



CHILDREN'S LIVING CONDITIONS
STUDIES ON HEALTH, FAMILY AND SCHOOL

SARA BROLIN LÅFTMAN

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ABSTRACT

The present dissertation includes four empirical studies, each of which focuses on specific aspects of children's living conditions.

Study I analyses the association between young people's social relations and health complaints using Swedish nationally representative survey data on 10- to 18-year-olds. Both relations with parents and with peers are associated with health complaints. Relational content is more strongly associated with health complaints than is relational structure. With regard to relational content, strained relations are more strongly associated with health complaints than are supportive relations.

Study II investigates how effort and reward in school are associated with pupils' subjective health using data from the Stockholm School Survey. Both effort and reward are shown to be positively associated with subjective health, and in particular pupils who report to put in high effort in school have high levels of subjective health. Contextual variation in health is found for girls but not for boys.

Study III is based on Swedish register data and analyses the association between family type and choice of programme in upper secondary school. Children in single-mother households less often choose the natural science/technology (NT) programme compared with children who live with two original parents. Having a resident or a non-resident parent with NT skills is positively associated with choice of the NT programme.

Study IV analyses the association between family type and social support, health, and material resources in 24 countries. The data are derived from the international Health Behaviour of School-aged Children (HBSC) survey. In a majority of the countries studied, children in single-mother households report smaller resources compared with children living with two original parents. No clear pattern is found with regard to differences between countries.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

During my undergraduate level studies in Stockholm and Master's studies in London, I gradually came to realize that doing research was something I wanted to try. Through a simple twist of fate (well, in fact several), I happened to be hired as a research assistant in the Level-of-Living (LNU) project at the Swedish Institute for Social Research (SOFI) in 2001. From the very beginning I had the benefit of working with Jan O. Jonsson and Viveca Östberg, who were later to become my supervisors.

I have learnt a great deal during my time at SOFI, and I am of course particularly grateful to my main supervisor Janne and to my co-supervisor Viveca. They have untiringly guided me in how to conduct research in practice, and they have constantly, patiently, and always swiftly provided advice and constructive comments on countless drafts. They have been supportive and encouraging all along the way and also showed extraordinary patience when I prolonged my PhD candidate phase substantially by having two children. Thank you Janne and Viveca for having brought me to this point.

This dissertation includes two articles that are joint work, one with my co-supervisor Viveca and one with Bitte Modin, who are both at the Centre for Health Equity Studies (CHESS). Co-writing with Viveca and Bitte has been a privilege. Not only did I learn a lot, but they also reminded me that research can in fact be a fun and social experience. Thank you Viveca (once again) and thank you Bitte – I consider myself very lucky to have had the opportunity to work with you both and I already look forward to future planned projects.

I am grateful to junior and senior colleagues for reading and commenting on drafts over the years. I want to collectively thank past and present colleagues in the LNU group, as well as other participants at seminars at SOFI, the Department of Sociology and elsewhere who have helped me improve my work. I am particularly indebted to Tommy Ferrarini who provided insightful and important comments on my work in progress at the "final seminar" at the Department of Sociology. Gunilla Halldén deserves special thanks for suggestions on the introductory chapter. Also I am grateful to colleagues in the research project "Family structure, economic resources, and children's living

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Writing this dissertation has indeed been a challenge. To quote a fellow PhD student and colleague, doctoral studies have been something like an emotional rollercoaster. The work has largely been joyful and progressed relatively smoothly, but there have also been moments of doubt when it was hard to spot an end to all the writing, rewriting, running and rerunning of analyses. During all these times, one of the things I have valued the most at SOFI is being surrounded by such friendly colleagues. In particular my fellow PhD students have provided invaluable social support. Also Mia Hultin should be mentioned for her special concern.

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Working within the field of family sociology and doing research on children’s living conditions is indeed a rewarding task, but studying other people’s lives certainly cannot compete with living one’s own. I want to thank my family – Hannes and our children Jakob and Calle – for constantly reminding me of what is most important in life.

Finally but not last, my parents deserve the greatest thanks possible for all kinds of support during the years. For what it is worth, I dedicate this thesis to you.

Stockholm, December 2009

Sara Brolin Låftman

INTRODUCTION¹

The topic of the present thesis is the living conditions of children and young people, with an emphasis on Sweden. Until very recently, we have not been able to give encompassing answers to questions such as what it is like to be a child in Sweden and how the living conditions and experiences differ between groups of children, at least not if we wanted both to consider the children's own perspectives and to allow for generalizations.

The overarching aim of the thesis is to analyse selected aspects of the living conditions of children and young people, with an emphasis on their own reports. Children, defined as individuals below 18 years of age, constitute about one third of the world's population.² In Sweden, more than one fifth of the population are children, i.e. almost two million out of about 9.3 million citizens.³ Despite the fact that they make up a large group in society, children are disproportionately seldomly included as study subjects in sociology. To date, particularly empirical sociological research on children's everyday living conditions, based on children's own reports and conducted on samples that allow for generalizations, has been surprisingly limited. Thus we know relatively little about how children and young people in general perceive their situation, e.g., in the family and in school. The present thesis contributes to filling this knowledge gap.

