

DEVELOPMENTS AND CHALLENGES IN LONGITUDINAL STUDIES FROM CHILDHOOD CONFERENCE, CLARE COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE, 22ND-24TH SEPTEMBER 2010

Summary

1. The scientific meeting on 22nd -24th September 2010 in Clare College, Cambridge, addressed the EUCCONET aims of:
 - raising the visibility of birth cohort studies
 - enhancing their quality
 - initiating new and in-depth collaboration to share expertise
2. Experts in longitudinal enquiry from across the developmental, health, social and statistical sciences presented papers with a major focus on early childhood, its impact on functioning later in life and on the methodology and practice of longitudinal study.
3. The meeting was funded through a co-funding arrangement between EUCCONET and the Think Tank Longview, and organised jointly by EUCCONET and the international 'Society for Longitudinal and Life Course Studies' (SLLS), for which this was the inaugural meeting. 168 academics participated of which 141 were based in Europe and 27 in other countries, including 21 from the USA. The conference was oversubscribed and 5 people joined a waiting list for places.
4. Support for EUCCONET participants was provided in the form of 120 bursaries, of which 108 were awarded to European participants and 12 to participants outside Europe. Priority in the allocation was given to early career researchers and PhD students.
5. The facilities for the conference, supplied by Clare College, Cambridge, were excellent, comprising a large auditorium able to accommodate just over 160 people and four break-out rooms for group sessions and rooms for poster presentations. Accommodation was provided in the College.
6. To support networking at the conference, two receptions were held associated with the poster presentations in the evenings of 22nd and 23rd September. On Thursday 23rd September there was a conference dinner in the Great Hall of the college, at which the newly appointed Chief Executive of the 'Economic and Social Research Council' (ESRC), Professor Paul Boyle, former member of the SLLS Executive Committee, gave the after-dinner talk.
7. The conference was preceded by a methodological workshop on longitudinal data analysis offered free of charge to participants. Conference proceedings were organised in terms of plenary sessions, symposia, 4 streams of parallel group sessions and two poster sessions. There were three keynote talks (Professors Karl Ulrich Mayer (Berlin and Yale), Carol Dezateux (London), Bren Neale (Leeds); 16 symposia; 10 themed individual paper sessions; 2 poster sessions .
8. Feedback from the conference participants was supplied through completion of a short questionnaire. Of the 70 participants who responded, 74% rated the conference 'excellent', 26% 'good', none judged it 'average', 'not very good' or 'poor' and only 2% judged the conference too long and unbalanced between different types of presentation.
9. The meeting may be viewed as a memorable and highly significant event in the development of the field of longitudinal and life course studies, to which ESF through EUCCONET made a major contribution

Scientific Report

Background

1. The Scientific meeting brought together experts in longitudinal enquiry from across the developmental, health and social sciences. They addressed longstanding and emerging issues and challenges in the developing field of longitudinal and life course studies.

2. Longitudinal studies are the pre-eminent means of extending understanding of human development across the stages of life from 'cradle to grave'. This is concerned with the transitions through which the human life course is constructed through infancy, childhood, adolescence/youth, adulthood and old age (Alwin, 1995; Elder and Giele, 2009; Heinz *et al*, 2009.) Of central importance in the shaping influences involved are:

- the development of human agency through personality development - involving the interaction of individual biology with the environment
- 'linked lives' - comprising social relations within the family and outside
- history and culture - comprising location in historical time and geographical space
- 'timing' - comprising the intersection of age, period and cohort effects on the record of development for any given individual at any given life course stage

3. There is much expertise across the world in the conduct of large scale cohort studies, including studies that have followed individuals from the earliest stages of life, through to adulthood and old age. Spurred by the Millennium there has been a further burgeoning of interest in multi-purpose cohort studies that embrace both academic research and policy domains. The consequence has been expansion of interest in investment in the development of new and old *longitudinal research resources* (Bynner and Joshi, 2009), including the establishment of new birth cohort and age cohort studies and the expansion of household panel studies.

4. The data such studies yield enable the changing nature of society to be monitored through the experience of individuals in particular eras (Ferri, Bynner and Wadsworth, 2003). The processes linking earlier circumstances and experiences to later outcomes can be modelled through the course of cohort members' lives. Extending data collection to cohort members' children offers further opportunities for the investigation of continuities and discontinuities in the intergenerational transfer of resources and the elucidation of such phenomena as, e.g. 'Cycles of Disadvantage' (Rutter and Madge, 1976). Comparing such studies between countries offers the opportunity to test hypotheses across different national contexts and to assess the effects on the life course of different policy regimes.

