

Family transformations and well-being of children in Quebec

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The aim of the communication is to study the impact of family transformations into single-headed families and blended families after a separation or divorce, on the changes in the social behavior and well-being of children. Longitudinal data cast light on the association between family transformations and poverty episodes, and on the impact on the behavior of children, in comparison to children whose parents stayed in intact families.

The quantitative survey data from the ELDEQ¹ (Longitudinal Survey of Child Development in Quebec) are particularly original and underexploited. The ELDEQ is a unique source of information for the in-depth study of the impact of family events occurring during the development of children since early childhood, in particular their social and schooling adjustment. A total of 2120 children in 2120 households were sampled in the first wave. The data collection started in 1998 with a cohort of children who were about 5 months old. This cohort of children has been followed with a yearly round of the survey and will be followed until 2010 at least, year when most of the children will leave primary school.

A major advantage of ELDEQ is the recording of detailed history of family trajectories of the children, from their point of view. Children are the unit of analysis and are observed in association to their family events including the marital life of the parents. A second advantage is that the survey allows the researcher to study the relationship between the family events and the psychological indicators of children.

The methodology is event history analysis: a family transition experienced by the child corresponds to the passage from a state to another such as the change from a family structure to another. For instance a change may be from a family where both biological parents lived together with their child to a single-headed family where the mother lives with the child after a separation, or to a blended family. A behavioral transition corresponds to a change from a state defined on a standardized scale used in psychology to another state. Ages of the child at those various transitions are useful to measure change over time and to study the sequence of family or behavioral events of the child. Poverty episodes are studied in relation to changes in parents' union status.

The analyses will test whether there is a significant difference between the behavior of children and their social development according to age, in relation to the behavior of children who did not experience the separation or divorce of their natural parents. The present study proposes to include differentiation across socio-economic statuses of children in particular the full time employment status of the mother, the level of education of parents, the income of the family nucleus and the modalities of child custody and guardianship. The other explanatory factors of the changes of behavior will

¹ Étude longitudinale du développement des enfants du Québec

be the following: the family structure in which the child lives (parents' type of union, presence of the natural parents, step-siblings and half-siblings), and whether the child goes to daycare or to school. The social behavior of children is measured by several indicators and compared to standards in psychology on child social development by age. Finally, results of qualitative interviews with children and parents who live in blended families should help better understand some results. Households of three neighborhoods in Montreal will be interviewed (working class, middle class and higher class).

Changes in family structure after a divorce or a separation are expected to have negative effects on the income of the household, in particular when the child lives in a single-headed household. The time spent in hardship may have an influence on the social behavior of children in Quebec. The effects of family transformations on the child's behavior should be less detrimental when those transitions happen at a very young age of the child in contrast to those that happen at a later age. As regard blended families, incomes should be higher however the contribution may vary for each parent.