The dissertation includes four empirical studies, each of which focuses on specific aspects of children's living conditions. There are three general, recurrent themes that are all central to children's lives: health; family and social relations; and education and conditions in school. The first study analyses the association between young people's social relations and health complaints using Swedish nationally representative survey data on 10- to 18-year-olds (the Child-LNU and the Child-ULF).

¹ The introductory chapter has benefited from comments and suggestions by Ylva Almquist, Tommy Ferrarini, Gunilla Halldén, Jan O. Jonsson and Viveca Östberg.

² In 2003, the number of children under 18 was estimated to about 2.2 billion (UNICEF 2005, Table 6) and the entire world population was estimated to about 6.3 billion (Population Reference Bureau 2003).

³ Figures from the homepage of Statistics Sweden (SCB) www.scb.se, accessed on 20 July 2009.

The second study investigates how school-related conditions are associated with pupils' subjective health. The data are derived from the Stockholm School Survey, which is a total population survey of ninth and eleventh grade pupils in Stockholm. The third study is based on Swedish register data and analyses the association between family type and choice of programme in upper secondary school. The fourth study takes a cross-nationally comparative perspective in analysing the association between family type and a set of outcomes with regard to social support, health, and material resources in 24 countries. The data are derived from the international Health Behaviour of School-aged Children (HBSC) survey.

In this introductory text, the study of children's living conditions is discussed in broader terms. First, a general theoretical framework of the sociological study of children's living conditions is presented. Second, the relevance of studying children's living conditions from a policy perspective, including the connection to children's rights, is discussed. Third, some empirical examples of what we know about children's living conditions in Sweden are provided. Fourth, the dissertation's four empirical papers are framed, and finally, some concluding remarks including reflections on possible future research are presented.

Studying children's living conditions: a sociological perspective

The sociology of childhood

Children and childhood have long been the subject of scientific inquiry, perhaps most notably in disciplines such as psychology, education and pediatrics. Also in sociology, children and childhood have been included in research in various ways. However, until the past couple of decades, concepts such as socialization and development predominated, implying a "forward-looking" view of childhood with an emphasis on the child as a future adult. This also included a view of children as natural, passive, and incomplete individuals. During the past couple of decades, this view has been criticized (James and Prout 1990/97; Qvortrup et al. 1994; Corsaro 2005). Sociology of childhood developed as a new sub-discipline, taking a clear shape in the early 1990s with key works by James and Prout (1990/97) and by Qvortrup and co-workers (1994), the latter being a product of a large European research project on childhood as a social phenomenon. In this new sociology of childhood, researchers are interested in children as a group, rather than in the personalities of individual children, and in childhood as a social structure rather than as a

period in an individual's life (Qvortrup 1994). Important notions are that children are to be seen as active agents, and that childhood is to be seen as a social and historical construct, making it more relevant to talk about childhoods in the plural form (James and Prout 1990/97). James and Prout (1990/97, p. 8) formulated a set of features of this "emergent paradigm" of sociology of childhood: 1) that childhood is a social construction; 2) that childhood cannot be separated from other variables such as class, gender, and ethnicity; 3) that childhood and children's lives are worth studying in their own right; 4) that children are active subjects in the construction of their own lives; 5) that ethnography is a useful methodology in the study of childhood; and 6) that the new paradigm is involved in the process of reconstructing the concept of childhood in society. Furthermore, as pointed out by Halldén (2007), the sociology of childhood aims at giving power to children and at improving the living conditions of children through research. Consequently, sociology of childhood is not only about research *on* children, but it is also research *for* children and sometimes *with* children (Corsaro 2005; Halldén 2007).

One cornerstone of the sociology of childhood is the emphasis on children as "human beings" rather than as "human becomings" (Qvortrup 1994; see also Alanen 1992; Östberg 1994; 1996; Halldén 2007). Children as individuals and childhood as a stage in life are worth studying in their own right, and not only in connection with the development and socialization of individuals. Including children's perspective of their present living conditions implies a legitimate consideration of childhood as a stage in itself (Ben-Arieh et al. 2001). As Östberg (1996) notes, "[f]ocusing on children's present experiences implies that children are seen as a permanent group in society, the conditions of which do not alter as a consequence of the fact that the individuals who make up that group are constantly shifting." (Östberg 1996, p. 9). The developmental perspective, however, is not automatically neglected just because the focus is on children's present well-being. Although the sociology of childhood emphasizes children as beings, several researchers acknowledge that both children and adults are in fact both human beings and human becomings – neither children nor adults are "ready" but all humans are constantly undergoing change (Halldén 2007). Ben-Arieh (2000) argues that "...the best way for securing children a good future is to provide them with a good quality of life as children. In other words, we should be more concerned with child happiness and, by doing so, we will enhance the chances of adult happiness." (Ben-Arieh 2000, p. 244). At the same time, the differences between adults and children should not be neglected and the competence of children must not be overemphasized (Halldén 2007).

