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WELLCHI NETWORK

The well-being of children: The impact of changing family forms, working conditions of parents, social policy and legislative measures

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Report on the contribution to the Workshop

**The relationship between children and non-resident fathers
and its impact on their quality of life**

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WELLCHI NETWORK PROJECT

Workshop 6

**“The relationship between children and non-resident fathers
and its impact on their quality of life”**

NOVA – Norwegian Social Research
Oslo, 1st – 2nd December, 2006

AIMS

The workshop took as a starting point that it is a trend across Europe, albeit more pronounced in the North, that increasing numbers of parents with dependent children are living apart. While there has been extensive research on the levels of living among lone parents and their children in many countries, we still have little knowledge about the situation of non-resident parents – who, in the vast majority of cases, are fathers. The aim of the workshop was to address two main questions:

- (1) how do parental break-ups influence the financial and social circumstances of non-resident parents?
- (2) To what extent do non-resident parents maintain contact with their children, and how does this vary between countries, and between fathers and children with different characteristics?

In addition, the workshop invited papers that discussed how institutional arrangements can help facilitate contact between non-resident parents and their children. Speakers were invited from the network, but also from amongst international experts who could present new insights from their research in these fields.

THE WORKSHOP

Session 1: Negotiating contact

The first session dealt with negotiation processes on contact arrangements between parents in post-separated families. The first paper was presented by **Alexander Masardo** from the Dept. Social and Policy Sciences, University of Bath, and dealt with fathers' experiences of negotiating and managing shared residence in Britain and France. Shared residence is defined as a form of family life in which children reside with each parent for roughly equal amounts for time. As Masardo pointed out, this form of arrangement brings the nomenclature of a resident/ non- resident parent divide into question. The methods used in this

comparative study were qualitative in-depth interviews with 20 British and 15 French fathers. In terms of comparative methodology, this represents a most similar systems design. The data showed a great diversity within the cycles of care, not only in the days on which changeovers occur, but in their timing and logistics. The differences between the two national samples were a tendency towards longer blocks of residence in France than in Britain. With regard to the legal framework, three quarters of the British sample had no recourse to a lawyer or family courts. The French sample where more evenly split. Feelings of vulnerability and the need for certainty is according to Masardo key to understanding the motivations of respondents and the ways in which negotiations proceeded. Parents in the sample could feel frustration with an administrative apparatus that was unable to accommodate the lived reality of their family lives. The paper thus concluded that a resident/ non resident parent dichotomy may not be helpful where children have a dual residence, and in some instances it may even serve to discriminate against this model of family life.

Paper number two was presented by Liz **Trinder** from the University of East Anglia, UK, and centred on contact and child well-being in higher conflict families. The sample studied was made up of the 10% of British post-separated families who go through court procedures. 250 families were surveyed by structured phone interviews. The level of parental conflict is high in these families, and a crucial question is whether or not frequent contact is good for children under these circumstances. The analyses showed that there is no significant relationship between the frequency of contact and the child's well-being on the bivariate level. Also the multivariate analyses indicated that there is no direct correlation between the frequency of contact and contact being harmful or helpful for the child. Trinder however pointed to certain limitations in the study, and urged more research to be undertaken before conclusions can be drawn on this sensitive topic.

The third paper in session I was presented by Gill **Highet** and Lynn **Jamieson**, both from the University of Edinburgh, UK. The paper was entitled "*Children's relationships with a 'non-resident parent': exploring the interplay of feelings, material circumstances and wider social networks*", and was based on the Scottish study "Cool with Change". Here, 55 semi-structured face-to-face interviews and 19 follow-ups with young people aged 11 and 14 from Glasgow were conducted. The focus lies on the children's perception of their relationship towards their non-resident parent – mainly the father. The paper pointed to a variety of relationships: the settled relationship, ongoing difficulties, initial problems solved and children without contact with their absent parents. These relationships vary in terms of the emotiveness of the language children use to describe them, by the family's financial circumstances, by the support displayed by the wider family/ social network, and by

children's feeling of being "special" to their non-resident parent. The paper stresses the importance children place on the feeling "to fit" in the absent parents life and to have some kind of special position. However, it has to be considered that the relationship analysed over time shows a strong dynamic and is subject to a complex interplay of social and material factors.

