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**The Role of Fathers in Child Cohorts**  
Scientific workshop at the  
University of Vienna, 24<sup>th</sup> of Feb. 2010

Vienna, 2010-01-07

**Scientific Summary**

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

At the early stage of children's development, most cohort studies interview the parents in order to have information on the child's environment and behaviour. In most cases mothers are more involved in the study than fathers – a finding, which raises the issue of fathers' role in cohort studies. Since they would most likely bring in another view of their child than mothers do, it seems highly desirable to get fathers involved. But seeking to add fathers' perspective is not easily done, particularly in the context of increasingly fragile family structures. Given considerable rates of separation and divorce, it raises the question whether the biological father or the every-day-caring father should be taken into account. The answer to this question depends at least partly on whether the focus is on genetic resemblance or children's day-to-day social environment and exposure. How should fathers be included in the studies? How should cohort studies deal with a couple's break-up, new unions and non-resident fathers, etc.? The aim of this workshop is to try to find answers on these questions. Specific problems connected with the role of fathers in child cohorts are to be defined, possible solutions are to be discussed, experiences and knowledge on how to handle these questions in praxis are to be shared and considered. So the

workshop should also create a scientific community working in the specific field of the role of fathers in child cohorts. Main basis of the workshop are systematic reports from relevant cohort studies, and, in addition, inputs from invited guest speakers.

The contribution of Louise Marryat (Edinburgh) is based on the “Growing Up In Scotland Study” (GUS), a large-scale longitudinal social survey of about 8000 parents. Assuming that capturing the views and experiences of fathers is a vital part of cohort studies, sweep 2 of the GUS aimed to interview, in addition to the main carer of the child, any resident partner of the main respondent (in reality, usually the father). Response rates were fairly high, and anecdotal feedback suggests that fathers were keen to participate and share their parenting experiences. But what does including these views add to the study? In the current financial climate it can be difficult to argue the case for collecting ‘another point of view’. This paper will look at the data GUS has already collected from resident fathers and how this has been used thus far, the use of proxy data, and whether there is a case for a further partner interview in the near future.

Lisa Calderwood (London) reports experiences of collecting data from non-resident fathers in four child cohort studies: especially the Millennium Cohort Study (with information from the parents of 18.818 babies born in the UK), Growing Up in Ireland, Growing Up in Australia and Fragile Families. She will also talk about how she and her team have involved resident fathers in their studies, and present some descriptive findings from their father data.

Lynn Molloy, Larisa Duffy and their colleagues (Bristol) refers on the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), which is also known as “Children of the 90s”, a long-term health research project including more than 14.000 mothers, investigating the health and development of their children. The team is very interested in the role of fathers in child cohorts and is just about to launch a major initiative enrolling fathers into ALSPAC for the first time. A summary of how this has gone will be presented.

Nicole Lucassen presents results from “Generation R”, a prospective cohort study from fetal life until young adulthood, basing on the data of 10.000 children and their parents, from Rotterdam. Her research focuses on the influence of paternal psychopathology on father-child interaction and child behavior. In this study the participation of fathers is of main interest as well, even more because mothers were actively asked to participate, whereas fathers were not as much involved in the study from the start. This contribution will also deal with the question of involvement of biological father, stepfather or both.

Pauline Raynor and colleagues report on the “Born in Bradford”: Up to the end of November 2009 just over 10.000 mothers and babies have been recruited to the cohort and 2429 fathers (approx. 25%). Details of these fathers are presented, recruitment issues and different ways of engaging them in the studies will be discussed. Face to face contact turned out to be a successful strategy. First descriptive data in relation to the mothers and characteristics of the children will be presented. As well as recruiting fathers into the main study a nested study exploring childhood obesity is running. Processes involved so far will be described: Fathers have been recruiting in a sub sample of 1000 – around 20% have replied to a questionnaire about fathers' stress (using the perceived stress scale) and also about parenting dimensions and parenting styles. Data collecting is still going on, but recent research suggests there are links with fathers' parenting style and obesity.

Beside these contributions of EUCCONET(partner)-teams two guests from Germany, Sabine Walper and Bernhard Kalicki, will present inputs about their experiences of relevant cohort studies respectively methodological considerations.