As put by James and Prout (1990/97) in their “declaration” on the new sociology of childhood paradigm, ethnographic approaches are recommended when the purpose is to study children and childhood based on information from the children themselves. This guideline has to a large extent been followed in Swedish childhood research (Halldén 2003) meaning that quantitative sociological research with children as informants in Sweden and elsewhere is less common. Also in the international methodological literature on children as informants, most texts focus on qualitative studies. Literature on children as respondents in surveys is scarce (Andersen and Kjærulff 2003, p. 27).⁴ Interestingly, though, in the preface to the second edition of their 1990 book, James and Prout (1990/97) conclude that their original claims for ethnography were “somewhat one-sided” (James and Prout 1990/97, p. xv) and acknowledge the work that has been done to involve children in surveys. Yet, although studies based on child surveys do exist, sociological research on children is still largely based on qualitative data.

Commonly, when information on children is included in empirical sociological research, the purpose is to assess the impact of children on adults’ lives, e.g. how the presence of children affects the mother’s labour market outcomes or the propensity of a couple to split up (Scott, Brynin and Smith 1995). Even when the purpose is to examine children’s living conditions, children do not necessarily constitute the units of analysis. Children are often included in categories describing the conditions of adults or households, and studies that see the child as a unit of observation are less common (Ben-Arieh 2000; Ben-Arieh et al. 2001). However, to get a proper picture of children’s living conditions, one needs to focus on the children rather than on, e.g., “families with children” (Alanen 1992; Qvortrup 1990/97; 1994; Näsman 2005). Furthermore, statistics where children are included as a feature of households or of adults (e.g., households with children 0–18 years, women in paid work with children 0–7 years) may also result in an emphasis on the adults’ living conditions, rather than on the children’s (Näsman 2005). The fact that children are often “hidden” as units of a family contributed to the development of the sociology of childhood in which the children, and not the family, are in focus (see Qvortrup 1990/97).

⁴ Important exceptions being, e.g., Scott, Brynin and Smith (1995); Scott (1997; 2000); Borgers, de Leeuw and Hox (2000); de Leeuw, Borgers and Strijbos-Smits (2002).

Population-based studies on children

In empirical sociology, when children do constitute the units of analysis, there are different approaches to analysing their living conditions. Qvortrup (1990/97) argues for a voice *for* children, which is not necessarily the same thing as the voice of the children themselves. Thus, many studies use indirect information on children such as aggregate statistics or information gathered from parents. Yet in many cases, surveys with children themselves reporting about their living conditions are in fact crucial to obtaining “correct” information. Especially for areas such as psychological health, social relations, the work environment in school, and children’s own economic resources, it is important to use the children’s reports to get valid information. As shown in a Danish methodological project on children as respondents, it is not uncommon for children and parents to give different answers to the same question about the child (Andersen and Kjærulff 2003). For instance, when reporting on children’s psychological well-being the information provided by children and by parents may differ (Jonsson and Östberg, forthcoming, Table III). It is not evident whose picture is “correct”, but for some living conditions such as psychological well-being one can assume that the child knows best, which illustrates the importance of interviewing the children themselves. For other types of data, information from the parents or from other sources such as registers is of higher quality. This is true of information on, e.g., parents’ educational level, as children provide very unreliable data on such questions (see Andersen and Kjærulff 2003 pp. 62–68), and certainly even more so for parental income. Additionally, asking young people about their parents’ occupation is problematic as they do not always know what their parents’ occupations are, or cannot give information detailed enough for classification purposes (see Currie et al. 1997).

Even when children are interviewed there may be limitations. Much inquiry is based on small, non-representative data sets implying that results are not generalizable. Empirical social science research on children is also commonly characterized by a developmental perspective in emphasizing children’s living conditions as predictors of their later achievements or problems. However, as pointed out by several researchers, it is of the utmost importance to study also the living conditions of children here and now instead of merely looking at long-term effects of childhood conditions, i.e. their current well-being and not only their well-becoming (Alanen 1992; Qvortrup 1994; Östberg 1994; 1996; Halldén 2007). Still, while some social science inquiry on children takes a perspective from which children are seen as future adults, research that aims at examining children’s present living conditions

through surveys with children as respondents does exist. This is, however, largely a recent phenomenon. Up until the 1980s, when information on children's living conditions was wanted, the default was to ask the parents. Although there were exceptions, this was the general tendency (Andersen and Kjærulff 2003). As noted by de Leeuw, Borgers and Strijbos-Smits (2002, p. 6), a handbook on survey methodology from 1954 included a chapter on children as respondents, but it took more than forty years until a chapter on children as respondents was included in a handbook again (namely: Scott 1997). More recently, though, surveys with children as respondents have become increasingly common, because interviewing children themselves is a fundamental feature of the sociology of childhood research paradigm (Andersen and Kjærulff 2003).

