



Cross-National Research Papers

Seventh Series:

European Cross-National Research and Policy

## **4. Researching Family and Childhood from a European Welfare Perspective**

Edited by

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Julia Brannen  
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Katrin Saks**



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## Series Editor's Foreword

The seminars on which this series of *Cross-National Research Papers* is based are a response to the perceived need for a forum at which social scientists can discuss the issues arising in research that crosses national, cultural and disciplinary boundaries, thereby enabling participants to learn from past experience and to plan more effectively for future international work. The seminars maintain and build on the research of existing international teams. They are consolidating links between social science research and wider society. An important aim of the seminars is to provide an informal environment for the exchange of knowledge and ideas with policy actors interested in the lessons that can be drawn from social science research.

The papers address the theoretical, methodological, managerial and practical problems arising in comparative social science research projects across member states in the enlarged European Union, with the overall aim of contributing to a better understanding of the research process, improving the quality of international social science, and encouraging dialogue and transfer of knowledge between researchers and policy actors.

Specific methodological objectives of the seminars and ensuing publications are:

- to contribute to methodological advances in cross-national research;
- to develop robust theoretical frameworks for comparative analysis of social systems and policies;
- to offer training opportunities to researchers embarking on international projects;
- to create synergy between researchers from different cultural traditions within the European context;
- to promote mutual understanding of regional diversity within the European Union and Central and Eastern Europe;
- to analyse social constructions of concepts, and factors affecting the comparability of quantitative and qualitative data, and indicators in European projects;
- to share and disseminate knowledge and promote dialogue between researchers, policy actors and users;
- to foster good practice in cross-national comparative research;
- to identify the conditions necessary for successful policy transfer and learning.

The six seminars are exploring the central theme of modernisation of the European social model within the context of socio-economic change, European integration and enlargement, and the policy challenges they present for governments.

We are grateful to ESRC for the Seminar Competition Award (RES-451-26-0020, 2003–04) that is funding the seminars and publications. We should also like to thank the Estonian Centre of Health and Behavioural Sciences and the Department of Sociology and Social Policy at Tartu University for the additional support they provided for the fourth seminar in the series 2004.

*Linda Hantrais*

# 1. Researching Family and Childhood from a European Welfare Perspective

*Dagmar Kutsar*

The papers included in the fourth issue of the current series of *Cross-National Research Papers* on European cross-national research and policy address the question of researching family and childhood from a European welfare perspective. Traditionally, childhood has been dealt with as a temporary period in an individual's life, a preparatory phase for adulthood. It has been described as a social phenomenon (Qvortrup, 1990) and a social construction (James and Prout, 1990). Children can also be studied as active and creative co-constructors of their childhoods, as exploratory reproducers of their own peer cultures, and as generating changes in adult cultures.

What it means to be a child and what is meant by childhood differ from one culture to another and also within a single culture at different historical periods, according to social class and ethnicity; in other words, the concept of a child is culture bound (Aries, 1962; Postman, 1982). From a collectivistic perspective, children are a permanent social group with changing membership, whereas, from an individual point of view, childhood is a particular life stage (Qvortrup, 1990; Shamgar-Handelman, 1994). Children and adults form two separate social groups within a social structure and, consequently, also occupy dichotomous positions in research methodology and political discourse.

In the early years of the twentieth century, Sigmund Freud established the preconditions for understanding children as subjects in the here and now when he stated that, like adults, children are able to experience mature feelings. They cannot, he contended, be dealt with as butterflies that live no more than a day, and who easily forget unpleasant experiences, thereby giving adults an excuse for treating them as immature and as 'half-individuals'. However, a deeper understanding of children as subjects moved onto the research agenda only with discussions over human rights, as embodied in the 1959 Declaration on the Rights of the Child and the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. New perspectives on children as active agents or social actors and as units of observation crystallised as a new field of sociological research – the sociology of childhood – in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Today, it numbers a couple of a hundred researchers throughout the world.

This relatively new scientific perspective on children and childhood emerged as researchers focused more on minority groups, on the one hand, and with the development of social constructivism and interpretative theoretical approaches, on the other. The perspective does not confront traditional views of children but can be seen as complementary to it, thus enriching academic understanding of social reality.

To integrate family and childhood research methodologies in cross-national comparisons is an ambitious task. The present issue of papers makes an attempt to draw together these different dimensions: adults and children, families and childhood, family and childhood policies, including a gender dimension and work–family balance, from a European comparative welfare perspective.

Work–family balance is a key issue in designing family and gender equality policies. In the first paper, Fred Deven and Valérie Carrette provide an overview of parental leave arrangements in Europe, focusing on the child to show the impact of the

presence of parents on the child's well being during the early years of his/her life, including the child's biomedical health or the impact of breast feeding time on infant morbidity. They also refer to the different roles and functions of policy actors in developing new policies designed to improve the well being of children.

The co-operation of different policy actors and interest groups, as well as the wider public, is important but not always easy to organise when a new policy measure is being formulated. It is questionable how much researchers are involved in the policy-making cycle and to what extent they are listened to by policy makers. Last but not least, especially in the case of family and childhood policy, the opinions, attitudes and social competence of one additional actor – the child – need to be taken into account, for it is his/her welfare and well being that are directly affected by policy measures. How much visibility is given to children by researchers? As a rule, researchers belong to the group of adults, whose findings usually carry the bias of an adult's thinking and discount the child's needs. However, children, who are traditionally seen as 'human-becomings' or 'half-individuals', belong to a different part of a social structure (see Qvortrup, 1990) and are not used to being asked about their preferences and opinions.

From the review of international comparisons of parental leave arrangements carried out by Deven and Carrette, several common dimensions emerged: leave is generally aimed at balancing work and family life, creating gender equality and equal opportunities for mothers and fathers, improving the employment options of women, and thus solving problems for adults. Several national differences can be found within the European Union. The parental allowance introduced in Estonia in January 2004 had a strong pronatalist aim; the primary focus was not on the needs of children, as argued by Katrin Saks in her comments at the end of this volume of papers. Policies that have an impact on children's living conditions are not usually discussed with children. In an article entitled 'To whom does childhood belong?', which examines the parties involved in control over childhood aiming to achieve the desired physical and social replacement of society, Lea Shamgar-Handelman (1994, pp. 263–4) replies: childhood as a social construction belongs to nobody, but everybody is competing to control it. She continues: '...children, who in every society are by definition excluded from the power game, control childhood the least'.

In her contribution, Julia Brannen looks at children as social agents and active research collaborators, focusing on the methodological problems that arise in applying original research and dissemination techniques from a comparative perspective. She also examines the role of gatekeepers in researching children and disseminating the results.

Most often, a child is not expected to behave like an adult. For an adult, behaving like a 'child' is regarded as being immature, inferior and, occasionally, worthy of scorn. Hans Sebald (1992) has produced several child–adult dichotomies based on different role expectations, where children are seen as immature, irresponsible and independent on the one hand, and as responsible adults, on the other. Even 15 years ago, it was still not possible to find research about children where the child was taken either as a unit of analysis or as a unit of observation. According to Jens Qvortrup (1994) and William Corsaro (1997), children have not been ignored in research, but they have been analysed within future perspectives, where children are seen as future adults, thus discounting their current situations (expectations, feelings, dreams, wishes, needs). As a result, children have been left on the periphery of social structures, and the research focus been on risks and the potential that children uncover for future

society. This perspective looks at children as objects of research, where adults are the respondents, related in some way to the child, and taken to be the only valid and trustworthy expert and informant about the child's living conditions.

In their discussion of ethical symmetry in social research with children, Pia Christensen and Alan Prout (2002) found that the perspective of 'children as social actors' has created a field with new ethical dilemmas and responsibilities for researchers. Understanding children as social actors forms a good basis for involving children as subjects in social research, which, in turn, lays a foundation for using children's social competence and expertise about topics concerning their own lives. Furthermore, the same authors give examples where children are involved in social research as collaborators. They illustrate the problems of adults acting as gatekeepers in social research with children. Children are dependent on adults; thus their options for participating in research are determined by adults, whether parents or teachers.

As Julia Brannen shows, gatekeepers determine the way the research findings and outputs are disseminated to social practice. She also presents an interesting case study of how children can be involved as collaborators in social research. The research process confirmed that children do have a good understanding of family life, divorce, work-life balance and many other social issues. Last but not least, children as collaborators in social research take their task seriously and use their social competence to its full potential.

She raises the question: Can we trust what a child says? The answer may be 'yes' in cases where the child trusts the researcher, and feels confident about the environment within which the research is being conducted and is interested in the topics that are being studied. For the researcher, the most important point is how the respondent (read the child) understands the issues and what meanings they carry. This is no different from an adult respondent who also gives different meanings to social situations, their own feelings, expectations and aims, and behaves according to their subjective reactions.

Another question needs to be asked: Can the researcher rely on his or her own ability to be reflexive when interpreting data collected from children, that is from the child's perspective? The answer to both questions is 'yes', in the case where the researcher can integrate the child into the research process as a subject and understand him/her as a social actor. In this respect, few differences exist when carrying out research among adults and children.

Policy makers need to recognise that, just as different adults give different answers to the same questions, children as a separate social group may differ from adults in their answers to the same question. Therefore, to improve the welfare and well being of children, children's views must be included in the policy cycle.

In her paper, Amélia Bastos provides an overview of methodologies used in child poverty research. She analyses child income poverty where the child is the unit of observation and points to the relevance of the comparative perspective for policy actors. She also highlights a number of methodological problems in identifying and measuring child poverty, while also discussing the appropriateness of the indicators developed.

The discussion about the social or individual nature of poverty is a well-known aspect of social philosophy, stretching back to Aristotle and Plato. According to Else Øyen (1997), poverty is a social phenomenon and is always found in a certain social contexts. The most striking example of societal differences in poverty lies in the

comparison between developed and developing countries. The level of poverty and number of poor are directly related to the methodology for determining poverty thresholds. The question does not concern only the level of poverty but also its structure. In this respect, the question of methodology, especially the choice of relevant equivalence scales, is sensitive to the findings from the analysis.

In the context of the European Union, a set of 18 common statistical indicators of social welfare, with a particular focus on social exclusion and poverty, were endorsed at the Laeken European Council in December 2001, and have been applied to monitor the progress of member states and accession countries (Dennis and Guio, 2003). The main indicator of poverty is the 'at risk of poverty threshold', which is fixed for each country at 60% of the national median equivalised income, thus making it a relative rather than absolute measure that is defined in relation to the general level of prosperity of a country. By using the harmonised method of setting the poverty line at 60% of the national median equivalised income and applying the OECD modified equivalence scales (1.0; 0.5; 0.3)<sup>1</sup>, poverty is highest in the UK and Germany, and lowest in Slovakia and Bulgaria. If the poverty rate is calculated as 60% of the EU general median equivalised income, as Anthony Fahey originally suggested in his presentation at the CHANGEQUAL Research Network in Paris in May 2004, Romania and Bulgaria have a poverty rate approaching 90%, and the lowest poverty rate is found in Sweden, where it is close to zero. The EU modified equivalence scale thus tends to underestimate the share of individual consumption of household members.

