

Masaryk University
Faculty of Social Studies
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FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLDS IN BRNO A SLICE OF LONGITUDINAL SELF-REPORTS

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The Psychological Branch of the ELSPAC Study: A Survey of 15-Year-Old Respondents

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The purpose of this book is to introduce the data and measures through which the data were obtained in one of the four waves of individual psychological data collection associated with the European Longitudinal Study of Pregnancy and Childhood (ELSPAC) in the Czech Republic. This volume is intended mainly for researchers in the area of adolescence. It should provide them with an elementary outline of the ELSPAC study, the assessment instruments used in middle adolescence and the data gathered.

The European Longitudinal Study of Pregnancy and Childhood

The ELSPAC study is an international longitudinal epidemiological study initiated in 1985 by the World Health Organisation (Golding, 1989). Its coordination centre is the Institute of Child Health in Bristol, and currently, there are five countries participating in the project - the United Kingdom, the Isle of Man, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, and the Russian Federation. The aim of the study is to identify the current risks for a healthy and optimum development of the child, as well as to propose the way of preventing them. It generally observes whether certain early environmental, biological, social, psychological, and psychosocial factors in the participating countries have a long-term impact on the survival and healthy development of the foetus, infant and child in the later developmental stages, and whether these factors appear to play the same role in the participating countries.

In the Czech Republic, the project is run by the Research Institute of Preventive and Social Pediatrics under the supervision of Associate Professor Lubomír Kukla at the Faculty of Medicine of Masaryk University in Brno. This is where pediatric surveys of children take place, and the Institute is also responsible for project administration. The psychological branch of the study in the Czech Republic is run by the Institute for Research of Children, Youth and Family supervised by Professor Petr Macek at the Faculty of Social Studies of Masaryk University in Brno.

The creation of the primary sample for the Czech ELSPAC owes much to the help from primary-care medical institutions. The original research

proposal intended to observe families with a new baby as the unit of analysis from prenatal period until the baby reaches at least 18 years of age. Thus the study was launched with a sample consisting of all the families of children domiciled in Brno and born (or examined shortly after birth) in medical institutions between March 1, 1991 and June 30, 1992, as well as all the families of the children domiciled in Znojmo and born between April 1, 1991 and June 30, 1992. That means children born outside medical facilities are not part of the sample. In the early 1990s home deliveries were very rare, which makes the initial sample includes almost all members of the target population. This way, our Brno initial sample included 5549 families. From this sample, 3859 mothers had been surveyed following the prenatal period. More on the ELSPAC sample see Širůček (2002), Smékal, Lacinová and Kukla (2004), Sejrková (1999).

Individual psychological examinations – the psychological branch

In the Czech Republic the collection of psychological data from both the children and their parents through individual psychological examinations started quite late into the study. The first wave of data collection took place at age 8 from March 1999 until June 2000 on a subsample of 883 children and their parents. The following examinations took place at age 11 (April 2002 – June 2003, N = 876), age 13 (April 2004 – June 2005, N = 617), and age 15 (April 2006 – June 2007, N = 554). Currently (November 2008), we are collecting data at age 17. Despite the large sample the aim was to capture a complex image of each individual child. This guided the choice of techniques and measures to be included in the individual psychological testing battery.

Key objectives of the psychological branch of the ELSPAC study

The psychological examinations at the Institute for the Research on Children, Youths and Family starting at age 8 were intended to systematically complement the environmental, medical, social and other variables with both psychological or psychosocial developmental outcomes and psychological mediators or moderators of further development. Some psychological or psychosocial data are available from data collections prior to age 8 but mostly without much theoretical background. By starting at age 8 we were able to capture the transition from childhood to the period of adolescence and follow up through adolescence until age 17. The study is still running and we hope to follow our respondent into the period of emerging adulthood.

In the period of adolescence our focus is on the following four main domains:

- *Interpersonal relationships* in adolescence – family, peers, romantic partners as both outcomes of early development and also important assets for further development. This includes all the relationships from the attachment perspective and also the parental ‘input’ – parenting styles, parental conflict or marital satisfaction. It also

includes the related areas of adjustment (well-being, depression) and coping.

- *Risk behavior and its functions* as an important issue of this period in itself possibly influencing various intergenerational relationships. This includes estimating the prevalence of risk or problem behaviors in their multitude of forms as well as variables informing us about the individual and social functions of this behavior and its predictors or moderators.
- *Cognitive, academic and career development* as both outcomes and predictors of future development. This includes the intellectual abilities as an important developmental asset and moderator of various perception-based individual variables such as attitudes. We also collect data on the context of academic and cognitive development like school climate, motivation or mornigness/eveningness.
- *Self and identity development* as an important developmental task of the period of adolescence. We are trying to capture not only the formal development of identity but also the range of its contents. This area also includes various personality variables as general predictors or moderators and own body perceptions.