It should be mentioned that child surveys also have their limitations in that very young children cannot participate. According to de Leeuw et al. (2002), the age of seven is considered a major turning point in children's cognitive development and constitutes a general lower limit. Scott (1997) suggests that standardized questionnaires are suitable to use particularly for children aged around eleven and up. This means that information on the youngest children has to be collected from parents or other adults and/or that methods other than surveys need to be used.

Studying children's living conditions: relevance for social policy

The Scandinavian welfare research perspective

According to the Scandinavian welfare research approach, an individual's level-of-living is defined as the individual's command over resources with which she can control and direct her living conditions (see Johansson 1979). Individuals are seen as actors who benefit from resources that make decision-making and action possible. This resource perspective is combined with the idea that welfare cannot be reduced to a single measure (such as economy), but has to be studied from a multidimensional perspective. Thus, an individual's level-of-living is determined by her situation in a number of dimensions, such as health, employment and working conditions, economic resources, education, family and social relations, and political resources. These dimensions are measured using a number of descriptive, rather than evaluative, indicators, in order to be as "objective" as possible. This welfare approach may be applied not only to the study of adults' living conditions, but also to the study of children and young people. This is what is done in the Swedish Child-LNU survey of 2000 and in its annual

continuation in the Child-ULF from 2001 onwards, through interviews with children themselves and with links to parental and household information as reported by one or both parents. The level-of-living dimensions of children and young people as set out in the Child-LNU are the following:

- Health, well-being, and care
- Education and conditions in school
- Economic resources
- Family and social relations
- Housing conditions, residential area
- Security and safety
- Recreation, culture, leisure time activities
- Political resources

These level-of-living dimensions overlap to a great extent with the sets of child well-being indicators developed and used by UNICEF (2007), the European Commission (2008), the OECD (2009), as well as the Swedish Government (Ds 2005:59; Ds 2007:9). Assessing children's living conditions and well-being from multiple dimensions also reflects the holistic view of the child in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (see Santos Pais 1999). As Ben-Arieh (2008, p. 5) puts it: "The CRC promotes a holistic view of child development and well-being, giving equal weight to the children's civic, political, social, economic, and cultural rights, and stressing that these rights are interrelated, universal, and indivisible. Concepts of child well-being accordingly must be multi-dimensional and ecological."

The Child-LNU is a forerunner in the sense that this was the first child survey in Sweden to be nationally representative, with a wide age span and with a wide scope, and to provide extensive information on parents reported by the parents themselves. Still, more specialized surveys can obviously also be used to analyse certain level-of-living components. The level-of-living approach serves as a general theoretical foundation for this dissertation, and the Child-LNU and the Child-ULF provide data for this introductory chapter and for one of the empirical papers.⁵

One basic idea behind the Swedish level-of-living surveys, as formulated by Johansson (1979), is that these surveys enable citizens to

⁵ For a more thorough review of the Child-LNU, see Jonsson, Östberg and Låftman 2001; Jonsson and Östberg; forthcoming.

make themselves heard in the political process. According to Johansson (1979), there is a lacuna (gap) in the theory of democracy, namely, there is no discussion on how information on the living conditions of citizens in a country should be collected. Consequently, it is not clear how the members of a society are to gain knowledge about “how things are”. It is the task of political parties to state what the situation in a country should be like and to, with input from experts, formulate how to achieve this. To fill the knowledge gap concerning “how things are”, the citizens are to report about their living conditions, e.g., through national surveys. By doing this, they participate in the democratic process. This idea is valid for children, too. In order to tell what the situation of children should be like, we first need to know what the situation of children is like. To get a correct description of “how things are”, it is crucial that children themselves provide information on their living conditions. Lansdown (2001) puts it accordingly: “If we want to make the best decisions, then we need the best information available. Consulting children and drawing on their perceptions, knowledge and ideas are essential to the development of effective public policy.” In some matters, information from other sources may be superior, such as aggregate statistics concerning, e.g., infant and child mortality or school marks, and information from parents concerning, e.g., socioeconomic conditions in the household. But in a range of matters, direct information from the children seems the best.

A child rights perspective

In theories of the democratic process, children and young people are surprisingly absent despite the nearly universal acceptance of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) which states that State Parties shall provide possibilities for children to participate politically. The CRC has four general principles (see Santos Pais 1999):

- Non-discrimination (Article 2)
- The best interests of the child (Article 3)
- The child’s right to survival and development (Article 6)
- The child has the right to express his or her views and these shall be respected (Article 12)

These basic principles are part of one single entity and support each other. The CRC is also often summarized through the “three P’s” – “provision”, “protection”, and “participation”. Provision implies, e.g.,

the right to food, health care and education. Protection involves, e.g., the right to protection from abuse and war. Participation means that the child has the right to express his or her views and to be listened to. The child's right to participate is thus one of the cornerstones of the CRC, and is primarily formulated in Article 12.