Analyses of poverty (for example by Kutsar and Trumm, 1999) have shown that, in transition societies, where the incomes of the majority of the population are low, the relative poverty rate is abnormally low and does not reflect the real economic situation of households. Analyses have also shown that the child poverty measure is extremely sensitive to the equivalence scales applied (Kutsar *et al.*, 2004). In the Estonian case, the poverty measurement that proceeds from the real socio-economic situation of the country emphasises individual consumption (the equivalence scales applied nationally are 1.0; 0.8; 0.8) and makes child poverty significantly more visible. A direct impact on the policy process has been to introduce a number of child-friendly policies, following which the child poverty rate fell from 25% in 1997 to 22% in 2002. Using the EU harmonised method of calculating the poverty rate, the percentages would be around 14%, and the poverty level for retired people would increase from 5% (the national poverty threshold) to almost 25% (EU modified method).

Developments between 1997 and 2002 were relatively favourable to children. Social reporting on household poverty rates provides a more accurate picture about the country, whereas child poverty remains hidden (Kutsar *et al.*, 2004). In the Estonian case, and also in other transitional countries, relative poverty measures can be useful for international comparisons, but they need to be treated with caution when socio-political decisions are being made concerning poor people, especially in cases where children are concerned.

According to Jonathan Bradshaw (2000), child poverty is a function of three factors: demography, namely the proportion of children living in lone-parent families; the labour market, namely the number of unemployed members among households with children; and social policies, namely the efficiency of transfer systems to support poor households with children.

Whether it is material, social or psychological, relative deprivation is perceived subjectively through a process of social comparison. Relative deprivation means a

discrepancy between what an individual owns and what he or she regards as being deserved. Children are economically, legally and psychologically dependent on their parents and other adult members of the household. Children are not producers in the traditional sense but primarily consumers of common resources. Their status as dependants means that they have less 'voice' in the household's economic decisions. A survey of Estonian children in the late 1980s confirmed a statistically significant impact of poor economic conditions as viewed by the child on his/her perceived relative economic, social and psychological deprivation (Kutsar, 2000). Those who viewed the economic performance of their household as poor more often experienced subjective economic deprivation when compared to the economic opportunities of their friends. They felt/believed that they received less pocket money, that they could not afford necessities, and that they were not able to attend school events and hobby groups. Low economic performance of a household as perceived by a child also intervenes in his/her coping strategies with peers and creates preconditions of social inclusion or exclusion from peer groups. The subjectively perceived poverty of the child compared with the 'objective' perception, proceeding from the household income level, is a powerful factor that needs to be considered by policy actors.

De-institutionalisation of families and diversification of family structures have made traditional family research more complicated, while also bringing about important changes in the everyday lives of children, creating new challenges for policy actors in their search for new solutions to improve the living conditions of families and children. Policy actors face dilemmas in formulating welfare policies for families and children, since adults and children belong to different parts of the social structure, with the result that the interest groups representing them may often be in conflict with one another. Individually and collectively, the papers demonstrate that policy makers have much to learn from comparative research into family life that approaches issues of well being from a childhood perspective.

### Note

1. Equivalence scales express, in proportional terms, the presumed reduction in consumption for each household member sharing resources. Using equivalence scales means that the effect of household size and structure is eliminated. The first adult (aged over 18) has a value of 1.0; in the case of the OECD modified scale, the remaining adults in the household have the value 0.5 and children (under the age of 18) have the value 0.3. The Estonian government applies the OECD consumption weight adjustment, namely 1.0; 0.8; 0.8.

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## 2. A Review of the Impact on Children of Leave Arrangements for Parents

*Fred Deven with Valérie Carrette*

*Following EU Directive 96/34/EC, more interest has been shown in parental leave than in other types of leave arrangements for parents. However, considerable diversity remains between parental leave schemes in European countries, to some extent in terms of objectives and perspectives, and to a greater extent in terms of eligibility conditions, entitlement, flexibility and payment. The research and policy literature deals mainly with parents and employers as the major stakeholders, despite widespread agreement that leave arrangements are a provision that can contribute to the well being of children. The latter may be a formal policy objective of parental leave policy, as in Sweden, but an explicit child perspective is a common omission in related research and policy. Moreover, statistical data rarely take the child as a unit of analysis. This paper reviews the existing literature regarding the impact of leave arrangements for parents on children. The scant research evidence is analysed in terms of consequences and effects as well as research methodologies. Research carried out from the perspective of children and adolescents provides a basis for exploring appropriate methodologies in this research domain. Suggestions are offered for improving existing research designs and for reflecting on new directions for policy.*

The research described in this paper falls within the more general concern about work–life balance issues. Policy makers are major stakeholders for developing and adapting family, employment and welfare policies. Leave arrangements for parents are but one of a number of instruments used to reconcile family life and paid work. Equality of opportunity between men and women is often referred to as a major aim for such policies. Leave arrangements are also frequently referred to as a provision that can contribute to the welfare of children. However, research evidence on the impact for children remains scant. This bias is probably due, to some extent, to methodological problems in documenting the evidence that does exist with regard to infants and very young children. Reviewing this body of research with the aim of elucidating these kinds of problems, therefore, presents a considerable challenge.

### **Leave arrangements for parents in context**

Among the different types of leave arrangement for parents, parental leave has undoubtedly attracted most attention, especially following EU Directive 96/34/EC. Bronwen Cohen (1999) has documented the various difficulties the European Commission faced from the time when it made its initial proposal in 1983 up to the point when agreement was finally reached between employers and trade unions in 1996. She also observes that any reference to children as stakeholders with an active interest in parental leave was absent from the explanatory memorandum, and subsequent EU discussions about parental leave.

Whilst there would be wide agreement that parental leave is a provision which can contribute to the welfare of children, this possibility has not been part of the EU's thinking or of the EU's policy initiative in framing a Directive. (Cohen, 1999, p. 295)

Rather, attention has focused predominantly on gender aspects.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, considerable diversity remains, however, between parental leave schemes across, and especially beyond, the European Union, to some extent in terms of objectives and perspectives and, to a large extent, in terms of eligibility conditions, entitlement, flexibility or payment (Deven and Moss, 2002).

The EU framework agreement on parental leave approaches parental leave arrangements mainly as a means of reconciling family life and paid work and promoting equal opportunities between men and women. Consequently, most research on the influence and effects of parental leave has been conducted from the perspectives of parents and employers as the main stakeholders.

The research described in this paper falls within the more general concern about work–life balance issues, which are complex and highly relevant for all the actors involved. Policy makers are major stakeholders for developing and adapting their family, employment and welfare policies.

### **Aims of leave arrangements for parents**

The research and policy literature mostly deals with the main stakeholders other than children, especially parents and employers. Nevertheless, wide agreement can be found that leave arrangements are a provision that can contribute to the welfare of children. The provision of parental leave can protect the health of children during their first year of life, support their interaction with their parents, while increasing the length of time for breastfeeding, and help to establish good parenting. Sometimes, the well being of children is an explicit policy objective of parental leave policy. Different Swedish governments have, for example, considered parental leave as an important condition for the economic well being of children in the sense that paid parental leave arrangements guarantee that both women and men can have children and return to their jobs without adverse consequences (Haas and Hwang, 1999).

An explicit child perspective, however, is a common omission in both research and policy on parental leave. Moreover, the child is seldom the unit of analysis in statistical information.

### **The impact on children of various types of leave arrangement**

This section reviews in more detail the existing literature analysing the impact on children of leave arrangements for parents. The research evidence is examined with reference both to effects and to the research methodologies used.

In general, three major problems need to be recognised that seriously hampered our attempt to review the literature. The first is of a contextual nature. Whereas the provision, and especially the use, of (generous) types of leave arrangements for parents are characteristic of a number of European countries, most research data on the impact on children stems from datasets in the United States. If it were not for the dominant American position in research, would we really be interested in their findings in view of the context of rather poor childcare services and mostly unpaid forms of leave? This only highlights even more the relevance of contextual and of intermediate variables. Secondly, as this paper aims to address the impact on children of the use of leave arrangements by their parents, a major gender bias needs to be acknowledged in the available data: the impact of maternal employment on the development of young children is most often the focus of attention, and whenever the users of leave

arrangements are directly referred to, the vast majority of them are mothers. In general, it needs to be recognised that much of the Anglo-Saxon research often remains permeated with maternalistic assumptions, despite the fact that frequently it is dealing with dual-earner families. Finally, the methodological challenges are daunting insofar as the assessment of any possible impact of leave taking by parents relates primarily to their infants or very young children.

#### DIRECT EVIDENCE

Direct evidence of the impact on children of various types of leave arrangement for mothers and/or fathers remains rather scant. Documented evidence mainly concerns biomedical health. Judith Galtry (2002), for example, refers to the evidence that infants and young children are at greater risk of infectious diseases (for instance upper respiratory tract, otitis) during the first few months of day care. This suggests that such a risk is much lower in children remaining at home with their mother or father taking leave.

Based on aggregate data for 16 European countries for the period 1969–94, Christopher Ruhm (2000) suggests that longer periods of job-protected paid parental leave are associated with reduced rates of infant mortality. Building further on this work, the research of Sakiko Tanaka (2004) supports the findings that the extension of job-protected and paid parental leave significantly decreases infant mortality rates. The largest effect was found with an extension of paid parental leave of 10 weeks. Other leave arrangements, such as unpaid leave and non-job protected paid leave, had no significant effects on infant mortality rates.

Based on data for the United States, M.L. Berger *et al.* (2002) found a significant negative association between a women's return to work within the first six weeks after the child's birth and child health outcomes. They found also that these mothers were less likely to breast-feed and that the period of breast-feeding was significantly shorter than for mothers who returned to work after seven or more weeks.

Focused research on the impact of leave arrangements by users occasionally also provides information about the perceived impact on the well being of the child. A Luxembourg study, for example, asked parents (mostly mothers) what they perceived as the advantages of using their three months of parental leave for their infant (KPMG, 2002, chapter 8). Among the reasons given for taking parental leave, 35% of the users referred to the well being of the child as the main reason: 'la présence constante du parent auprès de l'enfant est donc définie comme source de bien-être pour l'enfant' (KPMG, 2002, p. 143). This main reason may, however, still conceal a rationalisation of behaviour for those unable to find an appropriate childcare service. Concern about the well being of the child is accounted for by referring to 'providing more security and stability', 'respecting the biological rhythm of the infant', or 'facilitating a period of breastfeeding'. More indirectly, users also perceive that, as the parent using parental leave has 'more time available for the infant', and experiences 'less stress', the leave period impacts positively on the child's development.

Berit Brandth and Elin Kvande (2003) studied a group of Norwegian fathers who took up their right to the father's quota (one month). Regarding care as a relational practice, they studied the care practices that have been developed and noted how even the one to two year-old child influences these practices. Following a mail questionnaire to all men who became fathers in the period May 1994–April 1995, they interviewed 30 couples that used their parental leave rights in various ways. The

researchers concluded that, only if the father has total responsibility (mother full time at work) does he see how demanding care work is, and is he made to feel close to the child. Such fathers also claim that 'this learning experience helps them "to read the child better", making it for example easier for them to understand why they are cross and cranky and avoiding merely disciplining the child' (Brandth and Kvande, 2003, p. 24). By being put on 'slow time' by their young child, fathers undertaking care and having responsibility for their child on a daily basis grow beyond a supporting player for the mother and develop care practices based on knowing the child better. From the perspective of the child, the result is considered positive, in contrast to the 'absent' father practice found in long-hours work cultures.

