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The Role of Fathers in Child Cohorts

Scientific workshop at the
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Scientific Summary

For several good reasons cohort studies are of strong interest to decision-makers and researchers. Longitudinal studies of children constitute a unique source of data to analyse human development in its context. They permit the study of various factors all interacting during the life course up to adulthood: family structure, social and physical environment, schooling, health and nutritional behaviour, etc. and also clarify the impact of the experience lived during infancy on the individual's physical, psychological, social and professional development and therefore help the progress of research in many different disciplines. Therefore ESF decided to support the creation of the European Child Cohort Network (EUCCONET). One of the main target and activity of EUCCONET is to create interest groups to study specific themes in connection with conducting cohort studies. One of these defined interesting aspects is the role of fathers in child cohorts (compare the EUCCONET-brochure).

At the early stage of children's development, most cohort studies interview the parents in order to have information on the child's environment and behaviour. In most cases mothers are more involved in the study than fathers – a finding, which raises the issue of fathers' role in cohort studies. Since they would most likely bring in another view of their child than mothers do, it seems highly desirable to get fathers involved. But seeking to add fathers' perspective is not easily done, particularly in the context of increasingly fragile family structures. Given considerable

rates of separation and divorce, it raises the question whether the biological father or the every-day-caring father should be taken into account. The answer to this question depends at least partly on whether the focus is on genetic resemblance or children's day-to-day social environment and exposure. How should fathers be included in the studies? How should cohort studies deal with a couple's break-up, new unions and non-resident fathers, etc.? The aim of this workshop is to try to find answers to these questions. Specific problems connected with the role of fathers in child cohorts are to be defined, possible solutions are to be discussed, experiences and knowledge on how to handle these questions in praxis are to be shared and considered. So the workshop should also create a scientific community working in the specific field of the role of fathers in child cohorts. Main basis of the workshop are systematic reports from relevant cohort studies, and, in addition, inputs from invited guest speakers.

Scientific content

The following presents a summary of the contributions presented during the workshop. The second part will focus on the content of the discussions.

Introduction

Harald Werneck presented some results of the FIL Study (*Familienentwicklung im Lebenslauf: Family Development in the Course of Life*). This study, focussing on the impact of the transition to parenthood on the family development, started in 1990 with 175 families who are to be followed for 16 years at various stages of the children's life. The first two sweeps took place respectively 3 months before and after the birth of the child, then at age 3, 8, 11 and 15. Parallel to the development of the child, this study places a big interest on the parents, on the way they feel as parents, and on the evolution of their relationship.

From the beginning, the first sweeps allowed the division of fathers into three groups corresponding to their level of involvement with the child and the household. Later results show that the paternal attitude can vary as the children grow, and that it can influence the quality of the parental relationship as well as the child's temperament development.

The results of this study prove the importance of taking fathers into account in order to have a better understanding of family dynamics.

Invited Speaker

Bernhard Kalicki, from the IFP in Munich (*Staatsinstitut für Frühpädagogik*: Institute for Early Childhood Research), presented results from a German study¹ that looked at the transition to parenthood within 175 families during the three first years after the child's birth. The point was to see in which conditions both partners find themselves in their parental role, how to avoid the erosion of the parental relationship and which circumstances could provide for a better adaptation. When looking at increase of conflict, decline of positive communication and decline of intimacy to measure the quality of the marital relationship, this study showed that the birth of a child most always leads to a decreased quality of the relationship which is partly induced by a diminution of the partners' self-esteem. The birth of the child mainly triggers a relocation of roles according to traditional gender roles.

Bernard Kalicki also evoked another German study² that would demonstrate the effect of father involvement on the child's development. This study will use a cross-sectional to longitudinal design to observe the impact of the type of care received in the early childhood on the child's development and future achievements.

Generation R

Nicole Lucassen belongs to the research team from "Generation R", a prospective cohort study from fetal life until young adulthood, based on the data of 10.000 children and their parents, from Rotterdam, Netherlands. She presented her research project which focuses on the influence of paternal psychopathology on father-child interaction and child behavior, and more particularly on the effects of depression from one or both parents. She also studies the relation between the parents' sensitivity towards their child. Her research questions were applied to the "focus cohort" of the Generation R Study, which consists of a homogeneous group of 1.232 families where both parents and grand-parents were born in the Netherlands (76% response rate, ie 752 families). The methodology consisted in a home visit at age four, where both the father-child and mother-child interactions were observed separately. In cases of separation, both the biological and step fathers were interviewed when possible.