Article 12

1. State Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

The notion that the child shall be able to express his or her views and be listened to in all matters affecting the child means that children should not only be listened to in "private" matters, but also in wider societal matters. All areas that incorporate aspects of welfare should thus be included. Furthermore, according to Article 12, children shall not only be given the possibility to express their views, but these views shall also be given weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

How then may Article 12 be implemented? Obviously, there is not one single way in which the article can and should be concretized, and the text is open to interpretation. In the CRC there are no indications of how the text should be put into practice but this is left open for the member states that have signed the Convention.

One way to implement Article 12 is to conduct surveys with children as respondents. In their text on the political influence of children, child rights advocates Petré and Hammarberg (2000) write that "...it is essential to create mechanisms that effectively take into account children's voices. Their views should be reflected in data collection and relevant research." (Petrén and Hammarberg 2000, p. 66). By providing descriptions of their living conditions, i.e. reporting "how things are", children and young people can contribute to the political process.

The respondents in child surveys are most often not given the opportunity to state what they think things should be like, but as argued

by Johansson (1979), formulating how it should be and how to reach this goal is the task of political parties (with input from experts). As noted by Ben-Arieh (2000), social indicators are today recognized as an important tool in the forming of social policies. With regard to children, there is a basic lack of such indicators, and those that exist are often outdated and inadequate (*ibid.*). Surveys with children as respondents may contribute a range of indicators based on information from the children themselves. For the case of Sweden, the importance of the annual Child-ULF was in fact underlined by the governmentally appointed “Working group with the task of developing indicators for the child politics” in their final report (Ds 2007:9). The Working group makes clear that in some child policy areas, the Child-ULF constitutes the only existing and possible foundation for a description of children’s and young people’s living conditions on the national level (Ds 2007:9, p. 38).

Surveys of children’s living conditions may be of relevance to children’s rights also in another matter, namely in the process of monitoring children’s rights. All the CRC member states have undertaken to report on their progress in fulfilling the Convention’s articles (expressed in Article 44). National surveys with children as informants may constitute useful tools in this monitoring process. In particular surveys that cover a wide range of areas have great opportunities to provide information on the state of children’s living conditions in a country.⁶

In sum, interviewing children on a range of matters that concern them is one way to implement Article 12 of the CRC. Furthermore, nationally representative data are of obvious relevance both to policy-makers on the national level and in the reporting procedure to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

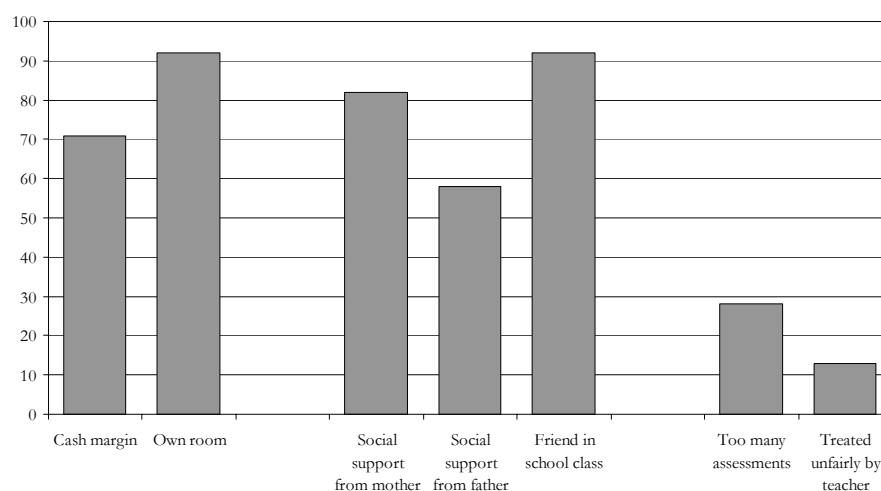
⁶ According to Ben-Arieh et al. (2001), the monitoring of children’s well-being and the monitoring of children’s rights are similar though not identical processes. One distinction is that the study of children’s well-being may focus on what is desirable, but the monitoring of children’s rights assesses legally established minimums. Another difference is that indicators used for the monitoring of rights are based on very clear, concrete and observable phenomena, while indicators used for the monitoring of well-being may be more abstract and suggestive (Ben-Arieh et al. 2001, pp. 42–43).

Children's living conditions in Sweden – some empirical examples

What do we know about the living conditions of children and young people in Sweden, as reported by the children themselves? One important source on the national level is obviously the Child-LNU and the Child-ULF. Several governmental reports (Jonsson and Östberg 2001; 2004) and reports from Statistics Sweden (SCB 2006; 2009a) are fully or partly based on analyses of the Child-LNU and the Child-ULF. The most recent issues of the report *Up to 18*, released jointly by Statistics Sweden and the Swedish Children's Ombudsman, also contain figures based on these surveys (SCB and BO 2004; 2007). Some information from these surveys is also suggested to be used as indicators for monitoring child politics in Sweden (Ds 2007:9).

