and the child's emotional well-being may be mediated via parental socio-economic circumstance and mother's mental well-being.

Table 5.5: Family trajectories and children's emotional well being at MCS survey 3

| Family trajectory | Child experiencing externalising difficulties[a] | | | | | | | | Child experiencing internalising difficulties[b] | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | (Model 1) | | (Model 2) | | (Model 3) | | | | (Model 1) | | (Model 2) | | (Model 3) | | |
| | % | OR[c] | 95% CI | OR[d] | 95% CI | OR[e] | 95% CI | | % | OR[c] | 95% CI | OR[d] | 95% CI | OR[e] | 95% CI | |
| **Married at birth** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Stable | 12.8 | 1 (ref) | | 1 (ref) | | 1 (ref) | | | 15.6 | 1 (ref) | | 1 (ref) | | 1 (ref) | | |
| Periods of separation | 15.9 | 1.35 | (0.85 to 2.16) | 1.14 | (0.69 to 1.89) | 1.00 | (0.59 to 1.70) | | 19.9 | 1.35 | (0.86 to 2.10) | 1.17 | (0.74 to 1.85) | 1.05 | (0.66 to 1.68) | |
| To lone parenthood | 22.1 | 2.01*** | (1.56 to 2.59) | 1.46** | (1.13 to 1.89) | 1.33* | (1.01 to 1.76) | | 22.3 | 1.56*** | (1.22 to 1.99) | 1.15 | (0.88 to 1.49) | 1.14 | (0.87 to 1.51) | |
| To re-partnered | 19.6 | 1.77* | (1.14 to 2.74) | 1.48 | (0.94 to 2.33) | 1.30 | (0.83 to 2.05) | | 17.8 | 1.17 | (0.76 to 1.81) | 0.95 | (0.59 to 1.51) | 0.94 | (0.58 to 1.52) | |
| **Cohabiting at birth** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Stable | 18.8 | 1.58*** | (1.30 to 1.91) | 1.44*** | (1.20 to 1.73) | 1.21* | (1.00 to 1.46) | | 17.7 | 1.17 | (0.96 to 1.43) | 1.09 | (0.89 to 1.33) | 1.04 | (0.84 to 1.28) | |
| To married | 17.7 | 1.45** | (1.13 to 1.87) | 1.44** | (1.13 to 1.85) | 1.28 | (0.98 to 1.68) | | 17.4 | 1.14 | (0.89 to 1.47) | 1.14 | (0.88 to 1.48) | 1.09 | (0.83 to 1.41) | |
| Periods of separation | 26.5 | 2.50*** | (1.67 to 3.72) | 2.28*** | (1.49 to 3.47) | 1.67* | (1.07 to 2.61) | | 23.1 | 1.63* | (1.08 to 2.47) | 1.49 | (0.97 to 2.27) | 1.26 | (0.83 to 1.92) | |
| To lone parenthood | 29.0 | 2.82*** | (2.26 to 3.52) | 2.11*** | (1.67 to 2.66) | 1.66*** | (1.28 to 2.15) | | 20.4 | 1.39** | (1.13 to 1.72) | 1.03 | (0.82 to 1.28) | 0.93 | (0.73 to 1.20) | |
| To re-partnered | 32.9 | 3.41*** | (2.30 to 5.06) | 2.68*** | (1.79 to 4.02) | 2.02** | (1.30 to 3.15) | | 21.5 | 1.50* | (1.02 to 2.20) | 1.17 | (0.80 to 1.72) | 1.09 | (0.74 to 1.62) | |
| **Solo at birth** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Stable | 28.7 | 2.79*** | (2.34 to 3.32) | 1.85*** | (1.50 to 2.27) | 1.22 | (0.92 to 1.63) | | 23.1 | 1.63*** | (1.31 to 2.02) | 1.10 | (0.86 to 1.41) | 0.94 | (0.70 to 1.25) | |
| To married | 20.7 | 1.79** | (1.23 to 2.59) | 1.55* | (1.06 to 2.27) | 1.21 | (0.80 to 1.84) | | 20.5 | 1.40 | (0.92 to 2.14) | 1.19 | (0.76 to 1.84) | 1.00 | (0.63 to 1.58) | |
| To cohabiting | 31.3 | 3.24*** | (2.49 to 4.22) | 2.68*** | (2.05 to 3.50) | 1.81*** | (1.35 to 2.43) | | 17.1 | 1.11 | (0.81 to 1.54) | 0.88 | (0.63 to 1.25) | 0.71 | (0.49 to 1.02) | |
| To new partner | 33.0 | 3.42*** | (2.53 to 4.62) | 2.70*** | (1.99 to 3.68) | 1.89** | (1.30 to 2.76) | | 21.7 | 1.52* | (1.07 to 2.17) | 1.19 | (0.81 to 1.74) | 0.97 | (0.65 to 1.44) | |
| Periods of partnership | 34.0 | 3.65*** | (2.76 to 4.82) | 2.21*** | (1.62 to 3.01) | 1.53* | (1.10 to 2.14) | | 27.2 | 2.03*** | (1.54 to 2.66) | 1.26 | (0.95 to 1.68) | 1.06 | (0.78 to 1.44) | |
| Total | 18.2 | | | | | | | | 17.8 | | | | | | | |
| Un-weighted sample size | 12,762[f] | | | | | | | | 13,416[f] | | | | | | | |
| Other covariates added | | Child gender and age | | Plus income poverty, and maternal depression | | Full set | | | | Child gender and age | | Plus income poverty, and maternal depression | | Full set | | |

(* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001)
[a] highest quintile in distribution of externalising scores from parent reported SDQ, 8 to 20 points
[b] highest quintile in distribution of internalising scores from parent reported SDQ, 3 to 10 points
[c] odds ratio including controls for child's gender and age
[d] odds ratio including controls for child's gender and age, income poverty and mother's psychological distress
[e] odds ratio including controls for child's gender and age, income poverty, mother's psychological distress, mother's level of educational qualification, mother's age at first birth, mother's ethnicity, language spoken in the home, whether the child was the mother's first born, total number of children in the household, history of parental unemployment, housing tenure, and use of early education or childcare facilities prior to primary school.
[f] sample percentages and regression models weighted to correct for sampling design, non-response and sample attrition up to survey 3

# Family status at age 5 and children's wellbeing

Family trajectories provide a detailed picture on family transitions that children experience and the settings that they have lived through. Generally speaking most studies in this field tend to examine current marital status rather than family histories. So the question posed is whether we would get similar insights on the well-being of children if we just considered the family structure in which they were living at age 5. Table 5.6 shows the extent of emotional and behavioural problems amongst children in four types of families: married parents, cohabiting parents, lone parent families and step-families formed through either cohabitation or marriage. This is a simpler classification and as a consequence the numbers in the different groups are larger which gives more statistical power such that odds of for example 1.2 on a smaller sample may not reach statistical significance but they may on a larger sample. From these analyses we see that compared to children in married couple families children in the other three types of families were more likely to exhibit emotional problems but after taking into account whether the family was living in poverty or whether the mother was depressed there was no significant differences across the different families. With regard to behavioural problems we see that compared with children in married couple families children in the other types of families exhibited more behavioural problems; with children living in lone mother and step families having somewhat higher odds than those living in cohabiting families. Again after the introduction of the background factors the odds of children experiencing behaviour problems are much attenuated but remain statistically significantly different from the children living in married couple families and children living in step-families exhibit the highest odds. The higher odds of behaviour problems seen for children in step families accords with findings from other research studies (see, for example, Dunn et al 1998).

The additional insights derived from the trajectories are that the greater emotional distress observed amongst children in step-families who were born to unmarried parents occurs regardless of the route taken to this family form; that children in lone-mother families where the mother has had a prior cohabiting relationship exhibit lower emotional well-being than children in lone mother families without this experience; and there is lower well-being amongst children whose parents are cohabiting but they have been reunited after a period of separation. Table 5.5 (model 3) also shows that children in step-families formed after cohabitation have elevated risks of behaviour problems, as do children in lone mother families following the break-up of a cohabiting union and children in families where cohabiting parents have temporarily separated also have heightened odds of behaviour problems

Table 5.6: Family status at age 5 and children's emotional well being at MCS survey 3

| | Child experiencing externalising difficulties[a] | | | | | | | Child experiencing internalising difficulties[b] | | | | | | |
| | (Model 1) | | (Model 2) | | (Model 3) | | | (Model 1) | | (Model 2) | | (Model 3) | |
| Family status at age 5 | % | OR[c] | 95% CI | OR[d] | 95% CI | OR[e] | 95% CI | % | OR[c] | 95% CI | OR[d] | 95% CI | OR[e] | 95% CI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Married | 13.5 | 1 (ref) | | 1 (ref) | | 1 (ref) | | 15.9 | | | | | | |
| Cohabiting | 21.4 | 1.75*** | (1.50 to 2.03) | 1.57*** | (1.35 to 1.82) | 1.24** | (1.06 to 1.44) | 18.2 | 1.18* | (1.00 to 1.38) | 1.07 | (0.90 to 1.26) | 1.00 | (0.84 to 1.19) |
| Lone parent | 28.0 | 2.54*** | (2.24 to 2.88) | 1.71*** | (1.47 to 2.00) | 1.29** | (1.07 to 1.55) | 22.8 | 1.56*** | (1.38 to 1.77) | 1.09 | (0.95 to 1.26) | 1.02 | (0.86 to 1.21) |
| Step family | 29.6 | 2.76*** | (2.21 to 3.45) | 2.19*** | (1.74 to 2.75) | 1.60** | (1.23 to 2.09) | 20.5 | 1.37** | (1.10 to 1.72) | 1.08 | (0.87 to 1.36) | 1.01 | (0.80 to 1.29) |
| Total | 18.2 | | | | | | | 17.8 | | | | | | |
| Un-weighted sample size | 12,802[f] | | | | | | | 13,456[f] | | | | | | |
| Other covariates added | | Child gender and age | | Plus income poverty, and maternal depression | | Full set | | | Child gender and age | | Plus income poverty, and maternal depression | | Full set | |

(* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001)
[a] highest quintile in distribution of externalising scores from parent reported SDQ, 8 to 20 points
[b] highest quintile in distribution of internalising scores from parent reported SDQ, 3 to 10 points
[c] odds ratio including controls for child's gender and age
[d] odds ratio including controls for child's gender and age, income poverty and mother's psychological distress
[e] odds ratio including controls for child's gender and age, income poverty, mother's psychological distress, mother's level of educational qualification, mother's age at first birth, mother's ethnicity, language spoken in the home, whether the child was the mother's first born, total number of children in the household, history of parental unemployment, housing tenure, and use of early education or childcare facilities prior to primary school.
[f] sample percentages and regression models weighted to correct for sampling design, non-response and sample attrition up to survey 3

## Summary and Conclusions

The children in the Millennium Cohort Study have experienced a diversity of family forms in their short lives which are more complex and unstable than was the case amongst earlier generations of children. By the time they were 5 years old 75 per cent of the children were living with both their parents compared with around 90 per cent of children born in 1970 who approximate the parental generation of the MCS children (Kiernan, 2004). Furthermore, 41 per cent of the MCS children were born to unmarried parents as compared with 8 per cent of children born in 1970 (OPCS, 1997).

Our array of family trajectories portrays some of the complexity of family life that we encounter in the twenty-first century and how it varies across ethnic groups and economic circumstances. Here we highlight some of the key findings. It is clear that children born to married parents are much less likely to see their parents separate compared with those born to cohabiting parents. On the other hand, mothers and children in stable cohabiting partnerships (whether they convert into marriages or not) are similar to mothers and children in marital unions in terms of their emotional well-being.

Continuing cohabiting families tend to be more economically disadvantaged than married families. Mothers who had a baby on their own but subsequently cohabited with or married the father of their child are the most disadvantaged of the two parent families. Undoubtedly, the most economically disadvantaged families are those headed by a lone mother. However, within this set there is also a gradient of disadvantage with the erstwhile married mothers being less likely to be poor than erstwhile cohabiting mothers who in turn are better of than the never-partnered lone mothers. These gradients are likely to be due to the initial selection of the more advantaged women into these different family situations at the outset (Kiernan, 2002) and these legacies continue into the early years of their children's lives.

Mothers living with the father of their child tend to have better mental health than those living with other partners and lone mothers are the most likely to have poor mental health. Poorer mental health is associated with less engaged parenting which in turn can affect the psychological/ emotional well-being of children (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000; Smith 2004) and this was shown to be the case amongst the 3 year olds in the MCS (Kiernan and Huerta, 2008).

Children who had experienced different family trajectories varied in the extent to which they displayed emotional and behaviour problems. It was clear that prior to the introduction of controls for other attributes of the families that children who had not lived with stably married parents over their first five years of life were more likely to be exhibiting behavioural problems at age 5. However, after taking into account other characteristics of these other families the differences were attenuated but not eliminated. Children from cohabiting families that had broken down still exhibited relatively high levels of behaviour problems and similarly children born to solo mothers who cohabited with the natural father or had re-partnered had higher levels of reported behaviour problems. Family instability and change seem to be an important element in young children's behaviour problems. The most common explanation for these findings from the divorce literature (Coleman, 2000) is that partnership changes increase stress amongst the parents, partners and the children involved as the families adjust to new routines, as the mother focuses attention on the new partner and children compete for the attention of the mother. It may be that such increased stress causes children to have more behavioural problems.

In conclusion,  the partnership context in which children are born is associated with a range of disadvantages but post-birth partnership behaviour of parents can also temper or enhance the disadvantage experienced by these families and their children. This is not to say that a parent's partnership situation either at the time of the birth or subsequently directly affects children and the families in which they live, but rather that partnership behaviours are associated with or reflect parental situations and inputs which in turn affect outcomes for these families.

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