Session 2: All about the money?

The presentation of the second session focused on financial aspects of the relationship between non-resident parent and children.

Paper number one – *"Expenses, Norms or practical considerations? The effects of income and education on non-resident fathers' contact with their children"* – in this session was presented by Ragni Hege **Kitterød**, from Statistics Norway, Norway. The analysis was based on a 2004 survey designed to evaluate the effects of the recent reform of the Norwegian maintenance scheme. One aim of the reform was to encourage more paternal involvement in child care. On this background, Kitterød explores the effects of the fathers' socio-economic resources on his contact with his children on a monthly basis and during vacations. It is found that there is a positive association between the number of contact days and the father's income, but the effect is not linear. Including travelling time to the child's residence slightly reduces the effect of paternal income, but it is still significant. Most models show a positive effect of the father's education on monthly contact. Receiving social assistance has a significant negative effect both on the number of contact days and on whether there has been contact during the last month or not. Financial circumstances, then, matter greatly for levels of contact, even when distance between the parental homes is controlled for.

John **Ermisch** from the University of Essex, UK, presented the second paper in this session, *"Child support and Non-resident fathers' contact with their children"*. He took as a starting point that there is a positive correlation between contact and payment of child support, but we do not know why this is so. The analysis first presents a theoretical model in which the contact between father and child and child support are jointly determined by non-cooperative interaction between the parents. The author suggests that the mother has "child-contact rights" and is in a so-called "gate keeper position". The father, on the other hand, "trades" child support to the mother for contact-time. This form of "negotiation" is based on the fact that father's child support – in Great Britain – in practice is voluntary. As basic assumptions Ermisch states that each of the parent's welfare depends on the expenditure on children, their own consumption and the amount of contact between father and child. The expenditure on children is considered a public good to divorced/separated parents. That implies that the

father may make an unconditional transfers to the mother in addition to “contact-related” payments. At the margin, additional father-child contact time reduces the mother’s welfare. After a certain amount of contact between father and child, the mother does not have an interest in more contact because it does not increase child support payments in an equivalent way. Higher income increases the father’s demand for contact. At the same time it reduces the mother’s willingness to supply contact. The assumption is: if the mother is rich there is less need to trade contact for money. If the father is rich he is more willing to trade money for contact. In theoretical conclusion, the effects of each parent’s income on non-resident father’s contact with his child are found to depend on whether or not he chooses to make unconditional payments to the mother. If he does, then the father’s income and the mother’s non-labour income should have exactly the same effect on the frequency of father-child contact.

Presenting research findings from the British Household Panel and the British Omnibus Survey (ONS) the author tests his hypotheses concerning child support payments and the frequency of contact empirically. The results show that among middle-income fathers, higher father’s income increases the probability of making financial transfers and it also increases the frequency of contact with his children among fathers who pay some child support. Among fathers who do not pay child support, a higher mother’s wage is associated with more father-child contact, but higher other income in her new household is associated with less contact between non-resident father and his child. Ermish draws the conclusion that a higher binding child support order reduces the frequency of contact due to lack of negotiation, or better due to lack of “trade off” opportunities, between cash and contact. This suggests, according to the author, that if the reform of the child support scheme in the UK does succeed in putting more payment orders in place and enforcing them more effectively, father’s frequency of contact with their children would decline among fathers paying less than the ordered amount before the reform. Yet, child welfare could still increase since higher incomes to mothers offset less frequent father-contact.

Session 3: Legal framework and political intervention

The third session integrated aspects of legal and political frameworks as well as measures of intervention.