As noted in these reports and elsewhere (Jonsson and Östberg, forthcoming), children and young people in Sweden generally have a high level-of-living, in particular in a historical as well as in a global perspective. The majority of young persons in Sweden have a very high material standard, good social relations with parents and peers, and reasonable working conditions in school. With regard to economic and material resources, in Figure 1 it is seen that about 70 per cent of 10- to 18-year-old children in Sweden have a cash margin, i.e. that they have or easily can get 100 SEK (approximately €10), e.g., to go to the movies. About nine out of ten have their own room. When it comes to social relations, a little more than 80 per cent of 10- to 18-year-olds state that they talk with their mother when they are troubled or worried about something, and almost 60 per cent state that they talk with their father. More than 90 per cent have at least one friend in their school class. As to the work environment in school, slightly less than 30 per cent think that there are too many assessments in school. About 13 per cent claim they have been treated badly or unfairly by a teacher.

FIGURE 1. Selected indicators measuring aspects of living conditions among children 10–18 years. Data from Child-LNU 2000 and Child-ULF 2001–2003. Weighted per cent. n=5,076^a

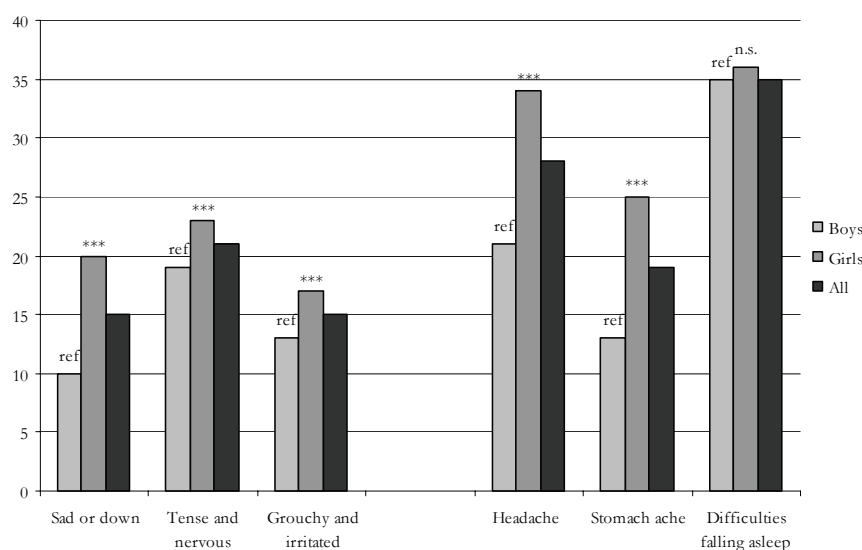


^a The items “Too many assessments” and “Treated unfairly by teacher” were only included in 2002–2003 (n=2,454)

However, one major caveat as reported by Jonsson and Östberg (forthcoming) is the high prevalence of health complaints among young people. Health complaints have increased during the past couple of decades, although this trend was broken in 2005 when health complaints were shown to decrease for 11- and 13-year-olds but not for 15-year-olds (Danielson 2006). In particular the psychological complaints of the 15-year-old girls continue to increase (Danielson 2006, Figure 8). The levels of health complaints among young people depend on the definition (i.e. what indicators are used) as well as on which age groups are studied. Some empirical examples based on data from the Child-LNU and the Child-ULF are shown in Figure 2. It is seen that in 2000–2003, 15 per cent of 10- to 18-year-olds agree with the statement that they feel sad, 21 per cent that they feel tense and nervous, and 15 per cent that they feel grouchy and irritated. Furthermore, 28 per cent of 10- to 18-year-olds report that they have a headache at least once a week, 19 per cent that they have a stomach-ache, and 35 per cent that they have difficulties sleeping. On several of the indicators there are clear gender differences in that girls report significantly more health complaints compared with boys (see Figure 2). Gender differences increase with age, meaning that the older girls report the highest levels of health complaints (Danielson

2006; Ravens-Sieberer et al. 2009). In an international perspective, the health complaints of young people in Sweden appear to have increased more than in several other European countries (SOU 2006:77). There is no clear answer to why there is such a high incidence of health complaints among young people in Sweden. A governmental report (SOU 2006:77) speculates about young people's difficulties in entering the labour market as well as an increased individualization, including the numerous possibilities in young people's lives, as possible stressors. Not commenting on the negative time-trend but only on the prevalence of health complaints today, Jonsson and Östberg (forthcoming) suggest that problematic social relations with parents and peers and the demands of school may be two sources of young people's psychosomatic problems. The importance of the work environment in school for young people's health complaints has also been analysed and put forward by Modin and Östberg (2007) and by Hjern, Alfvén and Östberg (2008). Yet more empirical research is clearly needed to explore the reasons for and mechanisms behind the high levels of young people's health complaints.