#### INDIRECT EVIDENCE

The impact and effects of parental (especially maternal) employment on children and their families has already been investigated repeatedly and debated actively. In reviewing the limited evidence of the impact on children of leave arrangements, it is useful to refer to sources providing indirect evidence of impact and effects. Several major reviews have been carried out of parenting (mother/father-child interactions). Most data relate to the nuclear two-parent household in Western societies, which is the most widely studied family form. Charlie Lewis and Michael Lamb (2003), for example, draw three major implications from their review of the role of fathers in child development. First, fatherhood has to be understood within a network of familial and wider social relationships. Second, policy makers should not ignore or merely pay lip service to the role of fathers, given the evidence that the father too is an important figure in children's lives. Third, there remain large (research) gaps in our understanding of the role of men in families. Catherine Tamis-LeMonda and Natasha Cabrera (2002) highlight various cross-disciplinary challenges to the study of father involvement. Similar though more extensive research data exist on the role and the type of impact that the presence of mothers has on (young) children. Research on child development has clearly revealed a multi-layered ecology of influences. Among others, the importance of responsive and stimulating parenting and quality childcare has been confirmed.

Next, we examine evidence from research literature on parental employment (for example Waldfoegel *et al.*, 2002), as well as on the use of early childhood services for (very young) children (Gunnarsson *et al.*, 1999). Not surprisingly, particular attention has been paid to the effects of maternal employment. Overall, evidence points to different effects on children before or after their first year of life. Full-time maternal employment combined with low-quality early childcare services can have negative effects on children's cognitive development, which may persist until the age of seven or eight. By contrast, employment related to children beyond the age of one seems to have positive effects. Lars Gunnarsson *et al.* (1999) concluded from Swedish longitudinal studies that good-quality public day care centres combined with extended paid and job-protected leave represent an important and much needed complement for young children to home care, when parents are working or studying. A review of mainly North American and Australian research (Poocock, 2001) concludes that long hours of parental work are bad for children as they curtail parental time for children.

The findings from British longitudinal studies show that children whose mothers work more extensively during the pre-school years have somewhat lower educational attainment as young adults. The effects, however, of low parental education and of

poverty are more important explanatory factors (Kamerman *et al.*, 2003). Various studies have found that full-time maternal employment in the first year of a child's life has significant negative effects on white children's cognitive outcomes even after controlling for variables that are correlated with both employment and outcomes (Han *et al.*, 2001; Waldfogel *et al.*, 2002). Other researchers are more cautious in their conclusions, suggesting, for example, that workplace variables affect job satisfaction and produce tensions, which then impact on parenting behaviour and, in turn, on children's behaviour. Sheila Kamerman *et al.* (2003, p. 20) conclude that it is the quality of childcare that is most important in determining the positive development of the children of working mothers.

### **Methodological issue**

An analysis of methodological issues in studies of the impact of parental leave arrangements and maternal employment on children, and research from the perspective of children/ adolescents provide a base for exploring the most appropriate methods in researching the impact on children of current leave arrangements. The majority of the studies of the impact of parental leave arrangements and maternal employment on children's well being suffer from important methodological limitations that are, to a large extent, the result of the various ways in which they have been conducted, which often explains inconsistencies between findings. In this contribution we briefly examine five conceptual and/or methodological issues.

The first element concerns the definition of 'early maternal employment' and the differences in how the early maternal employment variable is operationalised (Harvey, 1999; Brady-Smith *et al.*, 2001). Although 'early maternal employment' is a central concept in studies of the impact of maternal employment on the well being of children, little consistency can be found in the definition and construction of the variable. Some studies define early maternal employment as the employment of mothers during the six months following the child's birth (for example Ram *et al.*, 2004). In other studies, the concept of early maternal employment is used for the employment of mothers until the child reaches the age of three. However, an implicit consensus exists on the use of the concept: namely when mothers begin employment less than 12 months after the child's birth. In addition to these more conceptual elements, Elizabeth Harvey (1999) argues that the discrepancy in the results between studies of the impact of early maternal employment on children's developmental outcomes is partially caused by different approaches to the construction of the early maternal employment variable. Sometimes the employment status is used, whereas other studies consider the intensity of employment of (working) mothers or the combination of the two (for example Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 2002).

A second reason relates to the first, namely the definition of 'employment intensity'. This variable is considered to be of major importance in research into the impact of maternal employment on children's developmental outcomes (Baydar and Brooks-Gunn, 1991; Harvey, 1999; Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 2002; Ram *et al.*, 2004). The way that the 'employment intensity' variable is operationalised is a major concern, because differences in approach will obviously contribute to a certain extent to different, or even conflicting, findings in impact studies. In particular, the measurement of 'employment intensity' using a continuous variable, such as the 'number of working hours', needs special attention because of the infinite possibilities for defining categories. If the

categories do not include all possible employment patterns, the approach excludes mothers who might influence the results. Another problem is that, as stated earlier, these categories often combine employment status with employment intensity, which makes it difficult to interpret and compare the results of different studies. It is not always clear which factor is decisive. A related issue in this context is that a number of studies distinguish part-time from full-time work, but do not specify the number of hours the mother works. This implies that all part-time or full-time (maternal) employment arrangements consist of the same number of working hours and do not take into account any heterogeneity in part-time or full-time working patterns.

A third component consists of the use of different samples and/or age cohorts, which is particularly important in studies based on the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY). Harvey (1999) analysed six studies of the effects of early parental employment on children based on the NLSY dataset. She noted that none of the six studies used exactly the same sample set, and concluded that this was an important cause of differences in results between the studies. She also found that the age of the children and their mothers differed between studies. Variations in the children's ages, thus, seem to be an important factor in impact studies concerning the influence of maternal employment on children's developmental outcomes and deserve special attention in future research. Another important issue is the structural lack of a representative number of diverse ethnic groups in the majority of the data-sets and the scarce research into the impact of early maternal employment and the use of parental leave on children in (very) low-income families (Howes, 2003).

A fourth issue of importance in studies of the impact of early maternal employment and parental leave arrangements has two dimensions. The first concerns the control variables that are used in the analytical models. Ruhm (2004) found that the results showing positive effects or no effects of early maternal employment reported in some studies may have been spurious because of the use of inadequate control variables. This is supported by the authors of a Canadian study of the effects of early maternal employment, who discovered that the insertion of more variables, such as mother's occupational complexity, father's occupational status, family income in the child's infancy, in addition to the basic variables of children's age, sex and early cognitive skills, led to more pronounced or even different findings (Ram *et al.*, 2004). Consequently, in future research on the impact of maternal employment and parental leave arrangements, it will be important to give careful consideration to the inclusion of adequate control variables in the analytical model of analysis to achieve more reliable findings.

The second concern is the paucity of information available about intermediary variables such as the features of childcare arrangements (outside home), the quality of non-parental childcare, the sensitivity and quality of care that children receive at home (Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 2002; Lero, 2003). Although the relationship between early maternal employment, childcare and long-term developmental outcomes is very complex, the majority of the (longitudinal) studies measuring the impact of parental leave or parents' employment patterns on children have failed to consider a range of important intermediary factors that come into play between infancy and later periods in childhood (Han *et al.*, 2001; Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 2002; Lero, 2003; Ram *et al.*, 2004). The quality of non-parental and parental childcare, in particular, are recognised as intermediary factors of considerable importance (for example Vandell, 1988; Andersson, 1992; Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 2002). Nevertheless, the most frequently used

longitudinal dataset, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, lacks information on these variables (Lero, 2003). Recent studies based on other datasets, such as the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care (NICHD SECC) dataset, which tried to fill several of the gaps in previous datasets, offer the opportunity to include the quality of the home environment and non-parental childcare settings. Using the quality of childcare variable in analyses brings with it a number of methodological issues, such as the definition of quality and who participates in the care (for example Pierrehumbert *et al.*, 2002; Waldfogel, 2002; Owen, 2004).

Last but not least, studies of the impact of parental leave arrangements or early maternal employment on children do not focus on the well being of the child as a broader concept or construct. The impact on the well being of young children is usually translated into very specific developmental outcomes or scholastic achievements. The concept of child development is made operational in a rather narrow way by omitting to take into account other factors in child development such as emotional and creative development. Studies of the influence of parental leave arrangements focus on children's health and on cognitive outcomes, especially verbal and mathematical skills. Studies of the impact of maternal employment to a large extent assess cognitive outcomes and, to a lesser degree, the social and behavioural outcomes for the child. Because of the importance of the multidimensionality of the concept of well being (for example Pollard and Lee, 2003), it will be necessary to reconsider how well being is made operational in future research on the impact of early maternal employment or parental leave on children.

When a broader perspective is taken on the well being of children, a new approach to children – even very young children – is needed in research into the impact of parental leave and maternal employment. Based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), this requires a paradigm shift. Rather than approaching young children as 'objects' of research by developing so-called 'objective' measurement instruments, research needs to move towards the recognition of children as social actors with their own experiences and 'meaning-making' (Qvortrup *et al.*, 1994; Woodhead and Faulkner, 2000). Consequently, research methods need to be developed focusing on the experiences and meanings of children themselves. However, in the case of research into the impact of parental leave arrangements on the well being of children, additional methodological difficulties have to be considered, in particular due to the very young age of the children concerned. Despite the range of ages during which parents have the opportunity to take parental leave, the majority of the parents take advantage of a parental leave arrangement in the child's first year. Listening to the 'voice' of pre-verbal infants will be very challenging.

A research team at the University of Louvain (KU Leuven) offers an inspiring example of research into the well being of very young children. The team developed a framework to measure the well being of children under three in daycare settings outside home. The framework is based on observation scales built around the concepts of the 'experience of well being' and 'involvement'. The observation of a large quantity of video recordings of children in a daycare setting has provided the researchers with the basic materials for the development of the observation scales. It is important to note that the framework also takes into account child variables, special circumstances and other characteristics of the daycare setting (Laevens *et al.*, 2003). Another inspiring example is the Mosaic approach developed by Alison Clark and

Peter Moss (2001), which consists of a framework for listening to young children using multiple methods.

In sum, to measure accurately the impact of leave arrangements or early parental employment on children's well being, a broader, multidimensional approach needs to be developed to capture multiple facets of this complex concept (see also Pollard and Lee, 2003). A creative combination of diverse methods and an ecological approach will contribute to knowledge about the impact of family policy measures on the well being of (very young) children and improve insights into the relationship.

### **Suggestions for further research and new directions for policy**

Linda Duxbury (2003) argues for considerable caution in applying the available research. Flaws include the lack of research on a range of important intervening factors between infancy and later periods of life, such as the availability of high quality childcare or the household structure. Tiffany Field (2003), moreover, observes that truly valid comparisons need to be made between parents who elect to stay home for a paid period of leave and parents who prefer to return to work and place their child in good quality, affordable childcare service. Donna Lero (2003) considers the evidence strong enough to conclude that the length of leave in and of itself is not the most critical determinant of child development. She states that it is rather the set of personal, family, and workplace stresses, resources and supports that operate jointly and that interact with the leave experience.

A few suggestions can be made as a basis for improving existing research designs and thinking about new directions for policy. More research is needed into the workplace culture that can make returning to work more or less stressful and family friendly. With regard to the child health variable, important factors that need to be taken into account concerning specific leave policies include the length of leave, accessibility and the level of income support. Overall, a period of six months of exclusive breastfeeding is usually recommended primarily on maternal and child health grounds. But here lies the pitfall for greater gender equity. To overcome the problem fathers need to take leave consecutively, which is at present not an option in many countries. For policy makers who are committed to the reduction of child poverty and the improvement of child well being, Kloen Vleminkx and Timothy Smeeding (2001) identify 'adequate parental leave policies' as a focal point to ensure that mothers remain attached to the labour market.