Benoit **Bastard**, from the Centre de sociologie des organisations (CNRS/Science Po), France, talked about «contact centres» in Europe. Contact centres are environments where children can meet their non-custodial parents – mainly non-resident fathers – after parental break-up. Professionals and non-professionals assist children and their parents. Making use of contact centres is mainly based on court orders. The “new” paradigm behind these centres is the increased perceived importance of contact between non-resident parents and their children, even if this incurs certain costs. Even in cases of violent behaviour towards mother and child, courts try to make some kind of father-child contact possible ordering contact in these institutions. This new practice of ordering contact is based on the European Charter, on the one hand, and research evidence on the other. Nevertheless, Mr. Bastard argues there is no strong or systematic research whether contact is always in the best interest of the child, so that this does not yet justify the implementation of contact centres as measures to ensure contact at any costs. Different countries across Europe have different forms of contact centres. In the UK and France the reasons for implementing contact centres were similar. Courts had difficulties in implementing a neutral place to enable contact in high-conflict families. Mr. Bastard states that contact centres were born in the “shadow of courts” in order to offer judges solutions in difficult contact cases – that is where self regulation between parents fails. In conclusion, Mr. Bastard questions the justification of contact centres. He argues that they are solutions for judges rather than for children or fathers. Instead of perceiving contact centres as help and support, fathers consider them as “prisons” and constraints on the contact with their children.

Mavis **Maclean** from the University of Oxford presented the second paper of section III: “*The UK Children and Adoption Act 2006*”. The presentation focused on the legal framework of contact in conflicted families after separation and divorce, and the fact that the British government has increasingly focused on fathers’ rights to contact with their non-resident children. This development has resulted the Children and Adoption Act 2006. Within this legislation the child’s welfare is the paramount goal rather than competing parental rights. The new Act implemented in the UK now makes services – such as parenting classes or anger management courses – compulsory. In consequence, that means that those responsible have to make these services accessible, and also to implement sanctions if parents fail to comply. Fathers’ rights groups claim the presumption for contact and an even share of the child’s time between the parents as a starting point for negotiation. However, the

author argues that not all fathers have “bad deals” concerning contact arrangements. Only 10% of the cases go through court procedures and even in the case of high conflict judges hardly ever deny fathers contact. Maclean warns against treating a minority of fathers – those going to court – as the average father within law and within public discussion. Further, she states that the court can manage the adults’ disputes concerning contact between non-resident parent and child, however, that does not necessarily serve the welfare of the child. Maclean concludes that simply ordering contact between non-resident parents and children by court is not sufficient. The court needs further to encourage cooperation and support parents with coping strategies.

Session 4: The circumstances of non-resident fathers

The fourth session focused on the wider social circumstances of father after parental break-up. The first paper in this session was presented by Ms. Carina **Siefken**, University of Göttingen, Germany, and was entitled “*Absent fathers – more cash than care? Non-resident fathering in Germany, Great Britain and Norway*”. The starting point of her argument is the inconsistent situation some fathers are confronted with after family dissolution. On the one hand, fathers are increasingly expected to spend more time and have a closer relationship with their children. On the other hand, social changes have led to an increasing number of families where the father does not live with his children. This development begs the question of why some men allocate both time and money towards their non-resident children while others deny their paternal responsibilities? In order to answer this question, Siefken compares Germany, Great Britain and Norway representing different national surroundings of non-resident fathering. Germany promotes a rather conservative family policy. This is also shown in the strong bond of financial obligations concerning non-resident fathers. Paternal rights have been rather neglected. A reform in 1998, however, marked a moderate shift by acknowledging fathers’ rights. The reform entailed new rights concerning custody also for fathers who were not married to the mother. Within the system courts do play an important role unlike in the UK and Norway. Great Britain, on the contrary, does not have a coherent family policy. The responsibility for children is mainly based on the individual responsibility of parents, or in other words: “once a parent always a parent”. State intervention is kept on a minimum level. Thus, the British system does not have an advanced maintenance scheme unlike in Germany and Norway. Further, court decisions are rather marginalised. Parents are supposed to find their own arrangement. Male breadwinner assumptions, with their focus on duties rather than rights, result in a strong expectation towards non-resident fathers to provide financially for their children. Similar to Germany, fathers’ rights have mainly been neglected.