5. The scientific meeting capitalised on the establishment of the new international *Society for Longitudinal and Life Course Studies (SLLS)*, sharing, with EUCCONET, the aims of raising the visibility, and enhancing the quality, of existing longitudinal studies and initiating new and in-depth interdisciplinary collaboration on scientific topics. Following a series of successful conferences, addressing a range of issues in longitudinal and life course studies, *Longview*, a Think Tank devoted to the promotion of longitudinal research, and sponsor of SLLS, joined forces with EUCCONET to organise a scientific meeting that would also serve as the inaugural conference of the Society. The meeting offered the opportunity to share expertise in the methodology and practice of longitudinal enquiry by bringing together the producers and users of major longitudinal research resources across Europe and outside. An added bonus was the pre-conference workshop on longitudinal data analysis in Clare College

offered by Tim Croudace (University of Cambridge, Department of Psychometric Epidemiology) to conference participants free of charge.

6. The conference attracted 168 participants of which 120 received EUCCONET bursaries to meet conference accommodation and travel costs and 48 paid their own way. 99 women and 69 men with a wide range of age and experience, extending from PhD students to emeritus professors, took part. One third of participants were under the age of 35. Of the countries represented 95 (57%) participants were from the UK, 47 (28%) from other European countries and 26 (15%) from countries outside Europe.

CONFERENCE ATTENDANCE BY COUNTRY

Country	Bursary	Paid own way	Country	Bursary	Paid own way
<i>Europe</i>			<i>Outside Europe</i>		
UK	66	29	USA	9	12
Germany	15	3	Canada	1	2
Netherlands	2	1	Brazil	1	0
Norway	9	0	Ne w Zealand	1	0
France	5	0			
Portugal	1	0	Total	12	14
Denmark	4	0			
Italy	1	0			
Belgium	2	0	GRAND TOTAL	120	48
Austria	1	0			
Luxembourg	1	0			
Finland	1	0			
Ireland	0	1			
Total	108	34			

Programme

7. The first 'Call for Papers' was circulated on 9th February followed by three further 'Calls'. Proposals were invited for abstracts for symposia, individual papers and posters. Abstracts for 160 presentations were received from which 109 papers and 34 posters were accepted. Drawing up the conference programme was undertaken by the Society's conference committee, a subcommittee of the newly elected Executive Committee. The chairman of EUCCONET was made an honorary member.

8. EUCCONET interest extended across all the conference core themes identified in the Call:

- life course stages, developmental processes, transitions, outcomes and functioning spanning the early years, adolescence and youth, adulthood and old age
- household and family dynamics
- intergenerational transfers
- social biographical enquiry, 'mixed' methods and comparative research methods
- innovative methodology (design, measurement, analysis and practice) in quantitative and qualitative research modes

9. Three distinguished keynote speakers presented their own perspectives on these themes drawing on their work in the social and biological/health sciences:

Professor Karl Ulrich-Mayer (Yale University Director of the German Life History study and the newly appointed Director of the Leibnitz Institute), on "Life Course and Social Policy"

Professor Carol Dezateux (Institute of Child Health, University College London and Principal Investigator of the potential UK 2012 birth cohort study) on “Developments and Challenges in Longitudinal Studies from Childhood”

Professor Bren Neale (University of Leeds and Director of the UK “Timescapes” project) on “Journey through Time: time as a methodological strategy in qualitative longitudinal research”.

10. EUCCONET presented the work of the Network in a specially convened two hour plenary session comprising 7 presentations. The opportunity was used to test developmentally plans for future workshops in particular topic areas. EUCCONET also organised one of the conference’s two poster sessions, giving a show case to member studies’ longitudinal research designs and findings.

11. As a means of bridging the communications gap between what have typically seen as separate modes of research (qualitative and quantitative), a proposal was supported from Professors Frank Furstenberg (University of Pennsylvania) and Walter Heinz (University of Bremen) to convene a special symposium on social biographical and ‘mixed mode’ longitudinal enquiry with a view to producing a Special Issue of the newly established international Journal, *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies*. The UK Economic and Social Research Council-funded ‘Timescapes’ qualitative longitudinal research programme also presented a symposium linked to Professor Neale’s key note lecture with a major emphasis on families. A particular feature of the presentations from the five studies represented was the archiving of the data from the programme.

12. Apart from the qualitative longitudinal research and EUCCONET symposia, 13 other symposia were approved comprising papers brought together around common themes. Over three quarters were focused on development in childhood, and adolescence including the long term influence of early circumstances and experience on later life: ‘childhood influences on later quality of life’; ‘poor children’s attitudes and behaviour’; ‘the role of motivation and self-concept in pathways to adult hood’; ‘anti social behaviour across childhood adolescence and adult hood’; ‘becoming adults in the US Britain and Finland’; ‘adolescent conduct and emotional problems. Another symposium was devoted to ‘Understanding Society’, the new UK household panel study expanded to 40,000 households and scheduled to include shortly the children of the panel. Another symposium addressed the study of military service in the life course.

