



social and economic point of view. But of more crucial importance from a development point of view are the various circumstances associated with *becoming* the child of a single-parent or reconstituted family, as our earlier discussion of 'disruption' versus 'distortion' of relationships demonstrated. I would like you to look in some detail at one of the studies that has attempted to distinguish the effects of disruption from the effects of distortion of relationships. Michael Rutter (1971) has examined the association between early separation experiences, marital discord and the incidence of anti-social behaviour in nine to twelve-year-olds.

Activity 10 (Allow about 10 minutes)

Some of the main results are given in Figures 3 and 4. How do you interpret them?

- (a) Ratings of whether marriages were 'good' or 'fair' versus 'very poor' were established through parental interviews covering both the pattern of relationship and the extent of positive and negative feelings towards each other.
- (b) Information about separation experiences was also obtained from the parental interviews. 'Separation' was defined as a continuous period of four weeks or more,

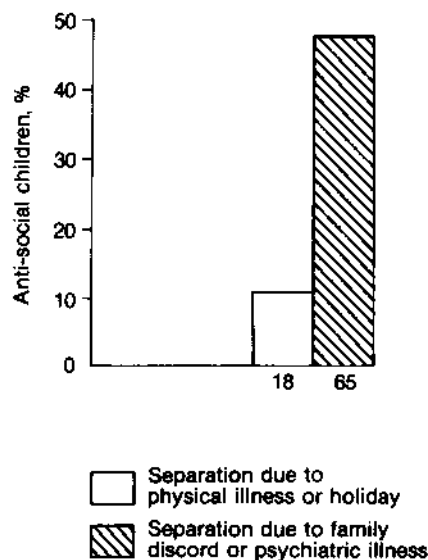
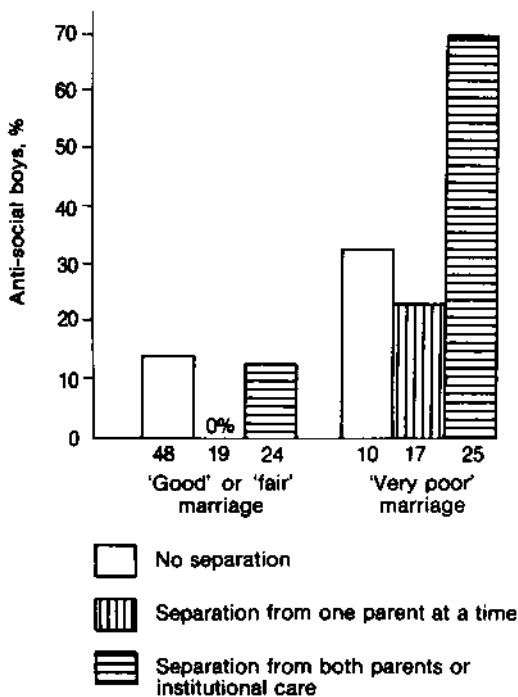


Figure 3 The association between family separation experiences and anti-social behaviour in boys (Rutter 1971).

Figure 4 Reasons for separation and anti-social behaviour in children (Rutter 1971).

due to the child either being taken into hospital because of physical illness, or being taken into care because of family discord or psychiatric illness in one of the parents.

(c) The measure of children's behaviour was based on a questionnaire completed by teachers (indeed the behaviour inventory designed by Rutter *et al.*, 1970 is the same as was used by Barbara Tizard, in the study discussed in Section 3). You will find a more detailed description of the teachers' questionnaire in Unit 18/19, Section 2.

(d) The numbers at the base of the histogram refer to the number of cases in that column.

Comment

Figure 3 shows that the largest differences in anti-social behaviour are associated with the marriage rating and not with the separation experience. For each separation circumstance, anti-social behaviour is more pronounced in boys from families judged to have a 'very poor' marriage. However, while no difference was found between children separated from one parent and those not separated at all, there did appear to be an effect of separation from both parents, at least in the 'very poor' marriage group. Rutter interprets this as due to the frequent association of separations in this group with discord (i.e. very often children were separated because of family discord) a conclusion which is supported by a re-analysis of the data (Fig. 4) according to whether the separations were due to physical illness or family discord and psychiatric disturbance. This interpretation was further confirmed by the evidence that anti-social behaviour was particularly high among children who had experienced separation in early childhood because of marital discord, and were still in families with poor relationships. Conversely, anti-social behaviour was relatively low among children who were now in harmonious situations but had previously experienced separation due to family discord; further evidence of reversibility.