Norway is characterized by a strong implementation of children's rights. This includes the right to have a relationship with both parents beyond the parental relationship. Gender equality has a high priority on the political agenda which is also reflected in the debate about fathers' rights not only after parental separation. Like in Great Britain, parents in Norway are encouraged to carve out their own agreements. In contrast to England, however, there is a mandatory mediation scheme in Norway, now opened for non-married parents going through separation. Holding a comparative perspective on German, Great Britain and Norway, Siefken analyses how non-resident fathering within these welfare states is shaped and how variations within and between nations can be explained. Using quantitative data sets from each nation, research evidence concerning contact and maintenance payments shows variations in allocation of frequencies both within and between different national settings. Ms. Siefken emphasised that this is work in progress, and that she will develop her categories as well as her empirical analysis further in the future.

Professor Frode **Thuen** from the University of Bergen, Norway, presented the final paper on The situation of non-resident fathers in Norway. Based on a quantitative survey, he analyses the psycho-social aspects and conflicts comparing non-resident fathers and non-resident mothers. Interviews were held six years after parental separation. Thuen's findings suggest that children living with their fathers after parental break-up show more deviant behaviour than those living with lone mothers. Further, figures suggest that there are no gender specific differences in the occurrence of serious conflicts: 56% of the parents interviewed state serious conflicts with the other parent. Thuen presents differences between non-resident fathers and mothers concerning different aspects. Research findings concerning the amount of time spent with the child on a regular (monthly) basis as well as contacts during vacations show certain gender differences. Mothers have a higher frequency of contact than non-resident fathers. Interestingly enough, there are no gender differences observable in the satisfaction with the contact arrangement. The results suggest that fathers are as satisfied with their contact frequency as non-resident mothers, even though the latter have more contact with their children. Further, the research findings state that a new family affects the frequency of contact between the non-resident parent and child. There are no significant gender differences. The frequency of visits decreases on a regular basis, whereas the contact practice during vacations is not influenced by a new family. There are also gender differences in the coping with separation. 28 per cent of fathers, and 48 per cent of mothers (as compared to 10 and 20 per cent respectively of the general population) report psychological problems. Determinants of these psychological problems are conflicts with the resident parent, restricted visitation, dissatisfaction with the contact arrangement, longing for and worrying about the child as well the lack of a new partnership.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite a growing debate about families after separation and divorce, so far, little is known about non-resident fathering and its variations. Within the workshop the discussion was taken further with this rather new perspective on fathers. The main achievement of the workshop was to bring together researchers who work with similar topics, but who approach them from different angles and with different methodologies. The two main topics – contact between non-resident fathers and their children, and the financial and other circumstances of non-resident fathers – tend to be discussed within different academic circles and sometimes with limited exchange of ideas. The workshop brought together researchers from both topics, and results and perspectives were presented using a variety of methods: interviews with resident and non-resident parents, in-depth interviews with parents and children, comparative methodologies, various types of quantitative data, and (unusually in this context) economic theory of the family. The relatively small format of the workshop, combined with ample time for discussions after each paper, allowed for lively exchange of ideas between researchers with different backgrounds and approaches.

Two directions for future research emerged from this workshop: first, there is a strong need for more comparative studies research on the two issues being discussed. Family change and non-resident parenting represent similar challenges across Europe. The fact that different countries have applied different solutions to similar problems should provide a valuable source of experiences and data for evaluating various types of policy initiatives. Policy makers, lawyers and social workers in different countries think differently both about the nature of these problems and how desirable solutions should be defined. Historical trajectories influence perceptions about current trends, as indicated in Carina Siefken's paper. Further, apparently similar initiatives are practiced differently in different countries, as shown by Alexander Masardo. Studying these topics comparatively is difficult, however, given the shortage of comparative data.

Second, the workshop made clear the need to investigate views and opinions held by children. Even if policy initiatives are seemingly directed to the best interests of children, in the real world policy makes also have to address a number of other concerns as well. For example, the paper by Benoit Bastard shows that policies are also initiated from the interests of the judiciary. Further, we are still only at the beginning to understand how children are influenced by – and how they deal with – various contact practices with non-resident parents, with different parenting/ fathering styles in separated families, and parental conflict. The most

crucial issue in this field of research is how the best interest of children can be defined and accommodated in different situations. In order to understand this, we need evidence of how various policy initiatives affect children by comparing children who are subject to different initiatives both within and across countries. In order to understand this, we need both longitudinal studies that follow children over time – preferably into adulthood – and also cross-sectional studies that map children’s situation here and now. Some work of this kind has been done in the UK, as exemplified here in the papers by Trinder and Highet and Jamieson, but this research is still in its infancy in most other countries.