FIGURE 2. Psychological and somatic complaints among children 10–18 years. Data from Child-LNU 2000 and Child-ULF 2001–2003. Weighted per cent. n=5,076



***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

A second important point regarding the living conditions of children and young people in Sweden is that there are notable inequalities between groups of children. Children living with single parents comprise one group that systematically tends to report lower welfare, along with children with parents not born in Sweden and children whose parents have working-class occupations (Jonsson and Östberg 2001; forthcoming). Also children in economically vulnerable households, where the three above-mentioned groups are heavily overrepresented, report more welfare problems (Jonsson and Östberg 2004). In Table 1, a number of indicators measuring children's material resources, social relations, school-related issues, and health complaints are shown, by a set of family and household characteristics. There are rather systematic differences between groups to the disadvantage of children not living with two original parents, children whose parents are manual workers, children whose parents were not born in Sweden, and children whose parents lack a cash margin. It should be noted, however, that differences between groups are not fully consistent. For instance, there are no social class differences with regard to somatic complaints, which has also been shown by Östberg, Alfvén and Hjern (2006) for the same data (for a discussion on the equalization of health in youth, see West 1997; West and Sweeting 2004).

These summarizing descriptive findings on children's living conditions in Sweden are based on information gathered from the children themselves, as well as on information collected directly from parents (e.g., on the household's social class). Also the overarching aim of the present dissertation is to study the living conditions of children and young people, with an emphasis on children's own reports. The empirical studies focus on two important topics as pointed out by Jonsson and Östberg (forthcoming), namely, young people's health complaints and inequalities between groups of children and young people, here particularly on differences by family type.

TABLE 1. Selected indicators of aspects of living conditions among children 10–18 years: differences by family and household characteristics (family type, social class, parents' country of birth, and family economy). Data from Child-LNU 2000 and Child-Ulf 2001–2003. Weighted per cent. n=5,076^a

	Cash margin	Own room	Social support from mother	Social support from father	Friend in school class	Too many assessments	Treated unfairly by teacher	Psychological complaints (2 of 3)	Somatic complaints (2 of 3)
<i>Family type</i>									
Two original parents (ref.)	73	92	84	63	93	26	11	11	20
Single parent	66**	90	78**	44***	87***	36***	18**	15*	25*
Reconstituted family	65***	92	83	46***	94	30	16*	14*	26***
<i>Social class</i>									
Higher non-manual (ref.)	76	95	85	65	90	25	13	10	21
Intermed./low non-manual	71**	93	83	57***	92	32**	12	11	21
Self-employed/farmer	78	93	83	60*	94*	28	12	13	20
Manual	65***	86***	80*	52***	92	27	15	15***	23
<i>Parents' country of birth</i>									
Sweden (ref.)	71	94	83	59	92	28	13	12	22
Other	72	70***	76***	50**	89	36*	17	15	20
<i>Family economy</i>									
Cash margin (ref.)	73	93	83	60	92	28	12	11	21
No cash margin	59***	82***	79*	45***	87***	30	18**	18***	27**
<i>All</i>	71	92	82	58	92	28	13	12	22

***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05

^a The items "Too many assessments" and "Treated unfairly by teacher" were only included in 2002–2003 (n=2,454)

Framing the four empirical studies

Study I: The pros and cons of social relations: an analysis of adolescents' health complaints (with Viveca Östberg)

Health is a fundamental living condition among both adults and children. Young people in the Western world generally have few physical health problems and rate their health as good. Yet psychological and psychosomatic complaints are relatively common, and high rates of health complaints are reported from several European countries (Currie et al. 2008). The psychological health of children and young people is thus an important topic on the current political agenda. Recently in Sweden, two governmental propositions on public health have emphasized the psychological health of young people (Prop. 2002/03:35 and Prop. 2007/08:110), and a governmental report on young people, stress and psychological ill-health has been released (SOU 2006:77). Consequently, it is an important task to map what is associated with health complaints – both what may have negative effects on health and what may buffer against ill-health.

In Study I, the association between social relations and health complaints, i.e. psychological and psychosomatic complaints, among young people is examined. We use Swedish nationally representative surveys of children of 10–18 years, the Child-LNU of 2000 and the Child-ULF of 2001–2003, to analyse relations with parents and relations with peers in school and in leisure time, and their association with psychological and psychosomatic health complaints. Both the structure and the content of relations are analysed, and for the latter, we look at supportive as well as strained relations. The method used in the empirical analyses is logistic regression. Because the observations are not independent (i.e., some children in the sample, being siblings and step-siblings, live in the same households), the data are clustered and therefore robust standard errors are estimated. The main finding is that both relations with parents and peers are associated with health complaints. This applies to both boys and girls and to all of the age groups studied. Relational content, i.e. relational strain and social support, shows stronger association with health complaints than relational structure, such as family type. Children in single-parent and in reconstituted families do report more health complaints compared with children who live with two original parents. The association between family type and health complaints is, however, much less strong than that between relational strain with parents and health complaints. For both parents and peers, strained relations are shown to be more strongly

associated with health complaints than are supportive relations. In particular being exposed to harassment is associated with high levels of both psychological and psychosomatic complaints. According to our definition (based on a set of questions on harassment in school on a regular basis), 13 per cent of 10- to 18-year-olds are exposed to harassment in school regularly. Even though this is a minority of all pupils, it should be stressed that harassment is highly severe for those individuals who are involved: children who are subject to regular harassment in school report a range of other problems, including having a pessimistic view of their own future, having few friends outside school, and experiencing fear in other settings such as the neighbourhood (Jonsson and Östberg, forthcoming).