13. The individually approved papers were similarly grouped thematically in 10 sessions, most again addressing issues directly or indirectly concerning childhood: ‘health and wealth in the lifecycle’; ‘childhood inequalities and outcomes’; ‘family pathways and functioning’; ‘child growth and behaviour’. Wellbeing was another theme addressed in papers on ‘disadvantage and depression’; ‘mental health in the life course’; ‘life course attributes and outcomes’ and ‘occupation and position’. There were also two sessions on longitudinal research methodology.

14. Apart from the EUCCONET poster session, a second poster session comprised posters addressing similar themes to those of the individually presented papers.

15. All papers presented individually or in symposia, or as posters, are being reviewed for possible development for publication in the Society’s on-line international journal, *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies (LLCS)* www.journal.longviewuk.com

16. Finally the opportunity was taken to use specially designated slots in the programme for participant convened meetings, including the EUCCONET Steering Committee meeting, the Society's Inaugural Annual General Meeting and first Executive Committee meeting. The Conference Sub –Committee, responsible for agreeing the venue for next year's conference, and the LLCS Editorial Committee also held meetings.

17. The conference presentations made a significant contribution not only to scientific knowledge but to the practice (design and implementation) of longitudinal research and national strategy for building longitudinal resources. Themes that had particular resonance included:

- medical vs social science orientations and coverage in data collection
- sustainability of large scale cohort studies, often now encompassing up to 100,000 individuals
- governance needed to ensure that a study meets given scientific priorities through advisory machinery and consultation
- means of ensuring continuity of coverage from one follow-up to the next, while recognising the need for new data to address emerging scientific issues - also impacting on the frequency of follow-ups and the duration of data collection;
- ensuring adequate coverage to achieve scientific objectives while not over burdening respondents
- enhancing ecological validity by area study vs population representativeness through national probability samples
- establishing new longitudinal studies reflecting new scientific priorities such as bio banks and cohort study perinatal investigation, vs maintenance of existing studies to cover the whole life course
- policy interest in longitudinal data and immediate outcomes of developmental processes in the light of policy interventions vs scientific integrity directed at the testing of hypotheses to take theory forward
- challenges for comparative research across countries and across cohorts in maintaining measurement equivalence and interpretive validity

Assessment

18. Participants judged the content of presentations and discussions excellent, matching the kinds of goals they had hoped to achieve through their conference attendance. Participation in the establishment of a learned society of much importance to their professional development and needs gave added value to their participation.

19. Appraisal of the conference format and coverage was very positive with the balance between keynote talks, symposia, papers and posters judged good by 55% and excellent by 43%. 98% also rated the length of the conference as just right. The main criticism was that discussion time was too short, mentioned by 27%, and a similar percentage were critical of the number of papers per session considering it 'average' or 'not very good'. But this still compares with the 78% who considered it 'excellent' or 'good'. Already the feedback has led to the decision that next year's conference (to be held in Bielefeld, Germany) should be expanded from the current two and a half days to three days. The organisers of next year's conference will be taking this feedback into account in their own planning.

20. The conference moved the field of longitudinal and Life Course Studies forward on a number of fronts:

- Recognition of the value of the life course perspective in understanding human development through the recognition of the significance of change in the social and physical environment as reflected in 'cohort effects'
- Appreciation of the need to research more fully the interplay between environmental and biogenetic factors in life course development implying the collection of DNA among other 'biomarkers'
- More widespread use of qualitative (social biographical) methods alongside quantitative (survey) methods in life course research to reveal the dynamics of life course processes and the meaning of 'linked lives'

21. At a more strategic level the successful inauguration of an international interdisciplinary organisation in these fields has created a critical mass. From such beginnings bridges between countries and disciplines can be built and strengthened. The network of contacts will bear fruit in years to come and will be evident in the Society's planned series of annual conferences and in the contributions to *Longitudinal and Life Course Studies*. LLCS will be carrying peer reviewed papers resulting from the presentations and conversations at this conference.

22. The international and interdisciplinary mix of participants was complemented by the excellent balance between early career and more experienced researchers. The opportunities taken for sharing and learning from others' experience were extensive, offering good foundations for collaborative research in this relatively new field. Such possibilities were enhanced further by the two receptions and such facilities as the pre-conference data analysis workshop. Pre-conference workshops are scheduled to be a permanent feature of subsequent conferences.

23. We conclude that the conference achieved its goals of supplying a platform for communications and laying the foundations for the emerging area of interdisciplinary and holistic *Life Course Science*. The opportunities the conference provided for exchanging information and sharing expertise in the design, conduct and scope of longitudinal enquiry identifies the conference as a valuable initiative for EUCCONET to support through the ESF funding arrangements. The range of studies represented at the conference from across the world, many of whose subjects have now reached mature adulthood and old age, will add further to the potential scope of EUCCONET's interest across the whole life course and internationally.

References

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