GUS Growing Up in Scotland

The contribution of Louise Marryat (Edinburgh) is based on the "Growing Up in Scotland Study" (GUS), a large-scale longitudinal social survey of about 8000 parents. Assuming that

¹ LBS Familien-Studie

² NUBBEK Nationale Untersuchung zur Bildung, Betreuung und Erziehung in den frühen Kindheit www.nubbek.de

capturing the views and experiences of fathers is a vital part of cohort studies, sweep 2 of the GUS aimed to interview, in addition to the main carer of the child, any resident partner of the main respondent (in reality, usually the father). Response rates were fairly high, and anecdotal feedback suggests that fathers were keen to participate and share their parenting experiences. The partner interviews allowed to collect more accurate factual information on the household, completing the proxy data from the mothers, and also to gauge different attitudes and perceptions towards the child as regards parenting or readiness for school. However interesting the data was, in the current financial climate it can be difficult to argue the case for collecting ‘another point of view’.

Concerning non-resident parents, GUS did not collect data directly from them although 20 to 25% of each cohort has a non-resident father. The problems are various: NRPs are not recorded which makes them difficult to contact, mothers might refuse to give information, and anyway they would be more difficult to enter in cooperation with.

Children of the 90s/ALSPAC

Amanda Carmichael and Larisa Duffy (Bristol) referred to the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), which is also known as “Children of the 90s”, a long-term health research project including more than 14.000 mothers, investigating the health and development of children. The team is very interested in the role of fathers in child cohorts and is just about to launch a major initiative enrolling fathers into ALSPAC for the first time. Since the beginning of the study, partner questionnaires have been sent for the mothers to pass on in which the relationship to the child was always requested (not necessarily the biological father). Partner questionnaires have a response rate of 40 to 50%. The interest of ALSPAC is to have data that allows an improved interpretation of the determinants of child outcomes and to be able to study genetic factors. Now 18 years after the start of the study, ALSPAC wants to involve fathers directly for data collection (DNA) and data linkage, and has created a special Fathers Focus group to define the necessary protocols. The method devised is always to go through the mother, who should try to pass on to her current partner and to the biological father, if it is not the same person. The clinic should open to fathers as of 2011 in order to collect blood samples, blood pressure, DXA scan, height, weight as well as waist and hip circumference. ALSPAC is very concerned as to the result of this new protocol of data collection on fathers: whether it will be successful, what could improve the uptake, and of course what key issues should be studied.

Millennium Cohort Study

Lisa Calderwood from the Institute of Education of the University of London reports experiences of collecting data from non-resident fathers in four child cohort studies: especially the Millennium Cohort Study (with information from the parents of 18.818 babies born in the UK), Growing Up in Ireland, Growing Up in Australia and Fragile Families (US).

Over the last 30 years, the role of fathers as more than just breadwinners has been increasingly recognized. At the same time, it became more and more common for children to live apart from their biological father. The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) used a very broad definition of ‘co-residential fathers’ as to include step, foster, adoptive fathers, also part-time, and any partner of the mother. These were personally interviewed at every sweep along with mothers. There is no data collected directly from non-resident fathers, only proxy data from mother reports, which appear to be quite limited and could be biased. However evidence from various cohort studies present how the family structure may change during the child’s first five years and how the involvement of non-resident fathers can evolve across the same time span. Whether resident or not, fathers are an important part of children’s lives and should be included in child cohort studies in order to gauge their impact on the children’s development. Therefore IoE investigated the possibility of hiring non-resident fathers in a new upcoming birth cohort study and the best way this could be achieved. Data from various studies allows to state that non-resident fathers are difficult to contact and not too prone to respond to studies, unless given financial incentive or contacted directly per telephone. Solutions to have a better involvement of non-resident fathers would be to include them in the study as soon as possible and independently from the mother. Greater emphasis should be placed on involving both parents, recruiting a ‘family’ in the genetic/biological sense and not a ‘household’ in the traditional sense.

Born in Bradford

Pauline Raynor and colleagues report on the “Born in Bradford” study: Up to the end of November 2009 just over 10.000 mothers and babies have been recruited to the cohort. From these, only about 25% of partners accepted to take part in the study, although they were also targeted by the massive communication that has been done in the communities at the start of the study. Most of them were recruited in the period close before or after the birth of the child, and face-to-face contact turned out to be a successful strategy. Data collected from the fathers consist of a base-

line questionnaire, height, weight and a saliva sample. BiB tries to ensure their continuous implication by involving them in such activities as an exhibition of sample member portraits. Moreover since BiB has received a grant from the National Institute for Health Research to finance a childhood obesity project on a subsample of 1000, fathers will be asked to complete a follow up questionnaire and be interviewed. The questionnaire includes general health and stress questions as well as parenting practices, the objective being on the one hand to identify possible risk factors for child obesity, and on the other hand to determine most appropriate intervention targets to prevent child obesity. Data collection is still going on, but recent research suggests there are links with fathers' parenting style and obesity.

