Editorial: Life course research around the world

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This issue of the journal bears witness to the growing international scope for longitudinal and life course research. The work published here includes analyses of data from separate single countries, Finland and Australia; and an article by authors in the Netherlands using data from 12 European countries, New Zealand, Canada and USA. The study profile is from an international consortium, LIFEPATH, working on complex longitudinal datasets from nine developed countries. Our methodological research note (by Suzanne Walton and colleagues) reports on the development of an integrated approach to developing and scripting questionnaires for longitudinal cohort studies and surveys, which should have applications beyond the UK Life Study for which it was developed. International comparisons and collaborations are not without pitfalls, but the Society for Longitudinal and Life Course studies is well placed to recognise and address them. At the time of writing, the Society has members in 22 countries on five continents, from whom we would welcome submissions and to whose geographical coverage we would like to expand.

'The biology of inequalities in health: the LIFEPATH project' whose profile is presented by Paolo Vineis and colleagues, has a huge international and interdisciplinary scope. The consortium is investigating the biological pathways that lead to socioeconomic inequalities in healthy ageing, and in mortality. The existence of these inequalities in rich countries suggests there is room for improvement. They present a challenge for public health policy, and social and biological researchers. The European Research Council funding brings together a consortium of 55 investigators working on longitudinal datasets. They are from nine countries, in Europe, USA and Australia. Many of the datasets contain social and behavioural data as well as biological information. The latter extend to epigenomics, proteomics and other 'omics' which may be involved in the pathways through which the 'social gets under the skin'. The project has taken on a programme of collaboration, harmonisation of data and synthesis of causal modeling approaches from both social and biological sciences. Readers of this journal will be interested to read of some of the early findings presented here and to follow the project's progress in the years to come.

The article by Yu Han, Aart Liefbroer and Cees Elzinga, 'Comparing methods of classifying life courses: sequence analysis and latent class analysis' is primarily methodological. It usefully and helpfully explains two methods increasingly used for handling sequence data: Sequence Analysis and Latent Class Analysis. They demonstrate results in exemplar data on women's transitions across partnership and parenthood between the ages of 18 and 30, in a number of developed countries in the 1980s and 1990s. Although the two methods generally produce the same results, there was one way in which they differed: whether childbearing after cohabitation should be treated as a separate category to unmarried motherhood. This reflects an issue of substantive interest dividing scholars on either side of the Atlantic – whether cohabiting mothers are more like other partnered mothers than other unmarried mothers. It is notable that the USA provides a substantial subset of the observations in this study. This illustrates the sort of pitfalls to be aware of when pooling international data.

The paper by Pasi Haapakorva, Tiina Ristikari & Mika Gissler, 'The impact of parental employment trajectories on children's early adult education and employment trajectories…' uses Sequence Analysis for the trajectories of young adults in Finland. They were all born in 1987 and are followed through education and (un)employment between ages 18 and 25. The database is an administrative record that also yields histories to classify their parents' movements in and out of employment over those 25 years. Lack of employment in the parental generation was strongly associated with disadvantaged outcomes in the second generation.

The same Finnish birth cohort of 1987 also provides the data for the paper by Miia Bask, and colleagues, 'Psychiatric diagnoses as grounds for disability pension among former child welfare clients'. Rather than Sequence Analysis, they use logistic regression to link childhood circumstances with disability in early adulthood. As the dataset only extends to age 25, the term 'disability pension'

should be understood as a cash benefit awarded on the grounds of incapacity to work, rather than an old age pension. The authors are particularly interested in using the disability benefit records to identify poor mental health. Children who had been under some form of social protection (whether with or away from their parents) – the 'child welfare' cases – were at higher risk of getting the disability payment as young adults, attenuated only somewhat by other evidence on parental situation in childhood. The records also show which psychiatric diagnosis applied to the young 'pensioners', and there were some differences between genders in the relationship of diagnosis to family background.

Abuse and neglect in childhood, even if they attract official social protection, may cast a long shadow on adult wellbeing. Survey evidence about maltreatment is seldom available from administrative sources. Research tends to rely on retrospective data, since it is difficult to ask families about severe difficulties when they are happening. James Doidge and colleagues write about this in 'Adverse childhood experiences, non-response and loss to follow-up'. They use the Australian Temperament Project, which includes retrospective reports from young adults of childhood adversity. The dataset also provides prospective evidence on the earlier life course which helps their attempts to allow for the formidable bias likely to affect even retrospective reports due to missing data.

Although people sometimes mistake our field as something to do with geographical meridians, this issue shows that longitudinal studies do indeed circle the globe. The lines they trace are those that link a person's past with the present and future. Taken together they help document the diversity and inequality of human lives.