

THE ORGANIZATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE OF A CROSS-NATIONAL,
INTER-DISCIPLINARY SURVEY ON THE LIVING CONDITIONS OF
YOUNG FAMILIES AND THEIR CHILDREN.¹

RUDOLF FISCH

FACHBEREICH PSYCHOLOGIE UND SOZIOLOGIE
DER UNIVERSITÄT, D-7750 KONSTANZ.

Working paper prepared for the Conference on Cross-
National Research in the Social Sciences in Ann Arbor,
Mich., October 3rd - 8th, 1977. Draft, do not cite or quote.

¹ This paper is partly based on two research proposals:
(1) Bronfenbrenner, U. & Cochran, M.: The comparative
ecology of human development. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell
University, Dept. of Human Development and Family
Studies, 1976. - (2) Lüscher, K. & Fisch, R.: Das Sozia-
lisationswissen junger Eltern. Konstanz: Fachbereich
Psychologie und Soziologie der Universität, 1977.

1. General Description

The aim of the project is an analysis of living conditions of young families in five nations:

- Federal Republic of Germany
- Great Britain
- Israel
- Sweden
- United States of America.

The theoretical background and basic research questions anchor in the idea that human development takes place in circumscribed ecologies which affect the activities of children and their caretakers, and thereby influence the development of the child's intellectual and social competence in the outside world.

Society and individuals attempt to create or at least try to influence or change those ecologies according to their concepts concerning the upbringing of children.

Objects of analysis are the immediate settings (micro-systems) containing the child (e.g. family, day care, kindergarten) as well as larger contexts (meso-systems), both formal and informal, in which these settings are embedded, such as: neighborhoods, communities and the world of work. The most general environments are "macro-systems", such as law, the economy and culture.

In order to study the impact of immediate and middle-range ecological systems on the processes of socialization, the sampling takes into account both characteristics of the family (e.g. two parents vs. one parent) and of the neighborhood.

The main interest of the research is to identify the capacity of the different ecologies to serve as support systems to parents or other caretakers in the upbringing of children. It is presumed that the availability of such support systems, both formal and informal, enhances the quality and extent of the activities that parents and/or other caretakers engage in with young

children. This, in turn, could be seen as fostering the development of the child's capacity to cope effectively with educational and social situations outside the home that require initiative, competence, cooperation, and sustained effort in pursuit of a goal.

A further interest of the research is the analysis of parental "knowledge on socialization": It is presumed that concepts of the tasks and roles of parenthood and on taking care and raising up children in today's society influence especially two areas of parental/caretaker behavior: Firstly in the selection and construction of immediate ecologies of one's family as far as one is able and willing to control them. Secondly they influence all activities concerned with establishing and maintaining a family or an equivalent and its well-being in a given setting. The concepts contain aspects of knowledge, for example on means and ends of one's own behavior or that of one's child, or on children in general. Theoretically the concepts could be seen as intervening variables, influenced by internal states and determinants of the outside world (e.g. social structure, features of the immediate physical ecology), motivating the actual interactive behavior and the steering of child's and parent's behavior.

Both research foci, the identification of support systems and the parental knowledge are subjects of social policy. The main rationale of the cross-national study is to investigate different impacts of social policy on families, especially the impact of family support systems on the behavior and development of parents and children and the impact of the dissemination of knowledge on socialization.

The five participating nations exhibit quite different patterns in ideology and institutional arrangements in behalf of families and children. For example:

- Swedish society can be regarded as in some way unique in its establishment of policies designed to enhance the capacity of family members in fulfilling their diverse roles both within the home and in the society at large, as workers and as citizens. At the same time, the number of single-parent families is relatively high.
- Israel has a wide variety of support systems based on local and often voluntary efforts, but the support of the state is relatively low.
- The Federal Republic of Germany has an extended formal system of economic and social supports, originally designed to meet the needs of a traditional family structure. At the same time, the activities of the churches and voluntary organizations are relatively numerous, especially on the local level. Both systems are in a period of transition in view of recent social and cultural changes.
- Great Britain represents still another model offering a generous mixture of both nationally institutionalized and informal local arrangements.
- In the United States of America family services are comparably far less widespread or developed than in the other four nations.