Discussion and results

All presentations triggered interesting discussions on the place that fathers should be given in cohort studies. Of course the primary objective of each study will determine to what extent fathers will have to be included or not. Studies which have a greater psychological and sociological focus will be more prone to require a participation of fathers in order to observe the evolution of family dynamics and determine the impact of father behaviour on the children's development. Whereas studies which focus on health issues and biological development will not consider the father to have to play a big role in the study, apart from giving some biological samples or making measurements at some point. The funding of the study comes also into question when one considers including fathers in a cohort study. For example the Education Department of the Scottish Government, which finances the Growing Up in Scotland study, apparently does not find particular interest in including fathers for their specific research purposes.

When one wants to look at household and family dynamics, observe different parenting experiences and perceptions towards the child, and determine the impact of the child's environment on his/her outcome or development, the implication of the father principally, or in fact of any other direct care giver, is preferable. Studies which have been working with fathers have had very significant results concerning their impact on the child, which should encourage for more research on this area. All the more so since a great discrepancy exists between research on mother/child interaction and research on father/child interaction.

The potential benefit of including fathers in a cohort study is no more to be argued, but it proves very complicated. Family structures have been changing a lot in the past decades, parents are more and more breaking up and constructing new relationships, and this makes it difficult to define which partner should then be included in the study: the biological father or the day-to-day caregiver. Some studies decide to include anyone living with the child even part time, be it a grand-parent, same-sex partner, adoptive or foster parent etc, while other will focus primarily on the biological father. New study designs will offer the possibility to have reports from both the resident partner and the non resident parent. As always the protocol depends on the research objectives to be attained.

One problem which arises though is how the analyse should take into account these multiple reports on the child, since every case is different and does not necessarily allow for comparison,

and the anonymity required in cohort studies would not allow for case studies. Another issue is also how to deal with different reports from the parents, which one should be taken into account. There we have to make a difference between the questionnaires that concern the child's day-to-day life (tv time, bed time, hours of play...) and the questionnaires that deal with parenting styles and perceptions of the child's development. On very factual issues, it would be appropriate to suggest that parents get together and see which one of them would be best designated to answer each question. We know for example that fathers will mostly be more precise in responding queries on the household's revenue and budget management. Double reports should be avoided unless the child partly lives in a different household where different rules apply. However different reports on the perception of the child development can be revealing in the way each parent feels about and behaves with the child. Mothers mostly worry more and therefore will be more protective and intrusive. Fathers on the other hand while seeming careless, will maybe give more space to the child to express him/herself. These are all parenting feelings and behaviours that are worth being studied and compared, in relation to each other to see the differences between mothers and fathers in the feeling of being parent, and also in relation to the children to see the impact of the parents' behaviour on their development. Proof also shows that there is a relationship between a child's temperament development and the quality of the parental partnership.

The protocol used to collect the data also comes to mind when investigating the role fathers should have in a cohort study. Proxy data always proves to be uncertain, and therefore if data should be collected on fathers, they should be directly contacted. But still discussion remains between the validity of self completed questionnaires as opposed to assisted completion and face to face interviews, which also allows for observation reports from the interviewers who can be trained for this purpose. But of course this kind of data collection is very fund and time consuming, also in the phase of analysis. The different modes of data collection and their validity is a big issue for cohort studies, which should be further discussed in another specialised workshop.

The major issue is still to actually get the fathers to participate. Most studies that want to include fathers always have very low response rate, so the reflexion should be on how to recruit them and keep them in the sample. Face-to-face and telephone interviews come to be more successful as regards fathers, and when possible financial incentive also helps. It always gets back to how a study should communicate with sample members to keep them interested in the study and show them the importance of their participation on the research results. This particular thematic of

limiting attrition, tracking cohort members and communicating with families is also the subject of another specialised EUCCONET Workshop.

To conclude, the discussions at the workshop were very fruitful, and helped most participants getting an overview of how other studies deal with the issues they also struggle with. It is difficult to speak in terms of impact, since the prior objective of EUCCONET meeting is principally to exchange experience, and as said before the management of this kind of issues mainly depends on the study design and its research objectives. However, all presentations as well as this report will be published on the EUCCONET website so as to share the discussions that took place at the workshop and be a source of information.

Programme

- 9:00–9:30: Welcome and Introduction to the workshop
- 9:30–11:15: Introduction
Findings from a longitudinal study in Austria / Werneck
- 11:30–12:15: Findings from relevant cohort studies in Germany / Kalicki
- 12:15–13:30: Lunch*
- 13:30–14:15: Generation R (Netherlands) / Lucassen
- 14:15–15:00: Growing Up In Scotland / Marryat
- 15:00–15:45: ALSPAC (UK, Bristol) / Carmichael - Duffy
- 16:00–16:45: Millennium Cohort Study (UK, London) / Calderwood
- 17:00–17:45: Born in Bradford (UK) / Raynor – Akhtar - Iqbal
- 18:00–18:30: Final Discussion
- 19:30: Dinner*