Considering the optimal length of parental leave, Juith Galtry and Paul Callister (2004) observe that the research literature from a range of disciplines and perspectives gives us different answers. The policy challenge, however, is to design measures that would take account of the seemingly contradictory objectives such as enabling both mother and child health-promoting behaviour, gender equity in childrearing, and optimizing the economic and labour market outcomes of both women and men.

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### **3. Researching Children's Family Lives from a Comparative Perspective: a dissemination project using video**

*Julia Brannen*

*The paper discusses some of the methodological issues that arise in cross-national comparative research. It focuses on a project concerned with children's views and experiences of family life and how such a project has been used to disseminate research, including cross-nationally. What began as a conventional mix of research methods in a study of children's lives – a questionnaire survey and an interview study – became something rather different. The interviews encompassed a range of methods from family trees, vignettes and emotional maps of social relationships. In the dissemination phase of the project children's voices were used not simply to give voice to children themselves for adult audiences. Rather, video was used to provide a public forum in which children as experts on their own family lives could learn about and evaluate the research in which their predecessors (in the same school) had taken part. This exercise turned into a mini research project in its own right concerning the ways in which children exercise competences in their understanding of research and in their performance in a formal setting: a panel of experts in front of the camera.*

This paper is based on a study concerning how children growing up in different types of family viewed and experienced family life (Brannen *et al.*, 2000). In an additional phase of the research, funding was provided and a methodology developed in which the results of the data analysis were reported to a group of children of the same age and life course phase as those in the study. This dissemination was videoed to provide a means of disseminating the study to audiences of practitioners and policy makers (Brannen, 2002). The substantive findings of the study provided evidence of the ways in which children thought about care in families and how they experienced growing up in different kinds of households, while the video of children responding to the dissemination of the research findings constituted direct empirical evidence to show both that children were competent to reflect upon family life and that they took research seriously. Not only did they respond to the researcher's presentation of the research findings, but they also conducted themselves competently in a public setting in front of a film crew and spoke as a panel of experts.

In the late 1990s, a three-year research study was funded by the UK Department of Health, which focused on children's concepts of care, and their experience and contribution to family life. The London-based study covered a multi-ethnic sample of nearly 1000 10 to 12 year olds who were going through an important transition in their own lives: the transfer from primary school to secondary school. The researchers conducted a questionnaire survey in school time, in three mixed-sex state secondary schools and nine primary schools, as well as 63 interview-based case studies from three different types of families, which were drawn from the survey sample: two-parent, lone-mother and step families. In addition, a group of children in foster care was found through two London social services departments. The study drew upon a variety of methods: questionnaires, in-depth interviews, vignettes and visual ways of mapping children's social networks and families. The samples disproportionately represented

children from minority ethnic backgrounds, Black-Caribbean and Asian origin in particular, since they reflected the school populations they were drawn from. They were also disproportionately working class, reflecting the decisions of many middle-class parents in London to send their children to private schools.

### **Making a film for dissemination**

The study ended with the production of the conventional forms of dissemination, which included a book (Brannen *et al.*, 2000). In reporting the findings at conferences to research users, a way was also sought of enabling children to speak for themselves about the research topic of family life, instead of relying on the typical mechanisms used by qualitative researchers, namely to illustrate the research results with quotations drawn from children's interview transcripts. Using professional help, a video was made in which children would not only articulate their views about family life but could also voice their views on the research findings.

Having identified and sought the assistance of a professional film company that made educational films, a return visit was made to one of the secondary schools that had originally been a sampling source for the study. The school gave permission to seek volunteers during class time (Personal and Social Education) among children in their first year of secondary school, aged 11 years. It was not possible to go back to the original children, since they were now much older, and the aim was to talk to children at the same point in the life course – the point of moving to secondary school – as the children who took part in the original study.

The initial idea had been to use children's own voices as illustrations of the research findings. Such a strategy for presenting the study findings was also a way of testing the validity of our interpretations of the data, with the risk that they might not be validated. As the idea evolved, making the video turned into a rather different exercise and became a mini-research project in its own right. The videoed discussions constituted a critical situation in which children were invited to display particular kinds of competences, notably to voice their opinions on a subject in which they were expert. In addition, they were being asked to do so in a very formal setting.

The intention was also to gain access to a wide range of children and reduce social class biases. An attempt was made to avoid the teacher handpicking the children. Since the research findings were so wide ranging, it was important to explore as many of them as possible by talking to several groups of children and covering some similar and some different topics with each group. The three classes of children approached to take part spanned the whole ability range.

The film producer accompanied the author to the school. He explained the video process to the children and she presented the background of the research, showed the children the book that had resulted from the study and gave a careful explanation of issues around informed consent. It was at this stage of seeking children's participation and informed consent in the school context (see Morrow, 1999; David *et al.*, 2001) that the exercise began to be seen rather differently. It was striking how seriously the children took the whole exercise. They appeared very interested in the research and asked intelligent questions. When invited, almost all the children expressed a desire to take part, although a few children were quite firm about not volunteering. They were advised that while being filmed they risked saying more than they had intended about their own families. They were, therefore, warned against personal revelations that they

might later regret or feel uncomfortable about. This advice only seemed to increase their interest. They were told that the video would be shown as part of conference presentations given for educational purposes, and they were invited to ask questions.

The children's surprise at being consulted about their participation was striking. It was made quite clear to them that they were to select themselves for the video discussions. An opportunity arose to stress the point, when the film producer referred to the teacher doing the selecting, and had to be corrected publicly. Certainly, this message stood in marked contrast to the regimented practices of the school environment in which teachers typically relate to children very much as a group (David *et al.*, 2001). Most children (60 out of 78) volunteered to take part, and permission was sought from their parents.

Three weeks later when the discussions were to be conducted, it was not possible to include all the children who had volunteered. At their own insistence, children asked the teacher for a ballot be held to ensure that each child had an equal opportunity of taking part, itself an indication of their keenness to participate. Six discussion groups of 30 children were held which lasted half an hour each (two groups per lesson period) and generated three hours of video. The 30 participants reflected the ethnic composition of the school, where minority ethnic groups were considerably over-represented. The room in which the discussions took place was organised to conform to the demands of filming. Two young men – a sound recordist and a cameraman – were in attendance. They set the chairs in a wide circle facing a large window, which helped to illuminate the children's faces. The children were asked to signal in advance of making a comment so that the sound recordist was able to move the microphone nearer, and the cameraman could focus upon the individual. An automatic camera was also running, which filmed the whole group. This latter footage was far inferior to the high quality of the close-up camera work.

The research results were presented as a series of statements, and the children were invited to comment upon each in turn. A selection of 'theses' is presented below:

- Two thirds of children said that there was no such thing as a proper family
- Most children said that both mothers and fathers should be equally involved in caring for children
- Both boys and girls said that when they grew up they would want to work part time when their children were small
- All children said that children are very sad to start with when their parents divorce
- Three-quarters of children said that children should have some say or be consulted if their parents divorce.

The formality of the setting and of the way the research was presented produced a particular kind of framing for the discussions. These were not the kind of interactive, wide-ranging focus group discussions that had taken place when we were developing the interview phase of the study. They were much more focused and controlled. Much less social interaction took place. Children did not interrupt one another, nor did they speak across each other. They conducted themselves very much in the fashion of a panel of adult experts performing on television. Their use of language was also typically formal, with children adopting an impersonal mode of speech referring to children in general or to 'the child'. Yet, they also shifted speech modalities, moving from the general to the particular, in which they talked about their own situations and experiences of family life. While not interacting as a group, they did on occasion make

reference to each other's statements, sometimes making a point of formally signalling disagreement with a previous speaker.

The showing of the video as part of the dissemination of the study to academic and professional audiences has provoked considerable interest not only in the UK but also in other countries where the works has been presented: Norway, Sweden, Portugal and New Zealand. Many have said how inspiring it was to see children speaking for themselves. Some have expressed amazement at the children's competence and have also been very moved by their reflection and the 'maturity' with which they spoke. Some have suggested that, at least in some of their comments about family life made in response to attitudinal questions, children were seeking to appear politically correct, which was yet another example of their sophistication.

Not all the audiences in other countries understood everything that the children said in the film because the children speak in English and sometimes speak quickly making them difficult to follow. Given the formality of academic papers, this dissemination approach has much to commend it, for it has rhetorical as well as cognitive impact. It seeks to persuade through the heart as well as the head.

Some responses to the video have been surprising. For example, in a showing to Swedish social workers many expressed scepticism that Swedish children would speak with such competence, which goes against cultural assumptions about Swedish approaches to children. Sweden is usually held to have led the way in its 'rights approach' to children. Indeed, the dissemination of the video to different adult audiences, both intra-nationally and cross-nationally, could have become part of the research project, since responses to the film probably have more to say about cultural understandings of childhood and expectations of children than about the competences of children *per se*.

### **Application in cross-national research**

A number of points can be made about carrying out such a dissemination project in other contexts, in particular cross-nationally. They relate to the cultural boundedness of the context in which research and its dissemination are conducted, the concepts used in the theoretical formulation of the work, and the methods adopted in relation to the questions being addressed (Hantrais, 1999). In respect of context, two issues are of importance in translating the project into other contexts. One is the tradition that exists in a particular society concerning the notion of dissemination and 'consultation', the latter being intrinsic to the process of reaching out and feeding back to specific constituencies and seeking their views, in this case particularly the children who were the focus of the research. The second issue concerns the significance of dissemination in the research process. In respect of concepts, a key issue in cross-national research concerns their equivalence in different societies (Hantrais, 1999). In this, as in most studies, a complex process of recontextualisation of language was going on (Bernstein, 2000). In the original study, social science concepts were translated into common sense language to which children gave their responses to the researchers' questions. These languages were again recontextualised in writing up the research as social science. In feeding back the research to the children, they were translated, and children responded with their own interpretations. Finally, the approach employed in making the video reflects the approach adopted in the research and comes from a

particular epistemological and methodological research culture. Such an approach would need to be clarified if the project were to be replicated in other countries.

#### TRADITIONS OF CONSULTATION AND RESEARCH DISSEMINATION

Making the video constituted a formal mechanism for feeding back research results to children and for creating a dialogue with children about research. The decision to adopt a consultative approach needs to be understood in the British context in which consultation is part of a tradition that touches upon the very fabric and history of the society. Consultation via the focus group has a long tradition in market research in the study of consumers and originated in the United States (Merton and Kendall, 1946), whereas this type of consultation is relatively new to in the political arena in the UK. Consultation has been much in vogue in the UK, with New Labour governments in particular. As a concept, it needs, however, to be distinguished from notions of participation based upon representative democracy. The dissemination of research is also recent and part of the growing consumer-led culture of the UK, in which research is commissioned and made accountable to those who have been constructed as its 'users'<sup>1</sup>. It should also be noted that, while the considerable importance given to the dissemination of research may be peculiar to the UK, with the growth in European Union research funding, this practice is becoming widespread. The requirement to disseminate and to do so in particular ways and to particular groups is part of the conditions of research funding, so that dissemination is increasingly a mandatory budgetary item to be included in a research proposal.

