Institute seminars

Longitudinal and life course study: The family policy connection

Professor John Bynner
Seminar held at the Institute on 28 October 2016
Summary by Sam Morley

Professor John Bynner is the Emeritus Professor of Social Sciences in Education at the University College London Institute of Education. In this seminar, Bynner overviewed the history of British longitudinal studies and their connection with life course theory. He discussed the methodological and theoretical advances that have led to large-scale longitudinal studies now prevalent worldwide. He also provided examples of the policy value of longitudinal studies and outlined the challenges with implementing them.

Bynner outlined how initial population studies, in a relatively short amount of time, went from small-scale inquiries to large-scale national and international “research industries”. He explained how technological improvements, more sophisticated research methodologies and theoretical developments (e.g., interdisciplinary and holistic studies) contributed to their advancement. Elaborating on the diversity of current research, Bynner referred to many nations having a “portfolio of longitudinal studies” that can be linked and contrasted to advance the understanding of societal trends. While he considers the development of data linkage and aging, comparative and intergenerational studies important, he also highlighted the challenges in “spreading” this knowledge to as many countries as possible.

Bynner summarised the United Kingdom’s longitudinal life course studies and their findings about the effects of social class on life outcomes. He reiterated the importance of multi-cohort studies, believing them to be “very powerful as a means of measuring, assessing and observing how society’s changes are impacting on people’s lives and producing a whole different set of challenges and problems.”

Based on his own research, Bynner overviewed the idea of the “trajectory of disadvantage” and how poor literacy often leads to poor adult outcomes, particularly in relation to education and employment. Poignantly, he discussed the notion of the “long reach of childhood” and how what happens in adulthood can be predicted from what happens early in life.

Bynner also mapped the link between research and policy development in early childhood literacy in the UK. He argued that the dialogue between policy and evidence is a critical part of the use of these longitudinal studies. He concluded with the current challenges in implementing longitudinal studies. This included issues related to participant attrition and respondent burden, the equal distribution of research evidence and the demands of disseminating results that were meaningful for development.

What difference do child support payments make to lone-mother poverty?

Dr Christine Skinner and Dr Kay Cook
Seminar held at the Institute on 14 December 2016
Summary by Alister Lamont

In this seminar, Dr Christine Skinner (Social Policy Reader, University of Cork, UK) and Dr Kay Cook (Senior Research Fellow, RMIT University) compared findings from two large-scale studies from Australia and the United Kingdom to determine whether receiving child support payments made a difference to lone mother poverty.

Dr Skinner began the seminar by providing some context of lone-parent families in Australia and the United Kingdom. As well as highlighting how lone-parent families have steadily grown in all OECD countries in the last 30 years, she emphasised how lone parent families are much more likely to have incomes below the poverty line.

Dr Skinner then presented her findings on whether child support made a difference to lone-mother poverty by using data from the Families and Children (FACS) UK study. The sample for her analysis was of lone, non-widowed mothers who had the father of their child living outside the household. The total sample size was 1,561. The findings in her analysis highlighted that child support payments led to a 14% reduction in lone-mother poverty.

The second half of the seminar was presented by Dr Cook, who compared the findings from Dr Skinner’s UK study to an Australian study using data from the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey (HILDA). Her study included lone mothers not living with a partner who had at least one child under 18. The total sample size was 396.

Findings indicated that mothers on lower incomes were receiving more child support payments in Australia compared to the United Kingdom. It was found that mothers on lower incomes were also receiving more child support than the richest group, relatively, and that such payments led to a 21% reduction in lone-mother poverty (compared to 14% in the UK).

Overall, the presenters concluded that child support payments do make a difference to getting lone mothers out of poverty and, at the present time, child support is helping more Australian women than its equivalent in the United Kingdom.