WORKSHOP 6 OF THE WELLCHI NETWORK

“The relationship between children and non-resident fathers and its impact on their quality of life”.

1-2 December 2006

Hosted by

NOVA – Norwegian Social Research

Venue: Clarion Hotel Savoy, Universitetsgaten 11, 0164 Oslo

FRIDAY, 1ST DECEMBER 2006

8.15- Registration. Coffee available.

9.00 Opening by NOVA Director Magnus Rindal

9.15 Introduction by Network Director Lluís Flaquer, University of Barcelona

9.45. Session 1: Negotiating contact

Chair: Morten Blekesaune

Alexander Masardo, University of Bath, UK

Research on father's experiences of the negotiation and management of shared residence in Britain and France.

10.30 Coffee

11.00 Session 1 cont'd

Liz Trinder, University of East Anglia, UK

The relationship between child and adult wellbeing and the amount/frequency of contact based on a study of high-conflict families.

Gill Highet and Lynn Jamieson, University of Edinburgh, UK

Children's relationships with a 'non-resident parent': exploring the interplay of feelings, material circumstances and wider social networks

12.45 Lunch

14.00 Session 2: All about the money?

Chair: Claude Martin

Ragni Hege Kitterød, SSB, Norway

Expenses, norms or practical considerations? The effect of income and education on non-resident fathers' contact with their children.

14.45 Coffee

15.00 Session 2 cont'd

John Ermisch, University of Essex, UK

Child Support and Non-resident Fathers' Contact with their Children

16.00 END of day 1

Evening: dinner at Restaurant Maud's [<http://www.mauds.no>, website in Norwegian only]

SATURDAY 2ND DECEMBER 2006

09.30

Session 3: Legal framework and political interventions

Chair: Gunhild R. Farstad

Benoit Bastard, Centre de sociologie des organisations (CNRS / Sciences Po), France

On "contact centres" in Europe

10.15 Mavis Maclean, University of Oxford, UK

The UK Children and Adoption Act 2006

11.00 Coffee

11.30 Carina Siefken, University of Göttingen, Germany

Absent fathers- more cash than care? Non-resident fathering in Germany, Great Britain and Norway.

12.30 Lunch

13.30 Session 4: the circumstance of non-resident fathers

Chair: Gunhild R. Farstad

Frode Thuen, University of Bergen, Norway

The situation of non-resident fathers in Norway

14.15 END of workshop

Participants at workshop 6 of the WELLCHI network:

”The relationship between children and non- resident fathers and its impact on their quality of life”

1-2 December 2006

Attendees

Institution

Speakers

Alexander Masardo

University of Bath, UK

Ragni Hege Kitterød

Statistics Norway (SSB), Oslo, Norway

John Ermisch

University of Essex, UK

Carina Siefken

University of Göttingen, Germany

Lynn Jamieson

University of Edinburgh, UK

Gill Highet

University of Edinburgh, UK

Benoit Bastard

Centre de Sociologie des Organisations, Paris, France

Liz Trinder

University of East Anglia, UK

Frode Thuen

University of Bergen, Norway

Mavis Maclean

University of Oxford, UK

WELLCHI members

Morten Blekesaune

University of Essex, UK

Lluís Flaquer

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

Claude Martin

IEP de Rennes and Université de Rennes 1, France

Blanche Le Bihan
LAPSS-ENSP,
National School of Public Health, Rennes, France

Invited guests

Lihong Huang
NOVA -
Norwegian Social Research, Oslo, Norway

Knut Oftung
University of Oslo, Norway

Charlotte Koren
NOVA -
Norwegian Social Research, Oslo, Norway

Randi Kjeldstad
Statistics Norway, Oslo, Norway

Kristin Skjørten
ISF -
Institute for Social Research, Oslo, Norway

Jan Lyngstad
Statistics Norway (SSB), Oslo, Norway

Responsible for the administration of
the workshop

Gunhild R. Farstad
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