If the exercise in research dissemination discussed here were to be carried out in a society with different political and research traditions, then it may be necessary to reflect upon general understandings of consultation in that society and on the practice of research dissemination in particular.

#### EQUIVALENCE OF CONCEPTS

The particular study in question set out to explore children's understandings of concepts relating to care and family life as well as to capture their experiences. The theorisation that underpinned the study involved a conceptualisation of human beings as exercising social agency. The approach was very much in the tradition of interpretivism and social action theory.

The study took place at a particular time in the 1990s in the British social sciences, in which the study of childhood was being subjected to major critique, especially following the initiatives of Scandinavian researchers in the 1980s (for example, Qvortrup, 1987; Alanen, 1988), with respect to their conceptual containment in developmentalism, their substantive containment in families and institutions, and a theoretical approach that denied them agency. In this study, children were conceptualised as active participants in their parents' care and in family life. It was an axiomatic assumption that children were competent actors within family life and also competent to reflect upon research findings (Alderson, 2001), especially when it concerned the representation of their own views. Moreover, the study was concerned to explore the differences of gender, ethnicity and social class among children with regard to their normative views, experiences and ideas.

The video provided evidence that children hold views about family life and are active agents who understand, reflect on and contribute to it. Evidence was also found that

children have the competence to communicate opinions in a public context and can acquit themselves well in a formal setting. This exercise may, therefore, be seen as a demonstration of how children can be transformed from the status of 'subjects of research' – in this study they were never considered 'objects' – to the position of experts on research, by engaging in dialogue and critique. This engagement in the dissemination process may serve to reduce the 'otherness' of children in British society and contest the assumption that children are intrinsically different from adults. However, it needs to be borne in mind that child-centred methods may maintain and strengthen stereotypical conceptions of children and childhood, as researchers in the socially enlightened Scandinavian countries have warned (Alanen, 1988; Solberg, 1994; Andenaes, 1996; Sandbaek, 1999).

The concept of 'children's rights' informed research practice in the project (2001)<sup>2</sup>. Dissemination is of its nature *post hoc*, happening after research findings have been produced. It was considered exploitative to elicit children's views on family life a second time when they had formed the dataset of the original research project. Ethically, it was important that children not only gave their informed consent to taking part in the video but that they also understood the context in which their views were being sought and the purposes for which the video would be used. In short, children were treated as having 'the right to know' the findings of the research.

The replication of the project in other societies or its use in cross-national research will depend upon how childhood and family life are understood in other societies: the position of children in those societies, how they conduct themselves, and their 'treatment' by the state, legal frameworks and social institutions. Since schools were the context in which research access to children was sought, both in the original study and in the video, understanding children in the school context would be a major consideration in mounting such a study in another country. Across societies, great variation is found in educational systems and in the position of the child in relation to educational institutions and the learning process. In Northern Europe, children are required to stay in school longer and longer and to achieve high level qualifications, while in the developing world children's school lives are typically short, and they assume many of the responsibilities of adults at a young age.

### **Research methods and practice**

Replicating the project in other contexts requires attention to be given to the conditions under which the research was originally done. It is important to stress that making the video paralleled the process of doing research, which would need to be made manifest in cross-national research. Films are of their nature shorter than most written outputs from research. The complexities and caveats of research can be conveyed in a written text but cannot be presented on film. Thus, the way that the children were chosen and the way the video was edited (how quotes are chosen) is important if a video is to be true to the spirit of research. This is especially important since the messages of film may be even more powerful than the written word, precisely because the caveats that form part of the conventional research account are omitted. The whole point of the film is to make powerful points through visual images.

Finding children to take part in the video resembled the process of sampling in which the aim was to minimise the power of gatekeepers – the teachers in this case – to

make decisions about which children should take part. It is likely that, in some school systems, it may be harder and less successful to challenge gatekeepers than in others.

The 'research design' adopted was to seek a variety of different viewpoints by maximising the number of participating children within a particular year group, including children from different ethnic origins. An effort was also made to maximise the topics covered by the research. This was a tall order given the constraints on resources – time that the children were allowed away from the curriculum – and the relatively short duration considered appropriate for a conference presentation. Managing such issues may be easier in some schools and school systems than others.

Making the video involved formulating hypotheses derived from the study that children were invited to reject or accept. Given the legitimacy bestowed on these hypotheses as 'research', it can be argued that they constituted 'leading questions' with which children were constrained to agree. It was the case that children rarely contradicted the statements openly. Nonetheless, they negotiated ways of expressing a variety of opinions in which they introduced notions of contingency, for example by suggesting that 'it depends on the family situation'. On occasion, they asserted overt disagreement with another child. This was done in a formal way, however, without confronting the person concerned directly. Such formal hypotheses fulfilled the research criteria of 'reliability', since the research study findings were presented in similar ways across the different discussion groups. They also provided a further test of the validity of the findings. It was reassuring to discover that the video discussions supported both the main thrust and detail of the study's conclusions and also amplified them. How children respond to such formal presentations of research is likely to be dependent upon their location in the school hierarchy, their ages and the culture of the particular school as well as upon the national context.

The fieldwork approach used in making the video reflected the study's research design and was guided more by the principles of a structured interview than by the focus group method. In translating the method for cross-national use, it is important to take account of research traditions in different countries, which may or may not favour such methods, although it should be noted that the method was tailored to the video context. Children's views were not probed as in the original research study. The intention was not to prevent exposure of an individual child to the scrutiny of the group through further discussion; given the public nature of the forum, the author was careful to ensure that each child felt that their views had been validated. Moreover, no time was available for further discussion because of the school's tight timetable; the discussions took place during curriculum time.

Editing the tapes was very similar to qualitative data analysis, again a practice that is more common in some research contexts than others. It was an elaborate and time-consuming exercise<sup>3</sup>, which would have been easier if digital technology had been available. As in the writing up of research for publication, the final result of the editing process involved making considerable sacrifices. The material that was edited out was as interesting and illuminating as that selected. Had this not been so, however, it might have been tempting to select quotes on the basis of 'impact'.

### **The context of dissemination**

The whole point of research dissemination as we understand it in the UK is to inform policy and practice. The extent to which policy and practice are amenable to being

informed and changed by research is likely to be very different in different societies. In the British context, the limits of an approach that prioritised children's agency were obvious: the video only gave children the opportunity of 'voice', and limited knowledge of the research findings. Despite promises to the children and the intention to ensure that they saw the end result – the video – the school was unable to find the time and resources to allow the author to return to show the film to the children. This caused her much disappointment but also underlines the limited power of researchers. It is also a salutary warning to other researchers who may try to fulfil promises to children in other similarly constraining educational contexts.

The danger even exists of increasing the control of adults over children. Making a film about children's perspectives constitutes a form of surveillance and can produce further intrusiveness into children's lives. It does not give children any direct power over what adults do in respect of children's lives. Since it is adults who interpret children's voices, the risk is that they will do so for their own purposes, albeit in relation to what they perceive to be children's 'best interests'. On the other hand, this type of material may help to make adults more sensitive to children and their interests.

Taking account of children's expertise and taking children's views seriously may unsettle adult certainties – those of practitioners in particular – about what is 'best for children' and may make them feel less sure and less confident about their own practice. It is certainly likely to make their work more complex and demand greater rather than fewer resources at a time when public services in many countries are under pressure from government to make them more efficient with less funding. British social services departments are a case in point. The responses of practitioners and policy makers to this kind of research exercise will vary greatly in different societies, with some countries much more advanced than the UK in their engagement with children. Presentations of the work in the UK to policy makers are well received, although it is also clear that some policy makers are perplexed and unsure about what to 'do' with the findings.

In carrying out such a project in a cross-national context, a number of issues, therefore, need to be considered. Firstly, attention needs to be given to whether and in what ways consultation and dissemination are part of the tradition of a research community and society. Consideration must be given to how an approach such as that used in this study, both in respect of dissemination and the approach to children, will be received by research funders, policy makers and the institutions, such as schools, through which access to children is likely to be obtained. Studies like this one and the approach to dissemination raise crucial issues concerning the conceptualisation of children and childhood, which may vary markedly across different societies. Finally, this account of making a video to disseminate research has highlighted the processes of doing research. Methodologies too may be culturally specific.

### **Acknowledgement**

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### **Notes**

1. The UK's Economic and Social Research Council refers to the 'users' of social research and has located policy makers, business and the voluntary sector in different parts of the research process from commissioning through to dissemination.

2. Internationally, via the United Nations' 1988 Convention on the Rights of the Child, children's rights took on a new dimension when rights to participation, albeit modest compared with those allocated to adults, were added to rights to protection from abuse and neglect and rights to provision of goods and services (Alderson, 2001).
3. Firstly, the filmed material was reorganised under the different research hypotheses or statements, which was a very time-consuming exercise, especially when conducted on a home video machine. This made it possible to examine the nature and range of comments with respect to each hypothesis or statement of the findings. At the next edit, an attempt was made to demonstrate the variation in the comments by excluding those that were similar in content and style. This involved making difficult decisions to cut video footage. In the spirit of research rigour, an effort was also made to avoid selecting particular children or particular discussions only on the criterion that they created 'impact' and made 'good film'. This process involved a further edit, since it was hard to judge the exact timing of the comments. The whole editing process involved cutting the film from 3 hours to 40 minutes. Moreover, the film company then had to link the edited material together, which meant some further editing, together with the insertion of the credits and some headline statements. The latter were created in order to introduce the different themes. A blank screen was inserted between the different thematic sections so that the author's own commentary would knit into the structure of the film during the conference presentation.

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## 4. New Methods for Researching Child Poverty: cross-national learning from a Portuguese case study

*Amélia Bastos*

*The paper presents an overview of the methodologies used in researching child poverty. Among the key issues examined are different understandings of the 'concept' of child poverty, the appropriateness of the indicators developed and of the measurements used. The paper suggests a new methodological approach for the study of child poverty that considers the child as the statistical unit of observation. Rather than focusing on family income, the methodology analyses child income poverty by identifying the socio-economic characteristics of children living in poor families, thereby developing a more qualitative approach to the problem. Using a Portuguese micro database on the living conditions of children, a logit model is estimated to define a set of indicators associated with child income poverty. On the basis of these indicators, an index of child poverty is constructed to evaluate the intensity of the phenomenon, where the child is the unit of observation. The findings indicate that child income poverty is fundamentally associated with four socio-economic dimensions: education, health, housing and social insertion. The econometric framework used by this approach ensures greater accuracy of the results compared with other methods that do not use econometric tools. The conclusion comments on the value of applying the index of child income poverty in comparative international analysis of the phenomenon and its relevance for policy actors.*

When measured as 60% of mean equivalised income, data from the European Community Household Panel surveys indicate that the 'risk of poverty rate' for young people under the age of 16 remained high in Portugal throughout the 1990s. In 1997, it had reached 29%, and only the UK was recording a higher figure at that time (European Commission, 2002, p. 185). Other work, using the same indicators, confirms that the number of children living in poor families is particularly significant in southern Europe, whereas it is relatively low in northern Europe (Bradbury *et al.*, 2001). In the United States, the child poverty rate is also relatively high, at around 30% (Bradbury and Jantti, 2001). All the statistics suggest that children are a group that is particularly exposed to poverty. They are generally over-represented among the poor population (Bradbury *et al.*, 2001). For this reason, increasing attention has been paid to the question of child poverty, from the political as well as the academic perspective (Department of Social Security, 1998). The problem of childhood poverty is of critical concern in the Central and East European (CEE) countries that joined the European Union in 2004, where 2 million children were estimated to be living in poverty at the turn of the century (UNICEF, 2001, p. x). In recognition of the importance of the problem of child poverty, one of the key targets in Portugal's 2002 National Action Plan (NAP/incl) against poverty and social exclusion was the eradication of child poverty by the year 2010 (European Commission, 2002, p. 65). In the UK, the target was to eradicate child poverty within 20 years (European Commission, 2002, p. 171).

