

What can we learn from British Birth Cohort studies?



Professor Jane Elliott

Seminar held at the Institute on 15 February 2013

Report by Joseph Kaspar

As social processes become increasingly complex, longitudinal studies are indispensable for social

researchers to establish temporal patterns, measure change and make stronger causal interpretations.

Australia is a relative newcomer to longitudinal research and we can thus learn a great deal from the experiences of other nation's longitudinal studies. In this seminar, Professor Elliot presented an introduction to the main longitudinal studies that have been conducted in her native Britain, as well as providing wide-ranging examples of some of the research and concepts that have arisen from them. Professor Elliot is particularly interested in promoting longitudinal research, increasing cross-institutional collaboration, and encouraging researchers to think in new ways when analysing quantitative and qualitative longitudinal data.

Many nations have longitudinal studies, but Britain has ongoing studies that started as far back as 1946 and 1958. Professor Elliot is thus well placed to introduce us to British longitudinal research and the successes generated from them. One of the studies covered in depth in the seminar was of the 1958 British Birth Cohort, known as the National Child Development Study. Interestingly, the National Child Development Study started 10 years after the creation of the National Health Service and was not planned as a longitudinal study but rather as a perinatal mortality study of children born in the first week of March 1958. Seven years later, however, there was a need to review children's progress in primary education, and the same sample was used, paving the way for the study to become a longitudinal study. Participants were subsequently followed up at ages 11, 16, 23, 33, 42, 46 and 50 years. Around 10,000 people are still participating in the study and there is a wealth of quantitative and qualitative data available for research purposes.

Professor Elliot notes that longitudinal studies are probably the most powerful tools available for social researchers. As the various British studies show, by tracking the same people over decades, researchers can obtain a much stronger evidence base for analysing

social phenomena than would be possible through other data collection methods.

By providing cross comparisons of several research projects, Professor Elliot introduced some interesting points about the effectiveness of cross-longitudinal analysis as well as the relative importance of the different approaches of data collection and analysis. She noted that the narrative elements of qualitative data can be particularly effective for analysing certain research topics. A good example of the benefits of narrative analysis was evident in research conducted on children's gender and career aspirations from the 1958 National Child Development Study. The research involved analysing essays written by children when they were 11 years old and showed that there was great diversity in career aspirations based on gender. This type of research demonstrates that changing the analysis of narratives from the qualitative paradigm of analysis into the quantitative paradigm of analysis can yield important results.

The strength of the quantitative data garnered from longitudinal studies was also discussed in the seminar. Professor Elliot noted that the progressive quantitative data that has been gained, for example, from the participants of the 1958 National Child Development study, is of far greater detail than could ever be collected from participants in a two- or three-hour qualitative in-depth interview. Thus, Professor Elliot argues that quantitative data collection can yield more information than many of its detractors believe, and this is especially if it is collected prospectively, as is the case for longitudinal studies.

Analysing early life data and comparisons between different cohort studies can also be very useful for researchers. This was particularly evident in the research done on changes in the value of skills over time. Professor Elliot noted, however, that researchers need to be mindful of the limitations of making comparisons between cohorts and that concepts like social class, deprivation or gender may mean different things at different times.

Professor Elliot concluded the seminar with an introduction of CLOSER (Cohorts and Longitudinal Studies Enhancement Resources)—of which she is the Director—which has been created to promote excellence and collaboration in longitudinal research. CLOSER has been working carefully to harmonise the various British longitudinal datasets, training staff and improving the quality of the metadata. We anticipate further collaboration with Professor Elliot and CLOSER into the future.

Institute seminars

An audio recording and transcript of the seminar is available at <www.aifs.gov.au/institute/seminars/2013/elliott/index.php>. The seminar slides are available on request.

Every day care: Family life and parent–child relations in Germany today



Professor Wolfgang Hantel-Quitmann

Seminar held at the Institute on 26 February 2013

Report by Carlie Dieber

The wellbeing of our children is an important indicator of family function.

This engaging seminar by Professor Wolfgang Hantel-Quitmann presented results from the 2nd World Vision Children Study (2010), which examined the wellbeing of children and the state of German families. The seminar highlighted the following, (among other) interesting findings:

Leisure

- German children's leisure time is primarily consumed by friendships, digital media use and sporting activities. Most children reported enjoying their leisure time; however, some, in lower socio-economic groups, reflected less positively on this time.
- Gender differences were noted, with females reporting more versatile activities and males predominantly focusing on media consumption.
- Media was identified as an influence on children's development. Learning via multimedia puts less emphasis on interpretation and translation than other forms of learning, and the increased use of social media has changed the way in which children interact—the number of “friends” they have has increased, and the meaning of “friend” has broadened.
- Real (or tangible) friendships still play a large role in children's development. There is an emotionality with real friends that is not found in virtual relationships. More than half of the children reported having more than five friends each, and a considerable proportion had ten or more.