Thus besides the different patterns of ecologies on a national level the five countries represent different macrostructures for the embedding of ecologies and this way provide some sort of "experiment of nature" for assessing the effects on human development of different types and levels of societal support for family life.

2. Methods and research strategy

Three main tasks are to be accomplished:

- (1) The design of new methods and instruments for the systematic assessment of ecologies and of child's and caretaker's behavior inside and outside families. The techniques used include extensive interviews with parents/caretakers and observations in real-life settings. The main topics are: Perceived stresses and supports, social networks, child's and caretaker's activities, parental knowledge, housing and living conditions, features of neighborhood, and a description of "the status

of the child" in each nation.

A first survey will be conducted with these instruments. It will be followed by two simultaneous, complementary, partially-overlapping longitudinal investigations of development in context.

- (2) The first investigation takes advantage of the above mentioned "experiment of nature". Over a five-year period the development of children and families in the five nations, representing sharp contrasts in national policies and practices with respect to child care, education, and family support systems, will be compared.
- (3) The second investigation, taking place concurrently, is a contrived experiment to be conducted principally in the USA and Great Britain, in which three contrasting, randomly-assigned strategies of family support, plus a non-treatment control, are compared in terms of their effect on behavior and development, first within the home and family, and then beyond in day care, pre-school, school, peer group, and a variety of settings in the adult world.

3. History of the project

Most of the collaborators in this project have already worked with one or the other for a number of years. They have developed a solide core of mutual understanding about the nature of family processes and the impacts of Western, post-industrial societal patterns on the family in all five cultures. They agree on a general framework for the analysis. It can be called an "ecological" approach to human development and the study of socialization. Two scientific conferences provided occasions to develop the idea of the project. Then the research rationale and plan, formulated by the senior investigator (Bronfenbrenner) and his closest associates in Ithaca, went through a series of written drafts, each commented upon extensively by the collaborators in all five countries. During this process major changes were made both in the way in which the research questions were asked and in the methods for answering

those questions. A conference, held in Göteborg/Sweden in November 1975, provided the opportunity for a face-to-face clarification of issues. In summer 1976 in pursuance of the so-called Wolfsberg-Seminar on the Status of the Child in Contemporary Society, held in Ermatingen/Switzerland, the Principal Investigators decided upon the size of instruments and particular responsibilities of each country in instrument-development. Looking back, these preparatory actions became very important steps in constituting a federalistic structure of project organization. Of course, the face-to-face interactions played a crucial part in this endeavour. Work was started in 1977.

4. Funding

Each national team prepared a proposal for the research to be done in its country in order to look for support for that research within its own country. Funding has now been arranged for USA, Sweden and the Federal Republic of Germany. Great Britain expects to be funded from 1978 on, while Israel still has great difficulties and up to this time it is not clear if this country is able to participate further on.

Besides national fundings there is a special funding to provide international cooperation, given by the Lilly Endowment from USA.

The funding procedure resulted in some obligations to funding agencies. This in turn influenced the extent to which certain research questions became important for a national team. Restrictions for the team's goals were mainly caused by funding agencies (which are more or less connected with nation's government - except USA, where different private sources contribute to funding) stressing practical questions.

The more questions of the praxis became relevant, the less understanding for a need of cross-national comparison and its implications could be produced. This in fact became a source of stress for the pursuit of the common goal among the different nations.

It is obvious that national funding furthers the independence of the teams and by this strengthens a federalistic structure of the project; on the other hand it reduces the chances of getting equivalent data for cross-national comparisons.

5. The organizational infrastructure

a) Common core.

The restrictions and changes of goals induced by funding contracts could at least be overcome in an extensive and intensive face-to-face negotiation process among Principal Investigators. The main problem was: The common core had to be oriented at the research facilities of the most restricted team. A "minimal common core" was agreed upon, defining areas of equivalent questions and methods used and also norms for data registration in order to ensure central data processing. Each country is free to add its speciality in topics and methodical approaches.

b) Special responsibilities of each country.