Awareness of the negative impacts that poverty can have on children's physical and cognitive development has contributed to the growing concern over child poverty throughout the Western world (Zill *et al.*, 1991). It has been shown that children who

grow up within poor families are likely to suffer from greater problems with health, schooling and emotional well being (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997). As argued by Aletha Huston (1994, p. 6), 'Children have basic rights to quality of life, they have inherent value as individuals ... not simply as future adults.' In other words, children should be granted the natural right to well being, since they represent the future of society.

The aim of the research on which the paper is based was to probe more deeply into the problem of child poverty, to gain a greater understanding of the well being of children directly, rather than through the family, which called for the use of non-monetary indicators to assess child poverty. The paper sets out to analyse the phenomenon of child poverty by assessing the living conditions of children and by identifying economic and social factors associated with their well being. The child is thus regarded as a statistical unit of observation. The analytical process addresses the child and not the family.

The analysis implicitly encompasses elements associated with the family's living conditions that are not an object of study in their own right but rather as one of the determinants of the child's level of well being. Although family income is not the sole determinant, it has an important impact on the child's living conditions. David Ross *et al.* (2000, p. 44) underline this point with reference to the Canadian Longitudinal Survey on Children and Youth when they state that: 'Les données recueillies dans le cadre de l'Enquête longitudinale nationale confirment l'impact fondamental du revenu sur le développement des enfants.'

The concept of child poverty underlying this paper is the definition of child income poverty. Accordingly, a child is poor if he / she belongs to a poor family. This is the classical concept of child poverty. The model presented for analysing child poverty combines the classical analysis of the problem, based on family income, and producing indicators of child income poverty, with an index that gives information about the intensity of the problem.

The methodological approach adopted in the study using Portuguese data is of interest for cross-national research, since it develops objective indicators designed to assess the life style of children. The indicators and the measurement constructed contribute to knowledge about the problem of child poverty, which, we would argue, can be applied in other national contexts because they are not context dependent. The indicators are also valuable tools for cross-national research, since they provide insights into the factors associated with child poverty in each country, while the measurement facilitates objective comparisons of the extent of the problem.

### **Review of the methods for researching child poverty**

Child poverty is a theme of growing interest in the social sciences across Europe. The pioneering research conducted in Portugal on this phenomenon (Silva, 1989) was based on studies of the more general issue of poverty. Having identified poor families by examining family income, they counted the number of children included in such families and analysed the living conditions of the family as a whole. These studies identified child poverty as a component of the more global problem of poverty, by observing both the specific features of poor families with children, as well as the impact of social policy on the well being of these families, and, indirectly, on their children.

A similar approach was followed by much of the research conducted in the late 1980s and early 1990s, such as that by Giovanni Cornia (1990), Jonathan Bradshaw (1990), and Sheldon Danziger and Jonathan Stern (1990), using a macro approach to the problem based on the analysis of the social environment. All these studies pointed to the increase in the number of children belonging to poor families in the industrialised world, either in association with the growth of the more general phenomenon of poverty or with changes occurring in family structure, in particular lone parenthood (Cornia, 1990). In addition, these studies reported a deterioration in the level of family benefits, leading to negative consequences for the well being of children (Bradshaw 1997; Danziger *et al.*, 1997).

Different methodologies were introduced in the 1990s to analyse the problem of child poverty. Working from the assumption that family resources are equally shared within families and that every member of the family is in the same situation with regard to poverty, Howard Oxeley *et al.* (2001) and Bruce Bradbury and Markus Jantti (2001), for example, analysed child poverty using a poverty line calculated from the equivalent income of children, assuming that all family members have the same standard of living and share family income equally. The results obtained indicate that, in most of the countries analysed, the equivalent income of children was almost always below the average income for the population as a whole. The same result was found for the level of poverty in general and for child poverty, which was taken to demonstrate the extent of the phenomenon under study. This method of calculating equivalent income has been almost universally applied in the analysis of income distribution, although some studies revealed inequalities between family members (Lazear and Michael, 1986). Despite the information provided by these studies, little progress was made in looking for ways of taking account of inequalities within families, and the convention of assuming equal living standards continued to be widely applied.

Some more recent work on child poverty has analysed the phenomenon from a dynamic point of view, by observing the movements of children with respect to poverty at two different points in time (Bradbury *et al.*, 2001). This type of analysis makes it possible to assess the impact of poverty on the child's development, to identify the concentration of poverty among children, to characterise the specific life styles of those who endure or escape from poverty and, finally, to propose more effective policy solutions. Using data for the 1990s on the dynamic aspects of child poverty in six European countries and the United States, Bradbury *et al.* (2001) found that over half the children in the poorest fifth of all children were in the same position the following year; one in every 10 children in Great Britain and the United States was living in poverty for five consecutive years, and children belonging to lone-parent families were more likely to fall into poverty and less likely to escape from it.

Notwithstanding the innovative methodological aspects of studies such as these, the vast majority of previous research into child poverty considers the family as being the statistical unit of observation, and concentrates on the analysis of the economic component in terms of family income. Researchers studying the living conditions of children, and implicitly analysing child poverty as a deficit situation in terms of well being, refer to the need for specific child indicators (Nolan *et al.*, 2001) and argue that the child should be taken as the statistical unit of observation (Qvortrup, 1995). In line with this approach, the analysis of the child's situation with regard to poverty may involve direct observation of the existence of specific consumer behaviour, held to be indispensable for a minimum level of well being (Nolan *et al.*, 2001). This methodology

favours a more qualitative analysis of the phenomenon of child poverty and calls for a definition of both economic and social indicators that can be applied to the child.

In spite of the volume of research on child well being, where child poverty is implicitly defined as a deficit in well being, little agreement can be found on how best to conceptualise and measure the phenomenon (Pollard and Lee, 2003). In what follows, we propose indicators for defining child income poverty that apply specifically to the child, leading on to an index of child income poverty that assesses its intensity.

### **Methodological issues**

The index was constructed using Portuguese data, but it can be applied equally to other national data because it relies on objective measures of child poverty. The analytical process comprised three stages. In the first, a survey was undertaken to assess the living conditions of children. On the basis of the data provided by the survey, a binomial logit model was then constructed to define a set of child-specific poverty indicators. In the final phase, a child poverty index was produced, allowing the intensity of child income poverty to be assessed, using the estimation results of the econometric model constructed in the previous stage.

#### **SURVEY DESIGN**

For the purposes of the analysis, the child was considered as a statistical unit, thus calling for observation of a number of economic and social variables indicative of his/her well being. Since no database exists in Portugal on the subject of child poverty<sup>1</sup>, the work undertaken is based on results obtained from a sample survey conducted in 1999, involving a set of 384 randomly selected children aged between 6 and 14. A stratified sample was drawn of children in the city of Lisbon, reflecting the living conditions of the child population in an urban environment. The instrumental variable used for stratification was family income, and two strata were defined: children living in poor families and children in non-poor families. Thus a set of poor children was identified, in keeping with the classical concept of child poverty or child income poverty. These data make it possible to identify the elements that distinguish the living conditions of children in child income poverty from those of children not living in what are classified as poor families. Elements were sought to enable child income poverty indicators to be constructed supported by robust econometric techniques.

Bearing in mind the multidimensional nature of child poverty and deprivation, issues were included in the survey design to reflect the different dimensions of children's well being. In this context and in accordance with theoretical and empirical considerations, five categories of variables were defined: family living conditions, housing, health, education and social integration. These categories are also found in the work of Brian Nolan *et al.* (2001) and can be identified in the survey conducted by Manuela Silva (1989). Unlike previous studies, the dimensions included in the work reported in this paper apply directly to the child and not to the family, thereby enabling a more precise evaluation of the child's well being and of child income poverty.

The breakdown of the categories used shows how the situation of children was distinguished from that of families. The questions about family living conditions were designed to characterise the family as a whole. Questions were asked about age and place of birth of parents or guardians and children, the number of children, the parents' education and their occupational and employment statuses. The batch of questions

about housing was designed to identify factors that condition the child's well being, including living in a deprived neighbourhood, overcrowding, lack of sanitation and the fact that children do not have a bed of their own to sleep in. Questions concerning health were designed to characterise the child's current state of health, the presence of serious or chronic illness, medical care and diet. Questions were also asked about the circumstances surrounding the child's birth, including the mother's pregnancy and the child's weight at birth. Questions concerning education were intended to assess failure at school and the amount of parental support received. Social integration questions covered how the child's spare time is occupied and exposure to different life styles (see Annex 1). In this case, the children themselves were questioned.

#### CHILD SPECIFIC POVERTY INDICATORS

Statistical analysis of the data obtained from the survey is based on the estimation of a discrete choice model. These models are well suited for the analysis of survey data that reflect choices of a qualitative nature. The endogenous variable displays two alternatives: to be poor or not to be poor, in keeping with the classical analysis of child poverty or child income poverty. All coefficients estimated were found to be significant from the t-student statistical standpoint, with a 90% confidence level. The specification tests suggested by Andrew Chesher (1984) were successfully passed, and there is no reason to suppose that explanatory variables exist other than those that were found. The results are shown in Table 5.1.

According to the model, children who belong to lone-parent families or live with no parental figure (X1) tend to belong to poor families. The same result is found in the case of children belonging to families with two or more offspring (X2). The parents' education (X3) penalises the children of poor families insofar as, generally speaking, their parents have, at most, received no more than compulsory education. As for schooling, the results from the model indicate that children of poor families are particularly affected by school failure and generally do not receive support from their families (X4). In the case of health, the children of poor families are found to be more

**Table 5.1 Estimated results using Portuguese child poverty data**

Parameter	Estimate	Standard Error	t-statistic
Constant	3.00815	1.34462	2.23717
X1	-0.948977	0.434593	-2.18360
X2	-1.06655	0.461792	-2.30958
X3	-1.15429	0.480474	-2.40241
X4	2.31886	1.32054	1.75600
X5	-1.62251	0.476280	-3.40663
X6	-2.16812	0.388909	-5.57487
X7	-1.72686	0.402581	-4.28948
X8	-2.16246	0.554127	-3.90246

Log of Likelihood Function = -89.9295

Number of cases = 384

R - squared = 0.679354

Fraction of correct predictions = 0.895833

likely to experience physical development outside the normal parameters and receive no regular medical attention (X5). Housing, poor habitat (X6) and small size (X7) are important distinguishing features between children of poor and non-poor families. Lastly, it should be noted that children of poor families generally have a lower degree of contact with the surrounding environment (X8). The estimated values suggest that schooling, health, housing and social integration most strongly distinguish between the two groups of children analysed. These items made it possible to define a set of indicators designed to assess the child's level of poverty that complement the child poverty analysis using family income.