Education

- Attitudes toward school were largely positive; however, interest in and satisfaction with school appeared to decrease with age.
- Views toward further education were more positive among children in higher socio-economic groups, and differed by gender, with females reporting more enjoyment and academic success.

Poverty

- When defining poverty as coping with less than 50% of the average net income, approximately 10% of the families experienced poverty.
- Some of the participants' definitions of poverty included: no vacations, visits to the pool or watching movies; wearing second-hand clothing; forgoing savings or having to work themselves to help make ends meet.
- Experience of poverty also influenced the fears of the children, with those reporting poverty conditions being quite fearful of their parents becoming unemployed.

Conflict

- Conflict is inevitable, and in the family setting should not necessarily be viewed as a sign of disharmony. Emotionally charged events and developmental life stages are more susceptible to conflict.
- Conflict was in fact viewed as being normal in some scenarios. One young participant defined “family” in these terms: “If you have breakfast together and go on vacation together and if you ... yell at each other”, suggesting the presence of conflict is part of normal life.

Family climate

- Children need to be taken seriously and encouraged in their development. Appreciation builds stronger self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Family climate is a more important factor in children's wellbeing than socio-demographic factors. Family values—such as love, appreciation, freedom and support—will positively influence children's wellbeing.

Professor Hantel-Quitmann's presentation suggests that the majority of children in Germany today are content and feel good about their circumstances. This seminar provided an interesting look at contemporary life in Germany, and while the results may not be applicable

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universally, it cannot be denied that there are many similarities to be found in Australian family life. The key message to take away is that there are many factors that affect family wellbeing; however, generally speaking, children are more likely to be happier if they are raised in an environment where they feel loved, cared for and appreciated.

The seminar slides are available on request.

Eroticising inequality: Pornography, young people and sexuality



Maree Crabb and Dr David Corlett

Seminar held at the Institute on 11 April 2013

Report by Mary Stathopoulos

Maree Crabb and Dr David Corlett presented on the research into understanding how young people are navigating pornography and their own sexuality.

Ms Crabb and Dr Corlett suggested that pornography has become more mainstream and is characterised by quite hard-core depictions of sexuality. This means that pornography now includes more exploitation and more “marginal” sexual tastes. They were clear in articulating that marginal sexual acts in themselves are not the problem. For young people, there is a lack of any alternative presentations of sexuality or sex education beyond the tropes presented in hard-core porn, to which they have greater access via the Internet. The tropes in pornography relate to women’s degradation and men’s dominance. Interviews with pornography industry insiders suggest that there is demand from both the industry and consumers to push the limits of sexuality. Particularly for the female performers, there is an expectation for them to push themselves physically, as there is a perception that this is what the audience wants.

There appears to be a lack of diversity in how sexuality is presented, and young people are not exposed to other sexual narratives or sexual scripts. Porn is no longer part of a repertoire, but a central mediator of how young

people learn about sex. The presenters discussed some of the issues that young people were exploring that had been informed by the pornography they had been exposed to or viewed, including:

- body image issues;
- sexual health issues—there is a distinct lack of condoms in pornography and certain acts can cause sexual health issues if caution isn’t taken;
- pleasure;
- negotiating consent;
- gender, power and aggression; and
- performance—there appears to be an elevation of performance over pleasure (this can be particularly problematic if pornography presents aggression as being pleasurable).

Ms Crabb and Dr Corlett suggested that young people do push back on the images and presentations of sexuality available in pornography; however, they also questioned how young people are expected to think critically about pornography when they don’t have any alternative frameworks through which to do so. Young heterosexual and same-sex attracted people discussed their sexual missteps, and a powerful message conveyed was that pornography was a ubiquitous reference point. Young women felt they needed to perform acts to please their male partners, young men felt they couldn’t measure up to male performers in pornography, and same-sex attracted young people had noticed a dominant/submissive demonstration in same-sex pornography they felt mirrored heterosexual pornography.

The presenters believe a means to correcting the current situation would be through the provision of a more conceptual approach to sex education. They seek to teach a more critical way for young people to think about pornography. Rather than teaching the mechanics of sex, teaching about consent, desire, respect and pleasure would be a more positive way forward. An important component is to teach young people how to say no and how to accept their partner saying no. This would empower young people to express their sexual desire and request sexual interaction, while being equipped to understand that rejection is not a blow to their self-esteem. An important function of having alternative expressions of sexuality is to allow young people to expand their frame of reference when it comes to making decisions about their own intimate sexual encounters.

The seminar slides are available at <www.aifs.gov.au/institute/seminars/2013/crabbecorlett/index.php>.