4.10 In view of the evident importance of family disharmony, Rutter made a more precise analysis of which qualities in family relationships may adversely affect later social adjustment, at least as it is perceived by teachers. First, Rutter made a distinction between two dimensions of discord: active discord (quarrelling, hostility, fighting etc.), which he calls *tension*; and the emotional quality of the relationship (the positive and negative feelings both between husband and wife as well as towards children), which he calls *warmth*. The analysis showed that the incidence of deviancy among the children was much higher in families marked by both high tension and low warmth, than in families marked by extreme scores on only one of these dimensions.

4.11 Before drawing conclusions from this study it is important to recognize some of the limitations in its design and interpretation. First there is the assumption that it is family discord that causes deviancy, whereas it is just possible that the causal relationship may work in the other direction (i.e. perhaps deviant children upset their parents' marriage). This would be perfectly consistent with the interactional model of development proposed in the set book by Schaffer. However, Rutter (1972) concludes on the basis of his own and other studies that while difficult child behaviour very likely exacerbates parental discord and promotes a circular process, this is triggered off by the tension and negative qualities of the parents' relationship.

4.12 Secondly, the study can be criticized for its dependence on teachers' perceptions as the criteria for judging children anti-social. Recall that in Tizard's study the strongest evidence on effects of early maternal deprivation came from teachers' judgements, using this same rating scale developed by Rutter *et al.* (1970). Parents, especially adoptive parents, were much more accepting of their children's behaviour.

Activity 11 (Allow about 10 minutes)

Can you think of possible reasons why teacher-rated behaviour inventories might produce a different pattern of results from parent reports? Is there any reason why evidence of 'disturbed behaviour' might show up most clearly in the classroom? Finally, the apparent strong effects of marital discord on anti-social behaviour was only shown for boys (as you may have noticed from Figure 2). Why should this be?

4.13 There seem to me to be two possible explanations, one focused on the child the other on the teacher. The alternative arguments are:

(a) emotional insecurity in the child is most likely to manifest itself in stressful situations; the school environment places children under all sorts of pressures so classroom behaviour is a good measure of children's emotional vulnerability. Perhaps boys are more sensitive to such stresses, and more inclined to respond to them by being anti-social, whereas girls would be more likely to withdraw or become tearful.

(b) pressures on classroom teachers accentuate their sensitivity to behaviour that fails to conform to the relatively narrow norms of compliance expected by schools; so teachers' judgements of anti-social behaviour tell us as much about teachers' vulnerability as pupils'. Boys show up as having the most problems because they are more potentially disruptive and so more threatening than girls; and teachers are less tolerant of boys' misbehaviour.

4.14 We cannot resolve this problem here, but two further studies provide some clarification of the issues at stake. First, in a parallel analysis based on a national sample of seven-year-olds collected as part of the National Child Development Study, Whitehead (1979) also found a strong association for *boys but not girls* between 'domestic tension' as identified by the health visitor, and teachers' ratings of social adjustment. However, when 'domestic tension' was related to parents' reports, *both boys and girls* were more often judged to be aggressive towards other children, boys were more often judged destructive, and girls more often judged sensitive or highly strung; *both boys and girls* were more likely to attend a child guidance clinic. Whitehead's analysis pinpoints very clearly the problems of trying to measure children's behaviour 'objectively'. First, by definition social adjustment is in part situationally determined. Behaviour that is 'normal' in some circumstances may be deviant in others. (Schaffer offers a neat example of this on pp. 108–109 of the set book.) Secondly, judgements about what is 'adjustment' necessarily reflect the values, expectations and purposes of those making the judgement. For example Keogh (1982) working in the USA, has shown that perceived individual differences in temperament are a key factor in teachers' judgements about children's 'teachability'. Children's powers of concentration are particularly salient, which is one of the psychological characteristics particularly affected by early deprivation experiences. Consequently, teachers' perceptions may be a particularly powerful measure of effects, although they should not be taken as representing the complete picture.