Four categories of indicators were defined, as shown in Table 5.2. These indicators were turned into binary variables to identify the existence or otherwise of the 'consumer behaviour' they imply. The same methodology has been used to define deprivation indicators (Townsend, 1979, 1987). However, since the indicators in Table 5.2 come from an econometric model that distinguishes children in poor families from children in non-poor families, they cannot be considered as deprivation indicators as they are directly associated with family income. The child income poverty indicators are qualitative variables. The coefficient of contingency between the indicators for each category was, therefore, calculated to assess their association. The figures obtained ensure there is no double counting, which is an important methodological element when defining this kind of indicator.

**Table 5.2 Child income poverty indicators**

Category 1 Education	Category 2 Health	Category 3 Housing	Category 4 Social integration
Number of failures	Physical development	Type of housing	Weekend outings
Support with schooling	Medical care	Size of housing	Holiday location
			Extra-curricular activities

#### CHILD POVERTY INDEX

On the basis of the above indicators an index of child income poverty can be defined: the Child Poverty Rate (CPR), whose operational formula is given as:

$$CPR_i = \sum_{j=0}^P p_{ij} \quad i = 1, \dots, n$$

where P refers to the number of indicators ( $p_{ij}$ ) considered, and n the number of individuals.  $CPR_i$  provides the value of CPR regarding the i-nth child observed. This simple counting technique has been used to evaluate the number of life stressors (McLanahan, 1983; Sameroff and Seifer, 1985; Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, 1995). It provides information about the number of disadvantages experienced by the child, allowing evaluation of the intensity of child income poverty. As nine indicators have been defined, the following child income poverty scale was considered:

- 0 ≤ CPR ≤ 3 Low level
- 4 ≤ CPR ≤ 6 Medium level
- 7 ≤ CPR ≤ 9 High level

The index is based on four life domains: education, health, housing and social integration. These areas are identified by Robert Cummins (1996) and, as he maintains, they should be used for the construction of quality of life indexes that are based on objective data. Rich Gilman *et al.* (2000) found the following domains of life satisfaction in a sample of American adolescents: family (relationships), self (image), living environment (material well being), friends (relationships) and school. If these domains are in deficit, it means individuals are suffering from deprivation. Thus, they coincide with the areas of deprivation identified in the paper.

Table 5.3 displays the data regarding the CPR found in the sample of poor children in Portugal. According to these data, more than half (61%) the poor children analysed register a median level of poverty. However, 21% of these children experience a high level of poverty, which underlines the gravity of the problem.

**Table 5.3 Child Poverty Rate (CPR)**

Scale of child poverty	% of children in poor families
Low level	18
Medium level	61
High level	21

#### APPLYING THE MODEL IN CROSS-NATIONAL CONTEXTS

Comparative cross-national research into child poverty needs a methodological framework that can be applied in different contexts. It also needs a clear definition of objective indicators and measurements. The approach presented in this paper provides a set of indicators derived from an econometric model that can be applied to any database on children's life styles, and it constructs an objective measurement with which to assess the extent of the problem. The approach benefits from the definition of common survey criteria that can be applied in each country. The methodological framework then yields important comparative elements such as the indicators and the index of child income poverty.

The indicators suggest important orientations for policy design to deal with the problem of child poverty by identifying the problem areas directly associated with the phenomenon, making it possible to elucidate problem areas (health, education, housing and social insertion in the present study) and the specific problems associated with each area (failure at school, the need for medical care, poor housing and lack of extra-curricular activities for example). The study undertaken provides a detailed picture of the problem of child poverty in Portugal and, more especially, in the city of Lisbon, thereby identifying the deficit areas where Policy measures are needed to eradicate child poverty.

The exercise of comparative research requires abstraction in line with Richard Titmuss's argument that comparative policy analysis should 'treat the subject, not by discussing the details of this or that country, but with the aid of concepts and models, principles and goals...' (Titmuss, 1967, p. 57). This statement is relevant for the study of child poverty in that it stresses the importance of developing a methodological framework, which is not context dependent. Although the method presented in the paper was not designed for use in comparisons, it is a valuable tool for cross-national studies in a situation where child poverty is such a widespread source of concern.

## Note

1. No specific data are available on the phenomenon of child poverty in Portugal. National studies are based on the Survey of Family Budgets carried on by the National Institute of Statistics, which took place in the early 1990s.

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### Appendix 1 Survey variables

- |  |                                    |
|--|------------------------------------|
| 1. Child's biographical data               | 3.4 School attendance              |
| 1.1 Age                                    | 3.5 Number of failures             |
| 1.2 Sex                                    | 3.6 Support for schooling          |
| 1.3 Birth place                            | B) Health                          |
| 1.4 Number of brothers/sisters             | 3.7 Mother's pregnancy             |
| 1.5 Family type                            | 3.8 Weigh at birth                 |
|  | 3.9 Medical attention              |
| 2. Parents' / guardians' biographical data | 3.10 Physical development          |
| 2.1 Age                                    | 3.11 Illnesses                     |
| 2.2 Birth place                            | 3.12 Handicapped child's meals     |
| 2.3 Number of children alive               | C) Housing                         |
| 2.4 Age of the mother's first pregnancy    | 3.13 Type of housing               |
| 2.5 Education                              | 3.14 Size of housing               |
| 2.6 Profession                             | 3.15 Existence of basic sanitation |
| 2.7 Employment situation                   | 3.16 Sleeping facilities           |
|  | 3.17 Bed-sharing                   |
| 3. Child's living conditions               | 3.18 Number of persons at home     |
| A) Education                               | D) Social integration              |
| 3.1 Kindergarten attendance                | 3.19 Weekend outings               |
| 3.2 School support                         | 3.20 Where holidays spent          |
| 3.3 Year of school attended                | 3.21 Outside school activities     |

## **5. Developments, Omissions and Challenges in Researching Childhood from a European Welfare Perspective**

*Leena Alanen*

The three papers in this issue of *Cross-National Research Papers* all explore aspects of children's lives and well being. They report on studies in which children and their welfare are a central focus. A sociological approach is adopted in the following discussion, with the aim of locating the papers within the multidisciplinary field of research that has come to be called Childhood Studies. Hence the omission in the title of the family focus. One of the discoveries of Childhood Studies and its founding ideas, emerging in the 1980s, was that, in social science texts, children are virtually 'invisible' within the family unit. In social policy literature, they have almost no separate identity (for example Daniel and Ivatts, 1998). 'Family' is taken to mean children, and through this 'familialising' discourse (for example Qvortrup *et al.*, 1994), children are lost from the policy analysis gaze. It has also been noted (Daniel and Ivatts, 1998, p. 7) that even the language of (Anglophone) social policy is family-centred, rather than child-centred.

The observation is still valid today that children and childhood are not, and never have been, high on the European social policy (or any other) agenda. However, countries in Europe differ between themselves in the extent to which child-related issues are drawn into their social policy discussion, as Fred Deven and Valérie Carrette point out in their paper. The social policy area, in both practice and analysis, seems to have been even slower to take notice of children and childhood compared with other areas, such as law, sociology, history and economics. Moreover, children seem to be the last category to be socially and politically recognised as a social group with its own social characteristics and worthy of study. Here, children trail behind other social groups (women, ethnic and sexual minorities, postcolonial and indigenous peoples) who have also been long hidden from social recognition. Children as a group have been silenced for longer still, and kept invisible and hidden from attention. This applies despite the fact that a discourse of 'child-centredness' is in frequent public usage, but often only to promote some rather different cause. As a result, children mostly appear in policy discussion and analysis in an instrumentalising fashion, instead of their own cause being the main focus of attention.

In their paper, Deven and Carrette are well aware of this (mis)use of children and their welfare. They discuss parental leave arrangements in Europe, focusing on what is known about the impact on children. They note that, in the EU framework, parental leave arrangements have been understood mainly as a means for reconciling working parents' family and work lives. In promoting arrangements of various kinds, the argument is also made that parental leave contributes positively to the welfare of children. A common belief seems to be that this requires no further argument. However, research evidence on how the link between parental leave arrangements and children's welfare actually works is scant, as Deven and Carrette note, and demonstrate in their paper. Studies in which parents are asked to give their subjective perceptions of the link come closest to producing such evidence. Mostly, however, researchers rely on indicators that they choose for themselves to assess the social or

economic dimensions of parental leave, such as the 'quality of parenting' or the economic situation of the household during parental leave. They are confident that 'good' parenting always 'trickles down' to children's everyday lives and has a positive impact on their well being. Alternatively, they believe that, if the economic situation of households with children is good enough, it will benefit children living in such households. Popular psychology tends to provide the meagre basis for this kind of argument. In the two examples above, it may be that popular psychology does present a fairly good approximation of how things generally are. However, the examples also show that social scientists constantly, and uncritically, ground their interpretation of findings on prevailing cultural assumptions, without realising this is what they are doing, and even less do they question their assumptions. This is clearly a problem that has to be overcome if the quality of cross-national comparative research and policy development is to be improved.

Since about the mid-1980s, in the new field of social science research and discussion that has come to be known as Childhood Studies, these problems surfaced in tandem with a cultural, or representational, crisis of children and childhood in Western societies (for example Prout, 2004). These developments took place across several social science disciplines. Also, the breadth of problems observed and to be tackled grew to include methods and methodologies, concepts and frameworks that were used in the social sciences in researching children and childhood. Most of them were found to be un- and underdeveloped. The message was clear: if we want our analyses to be relevant to child welfare policy, or social policy more generally, analysts need to reconsider the many omissions and biases in present knowledge, and the deficits in theorisation, conceptualisation and methodology.

The range of methods that social scientists normally learn to use was developed by studying the lives and circumstances of adults, firstly of adult men, later of adult women, and later still of other marginalised groups. This history of constructing tools for research has meant that an implicit adult-centeredness was built into the methods of social science, which then appeared as a problem when research focused on 'non-adults', that is on children. What appeared to be problematic were not just 'practical' issues, such as how to produce data on young children that do not share a common language with the researcher, since interview methods were not very useful. An all too easy way to try to bypass the problem (without solving it) is simply to continue to regard children as not-yet-grown-ups who, therefore, do not qualify as capable and trustworthy interviewees, and to turn to adults living in proximity to children to ask them about the children. Clearly, a more useful way forward is to look critically at the methods social scientists have learned to use, to recognise their origins and their built-in biases, and to start developing more suitable methods for generating direct knowledge on children and childhood.

At present, most social scientific knowledge about childhood and children's lives continues to be fundamentally indirect knowledge that has resulted from research on children, not with children, and collected from purportedly more 'objective' and knowledgeable adults, or through the researchers' own observations. In many cases, therefore, this knowledge cannot inform us about the life situation of the children themselves (as was intended), but instead about the (for example economic) life situation of adults (parents, guardians) who surround children but without necessarily having close contact with them. Another outcome is that the resulting knowledge provides the subjective view of adults (parents, teachers, social workers) in proximity to

children on the aspects of the children's situation under study. Taking an example closer to childhood policy analysis, studies of children's welfare or well being tend to use well-trying ('adultist') measurements, relying on a narrow repertoire of indicators of children's welfare, as Deven and Carrette again point out. In all these cases, implicit cultural assumptions are at work; assumptions that the emerging field of Childhood Studies has argued need radical 'deconstruction'.