Each scientific teamwork has to consider centrifugal tendencies: Subsidiary aims can become dominant, team members might follow their favourite scientific interests and/or become more concerned about their scientific career than about the pursuit of the team's goals etc.² In this project, the above mentioned obligations resulting from funding negotiations had to be taken into account as an additional source of centrifugal tendencies. Some of these problems could be abolished by an agreement about special responsibilities that each country takes over. So each national team has responsibility and the final word on the con-

² As this paper is concerned with cross-national research we do not refer to problems of team organization on a national level including problems of interdisciplinary cooperation, despite the fact that team problems may affect international cooperation to a remarkable extent. These phenomena are described more detailed in: Fisch, R.: Psychology of Science. In: Spiegel-Rösing, I.S. & de Solla Price, D., Science, Technology, and Society - A Cross-Disciplinary Perspective. London/Beverly Hills: Sage, 1977, 277-319.

struction of one assessment-instrument while particular teams serve as consultants and discussion partners in the developmental phase. All other teams accept the common-core-part of that instrument after the necessary cultural adaptations. The size of tasks and the responsibilities are, of course, matched according to the varying research facilities of each team.

6. Cooperation among national teams

We now turn to some more general problems concerning prerequisites of cross-national cooperation, which perhaps could be taken as a starting point for a conference discussion on supports for cross-national research.

A first crucial problem is a common shared feeling among team-members of not knowing as much about the models and contents of thoughts of the other teams as one should know. Usually one is confronted with end-products of longer intra-team-discussions or of long-lasting conceptualizations of problems. The quality of such a product of another team might be high, but the acceptance on the side of the other teams is low due to a lack of participation in the genesis of an idea or a methodical approach. As a matter of fact, the effectivity of common work might be increased by implementing shorter workshops with at least one representative of each team in the critical phases of development of major steps in a part of the common project.

Second, language competence for the respective countries has proved to be a prerequisite for effective communication among teams and, more important, for ensuring equivalence of instruments. But language competence alone is obviously not sufficient to accomplish equivalences: Team members taking over the status of "marginal man" and serving as cultural mediators are quite advantageous for a smooth cooperation among teams.

Third, there exist somewhat different styles and strategies of scientific thinking: For example, there is some evidence that European social scientists often argue from quite different theoretical backgrounds and prefer other positions in the philosophy

of science during their discourses than most of their American colleagues who are more likely to stress pragmatic approaches and concrete questions.

This, of course, are social stereotypes, but it points to an issue in cooperation which might become very fruitful if those positions can be balanced by a sensitive mediator. If the role of the cultural mediator is combined with the status of a mastermind and a travelling coordinator, project organization on the international level renders optimal conditions.

Finally, a most difficult problem should be mentioned which on a general level is very hard to cope with: Depending on research facilities and team composition the rate of progress between the national teams might be very different. Of course this is primarily a problem of planning man-hours and budgeting; but especially for team-members who are not full-time in that job due to other obligations (e.g. teaching) it can become a severe stress, also for the respective team.

7. Suggestions

As described above it took a longer process of establishing the required personal, social and intellectual networks for a successful scientific cooperation on a cross-national project. Some fortunate circumstances supported the endeavour in our case, but this might be unusual and out of reach for others.

So it would be desirable to convince funding agencies about the necessity to give a starting financing for the preparation and establishment of at least the networks among scholars and some piloting for comparative projects that promise a development of social science theories and distinct advances in the formulation of coherent sets of propositions concerning the sources of variations in social structures and human behavior. This problem is to be seen in close connection with national discussions on research priorities and it is an issue for science policy.

Another infrastructural problem at our national level is a lack of systematic teaching of objectives of cross-national or cross-cultural research. An analysis of the last year's announcements of 15 Western Germany's universities and those of Vienna in Austria and Zürich and Basel in Switzerland revealed that only one course on cross-national comparison was offered in one university (Köln). It would be of great help, if, for example, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft could give grants for permanent guest-professorships and for regular workshops on problems and methods of cross-national comparative research in order to institutionalize, for example, a graduate program on that subject.