Our psychological perspective emphasizes the adolescent's subjective experience, which may be perceived as a current reflection of the developmental process whose active creator and producer, or moderator, is the adolescent him or herself. This conception is incorporated in the approach of R. M. Lerner, who adapted the SOC model for the developmental period of adolescence (Macek & Lacinová, 2006). The processes of selection, optimization, and compensation acting as part of a positive development (leading to minimizing losses and maximizing personal profits) are represented within observed areas, while depicting their selected aspects.

Organization and administration of the collection of psychological data

The psychological data in all the data collection waves are collected mainly during the respondent's visit at the Institute which we call examinations. Some additional self-administered measures were taken home by the respondents to be mailed in later. Parts of the battery are administered on computer.

The on-site individual psychological examinations are administered by the employees of the Institute for Research of Children, Youth and Family and trained students of the Master's program in psychology at the Faculty of Social Studies and the Faculty of Arts of Masaryk University in Brno.

At the examinations our respondents are usually accompanied by their parents or grand-parents (in most cases, it was their mothers). In all age groups, the individual session lasted approximately 2½ hours. Following an

approval of the accompanying person and the respondent, a video recording of the session was made (for respondents aged 11 years or older).

Within a few weeks after the visit, the parents (and starting at age 13 adolescents as well) are sent a report containing the description of behavior and working style, preliminary results obtained in the individual areas, the form of interaction with the administrator, as well as coping with the testing stress situation. The parents are also offered the time for individual consultations and a chance to see the video recording of the testing session. Provided that it was the case of any more serious problem, the parents were offered to contact a specialized psychological or psychiatric institution.

Methodological issues

The framework of the large ELSPAC study is an important support but also a source of various problems related mainly with the long duration of the project in time and the adaptation of foreign, English language instruments into Czech versions. The prospects of international comparison disqualify domestic, local measurement instruments. On the other hand, in the extensive piloting that is necessary for the adaptations we often run into problems meaning or context. Unfortunately the literature on the cognitive processes involved in responding to psychological survey questions is developed only for adults (Scott, 1997) and there are near.

We also have some concerns about the representativeness of our sample. Besides the ubiquitous problems of attrition there is also a developmental side to the problem. Our respondents are young people who have been respondents all their life. Since they were born someone has been asking multitude of questions about them and as soon as they could respond to questions themselves they were asked about themselves as well as the world around them. Now, at 17 those who remained in the study have developed a habit for answering questions and we have yet to find out in which ways that makes them different from their peers. It appears no question can surprise them but they see hardly any question as important enough to be worth of more than a second of thought. We are planning some cross-sectional studies to verify these casual observations.

In similar vein we are concerned about the effects of the size of the testing battery. It is very tiresome to respond to a wide range of personal questions for 2 to 3 hours, even with breaks. While it is difficult but possible can hypothesize about the effect of fatigue on response, hypothesizing about the interaction of various instruments comprising the testing battery is even more problematic.

Structure of this volume

This introduction aims to provide an overview of the scope of the ELSPAC study in the Czech Republic from the perspective of content areas from which data have been collected in the course of the study. The remaining chapters describe in detail individual methods used in data

collection at age 15. Each chapter provides the theoretical relevance of a given area of interest, gives some background about the selection of the measuring instrument. Often the adaptation of foreign methods to Czech language and context needs to be described. The book also mentions the advantages of the selected approach, not leaving out limitations and disadvantages arising when the individual measures were used within a longitudinal survey. Each chapter also presents statistical descriptive overview of collected data and usually tests of theoretical assumptions about factorial validity of the measures. In conclusion or discussion most authors propose possible uses of data acquired by the described measure for various research questions.

We hope the reader will find the data described in this volume interesting. The ELSPAC project has originally been focused mainly on data collection and not on their analysis. The Institute for Research of Children, Youth and Family cannot utilize the full information potential in the data and will welcome proposals for interesting analyses. This volume describes only one cross-sectional slice in the full breadth of one of the waves but all data from the psychological branch of the Czech ELSPAC are available for analysis. As for data from the core Czech ELSPAC, Lubomír Kukla, head of the Research Institute of Preventive and Social Pediatrics needs to be contacted.

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