Deconstruction – the critical reconsideration of concepts, theories, frameworks, epistemologies and methods – is, however, not enough. In developing methodologies that would help to generate more accurate knowledge about children and their childhood(s), three parallel routes can be distinguished: child-centred, structure-focused and discourse-analytical methodologies.

### **Child-centred methodology**

The methodology for genuinely child-centred research seeks to take children seriously as social actors (agents) in their own right, examining how the socially constructed material, social and cultural 'structures' surrounding children not only constrain their lives but also open up possibilities for action that children actively and imaginatively use, thereby (co-)constructing their own childhoods. This approach is so far the most widely used in childhood research, especially in Anglophone parts of the scientific world. The methodological focus on children 'in their own right' has also given the social study of childhood a completely new impetus across (mainly) the Western world. Studies in this vein have the powerful advantage that their findings reveal the many social and cultural competencies that children actually have (but were not believed to have), and which they manifest in the course of their everyday lives in the company of other children and adults, in peer groups and in families, as well as other arenas of social action (for example Hutchby and Moran-Ellis, 1998). Recognition of children's diverse competencies, even those of very small children, in turn helps in gaining recognition for the social contributions that children bring to social life, as partners and as citizens.

Julia Brannen's paper presents an interesting story of how far a firm and systematic child focus in a study on children's experiences of family life can advance the research process, generating innovations in methods and revealing children's competencies in argument, reflexivity and presentation. The experience also contributes to a deeper understanding of what researching with children implies in terms of research ethics.

### **Structure-focused methodology**

A second methodology may be called structure-focused. It takes as its starting point the observable, lived experience of childhood – the focus of child-centred research – and seeks to link it to the ongoing structuring processes in social life. The analytical task is to explore the many social, economic, political and cultural processes in which children and adults are involved as both individual and collective actors, and in which their everyday activities are embedded. This shows how children's existence as children (and as further subcategories of children) is constantly affected. The social positions of childhood and adulthood, again in many variations across the diverse arenas of social action, are thus linked into reciprocal interdependencies and relationships of power.

The study that Amélia Bastos presents in her paper of children living in poverty can be seen as taking a few steps in the direction given by the structural approach. Children constitute a social group distinct from other social groups and are, therefore, taken as the unit of analysis. In the Portuguese study, children (or rather, a subgroup of children) form the statistical unit of observation, showing that, in quantitative studies as well, greater accuracy can be achieved in terms of knowledge directly providing information about children, instead of the units (families, households) on which large quantitative surveys of child poverty have mostly relied.

### **Discourse-analytical methodology**

One of the major factors contributing to the questioning of available research perspectives on children and childhood, and the emergence of discussions under the umbrella of Childhood Studies, was the cultural, or representational, crisis of childhood in the Western (minority) world. Since the 1970s, a lack of public, civic consensus has existed as to the cultural meanings of the terms 'the child', 'children' and 'childhood'. Linked with the new, post-positivist epistemologies emerging simultaneously within the social sciences, the ground has been prepared for the development of a third group of methodologies for Childhood Studies. The focus is the discursive, or cultural, construction of these terms and the practical consequences of such constructions. This includes 'deconstruction' of taken-for-granted cultural meanings, and was referred to above as one of the major (early) tasks in the emergence of social scientific childhood research.

None of the studies presented in this collection of papers uses this particular approach. After the 'cultural turn' in the social sciences, the cultural underpinnings of welfare policies are increasingly recognised and being studied (for example Chamberlayne *et al.*, 1999). Research within Childhood Studies includes numerous discursive, cultural analyses of issues that powerfully affect children's lives and welfare. Comparative studies of welfare policies could usefully expand to undertake the analysis of childhood policies, while childhood research would be more relevant if it expanded into the policy field.

The three methodologies presented above – actor-focused, structure-focused and discourse-focused – are not, and should not be seen as, alternatives, and even less as rivals. In developing welfare for children, policies are needed that genuinely recognise the materially, socially and culturally instituted relations that exist between children and adults, and the cultural constructs with which these relations are upheld. Such policies must genuinely respect the 'voice' of children as citizens and co-partners in social life if they are to build bridges between policy analysis and Childhood Studies within countries, across countries and working comparatively. The papers in this issue are promising examples of a positive development in that direction.

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## **6. A Politician's View of Research into Family and Childhood from a European Welfare Perspective**

*Katrin Saks*

Although I am a member of the Cultural and European Affairs Committees at the Parliament (Riigikogu), rather than the Social Committee, for three years I was Minister without Portfolio of Population and Family Issues in the Estonian government, which means that I was closely concerned with the topics discussed in the papers. As a politician and member of the Estonian parliament rather than a scientist, my approach to these issues is practical. In particular, I am interested in knowing how researchers can contribute to the decision-making process.

The idea of viewing issues about the welfare of children from the child's perspective, which is a common theme running through all the papers, is quite new for Estonia. In everyday politics, little attention is paid to children and even less to their interests. A cynical view would be that children do not vote. We can only hope that compilations of research findings such as these will affect our approach to child and family issues and to policy making.

Fred Deven's and Valérie Carrette's paper on the issue of parental leave arrangements in Europe was of particular interest because the subject is of topical relevance and significance in Estonia today. A new law on parental leave allowance was enacted in Estonia on 1 January 2004<sup>1</sup>. Previously, mothers in Estonia were able to take 140 days maternity leave and received compensation at 100% of salary from the Health Insurance Fund. At the end of the period, they could stay at home for three years, but with rather modest support from the state. Under the new law, in addition to maternity leave, parents have the right to stay at home on full pay until the child is a year old, which makes the provision one of the most generous in the European Union. The arrangement for the following two years is unchanged. It should be emphasised that, after the first six months, the provision applies to the mother or the father. The stipulation that only the mother should be entitled to leave in the first six months was made in the act, first and foremost, to take account of the interests of the child, and was inserted upon the recommendation of paediatricians and academic researchers. Politicians are generally criticised for not protecting the interests of the child, so this case is an exception. After the first six months, however, priority is no longer given to the interests of the child, and gender equality becomes the main issue. After the child's first birthday, we lose sight of the interests of the child altogether, since, in cases where the very low benefit is not enough for them to live on, mothers are forced to return to work for economic reasons. However, if the mother was not working before the child was born, either because she was a student or was unemployed, she is entitled to a fixed rate parental allowance followed by childrearing benefit.

In my view, the regulation is more concerned with the interests of parents and employers than of children, and more especially with the interests of parents in well-paid jobs, because they can take leave on full pay. The arrangement may also be in the employer's interest, since they do not share responsibility for paying for the substitute income. Rather, the sole responsibility lies with the state.

The research reviewed in the paper stresses the importance of the first year of the child's life. However, we know that, in the Estonian context, what happens after the first

year is also very important. Reference is made in the paper to some of the studies that deal with the development of children in childcare, compared with those who stay at home with their mother, but the paper also shows how difficult it is to conduct research into parental care in the home. It is to be hoped that researchers will develop better ways of carrying out such studies. The Estonian experience, where it is possible to stay at home with a child for almost a year and feel economically secure, suggests that solutions need to be found for the subsequent period in the child's life. The solution whereby the mother or father goes back to work does not really provide the answer from the child's perspective. It could be claimed that we lack a clear vision of what we should do and what we really want. For example, do we want a higher rate of employment for women? The current rate for Estonia lags behind the Nordic countries and is lower than at the beginning of the 1990s. Do we want a better work–life balance for families, do we want to have happy children, or do we want both? The current daycare system is unable to place two-thirds of children under three years of age, and only 10% of children aged between one and two are in childcare institutions. The question is whether we continue along this path, requiring local government to comply with the law, because, by law, this is their responsibility, or whether the state should fund provision of childcare places. Or should we be developing alternatives to reduce the burden on local government? Perhaps parents would be willing to hire a childminder for half the amount of the subsidy provided for public childcare places, thereby enabling another person to work, in addition to the mother. This might be better for the child. Are researchers able to answer these questions?

Another related issue is the availability of part-time work. In the EU, half the mothers with children under the age of six work part time. In Estonia, the proportion is only 10%. The paper that reported children's opinions showed that most of them would want to work part time when they grew up in the interests of the children. Should the state do something to improve the availability of part-time jobs? Or should we rely only on companies and employers? These are the questions we hope researchers will help us to answer. Politicians have many questions but no answers and would like to find answers in co-operation with researchers.

The research into children's views on family life is very engaging, and offers an approach where children were used not only as messengers on family life issues but also as family life experts, which they undoubtedly are. The way in which children were treated and the idea that they deserve to know the outcome of the research were remarkable. The part of the project where children participated in the video was also fascinating. Consulting children, the need to involve parents in the decision about whether they could participate in the study and the role played by teachers are particularly relevant and make us aware that not enough attention is being paid to the rights of children. We might ask whether a similar piece of research could be organised in Estonia. My journalistic experience suggests that people, including children, have become more open in recent years and are more prepared to discuss family matters. However, my experience as a politician is that approaches like the one described in this research involving the participation of children have not yet been developed in Estonia. From time to time, I give lessons in schools, and I always find that children do not know how to ask questions or express their opinions. This shows that, in most lessons, communication goes in one direction only. Children are not used to the fact that their opinions may also be important.

The last paper about child poverty provides an example of children being taken as a unit of statistical observation in an analysis of household income and expenditure in Portugal. Estonia needs to adopt a similar approach in analysing poverty because the available statistics do not provide a very accurate picture of the real situation. For example, if we take the average salary, it is relatively high because of a very small group of wealthy people, whereas 80% of employees are earning less than the average figure. Similar problems arise with other statistics. As a politician, I have often heard talk about children who are suffering from poverty. Many children are unable to take part in school events because they do not have enough money, but this is not shown by the statistics. It would be extremely interesting to do the same analysis in Estonia as in Portugal. This would help politicians to decide whether more support is needed for families, for example by increasing child benefit, which goes to the mother. Or whether, for example, to expand child-oriented services, which would mean choosing between school lunches, recreational or other educational activities. This is the sort of practical questions we are facing.

In conclusion, firstly, politicians want to see more research and to have more answers, from scientists. Secondly, I should like to see colleagues in parliament making more use of the research we already have. Even if the situation has been improving year by year, we do not co-operate enough with researchers.

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### **Editors' note**

1. Under the new law, leave arrangements in Estonia are as follows:

- Women in paid work can take 140 days maternity leave (about 70 before and 70 after the birth) on full pay. If they are not in paid work, they do not receive a work-related benefit, but they can apply for childrearing benefit, which is paid at a fixed rate from the date of birth until the child's third birthday. The mother continues to receive the benefit if she takes up paid work. Since the benefit is not paid before the birth, it can be said to be child related.
- As from 1 January 2004, parental (leave) allowance provides a full replacement salary for parents who are in paid work. In combination with maternity benefit, the allowance is paid for a total of 365 days. After a year, parents are entitled to childrearing benefit until the child's third birthday. Whereas only the mother is entitled to maternity benefit, the parental leave allowance is paid to either the mother or the father. The parent may receive the allowance in combination with income from paid work up to a certain limit.
- If the mother was not previously in paid work, parental (leave) allowance is paid at the level of the minimum wage from the date of birth until the child is 11 months old. Thereafter, parents receive childrearing benefit.
- Childrearing benefit cannot be received at the same time as parental (leave) allowance. Generally, the allowance is higher than the benefit, and it is, therefore, advantageous for mothers not in paid work to receive parental allowance first before going on to childrearing benefit.

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