Study II: School-related stress and subjective health: effort and reward among school pupils (with Bitte Modin)

During recent decades, there has been an increase in health complaints among children and young people in Sweden (Danielson 2006). This also applies to several other Nordic and European countries (Berntsson and Köhler 2001; SOU 2006:77). As noted above, the increase is particularly pronounced in Sweden (SOU 2006:77, pp. 95–97). It has been suggested that the increase in such health problems among young people may partly be due to an increase in educational demands (Karvonen, Vikat and Rimpelä 2005). While the work environment and its association with health is a well-investigated field among adults, it is less researched among young people, whose natural work environment is the school. More research on the work environment in school and the association with pupils' health has therefore been called for (Häggqvist 2004). In Sweden, the school is encompassed by the Work Environment Act and accordingly it is stated that it shall be organized in a manner that is beneficial to the pupils' health. Consequently, there are also strong policy reasons to study this.

In the study of the work environment and health among adults, a commonly used theoretical framework is the effort-reward imbalance model (Siegrist 1996; 2002). In Study II, we apply this framework to analyse effort and reward in school and the association with subjective health. Data from the Stockholm School Survey of 2004 are used. The survey is a total sample of all ninth- and eleventh-grade pupils attending all schools in Stockholm city and eight of its surrounding municipalities. For Study II, we include data on pupils in the ninth grade only. Effort is constructed from two items: the pupil's own assessment of his or her

effort in very difficult school tasks, and whether he or she chooses to do something else if the school task is perceived as boring. Reward is operationalized in two alternate ways: as school marks, and as appreciation from teachers. Due to the hierarchical structure of the data, with pupils nested in classes and classes nested in schools, the method applied is multilevel linear regression analysis. We do not find empirical support for the theory, i.e. that effort-reward imbalance (high effort combined with low reward) is associated with poor health. Instead, both effort and reward are found to be positively associated with pupils' subjective health. In particular pupils who report putting high effort into school have high levels of subjective health. Reward operationalized as school marks is positively associated with health. Furthermore, it is found that pupils who get reward in terms of appreciation from teachers in school have better subjective health compared with those who claim they do not receive adequate appreciation. Contextual variation in subjective health between schools and in particular between school classes is found for girls but not for boys. Reward in terms of appreciation from teachers explains more of the school class variation in girls' health than does reward in terms of marks. Consequently, teacher support seems to be of importance not only for the individual, but also for the school class as a whole, at least for girls.

Study III: Parent presence and gender-typicalness of educational choice

Previous Swedish research has found that children who do not live with two original parents less often choose an academic programme in upper secondary school compared with children in intact families (Jonsson and Gähler 1997). Study III analyses family type and educational choice from another angle, namely, whether the absence of a father in the household is associated with a lower propensity to take the male-dominated natural science/technology (NT) programme in upper secondary school. The background is that children tend to choose educational tracks in line with the educational and occupational characteristics of their parents (Dryler 1998). Due to the strong horizontal gender segregation in education and in the labour market in Sweden, having a resident parent specialized in a male-dominated field is much less common among children in single-mother households compared with children in two-parent households. Thus, it is hypothesized that children who do not live with their father are less likely to choose a male-dominated educational track.

In Study III, I analyse register data combined with census data that includes all pupils in Sweden who graduated from the 9th and final grade

of comprehensive school in 1998 and 1999. The data were collected from a number of registers: the register of applicants and pupils accepted to upper secondary school in 1998 and 1999, the register of ninth grade pupils ("Årskurs 9-registret") of 1998 and 1999, the national censuses of 1985 and 1990 (FoB 85 and FoB 90), and registers of the total population (RTB) of 1998 and 1999. The methods used are OLS regression and logistic regression. The conclusion is that children in mother-only households choose the male-dominated natural science/technology (NT) programme in upper secondary school less often compared with children who live with two original parents. This, however, is accounted for by differences in socioeconomic conditions and their on average lower school marks. The "effects" of the NT skills of resident original mothers and fathers, of resident step-fathers, and of non-resident original fathers on educational choice are examined. For boys, resident original parents, non-resident fathers as well as step-fathers have positive effects on the choice of the NT programme. Geographical distance between non-resident father and child is used as a proxy for social contact, under the assumption that fathers who choose to live close to their children after a divorce take more interest in and are more involved with their children than are those who live far away from them. For boys, the effect of non-resident fathers' occupational characteristics is smaller the further away the father and the son live from each other, indicating that fathers who live geographically closer are more influential. The results are to some extent similar for girls: only the NT skills of original parents, whether or not in the same household, are positively associated with the choice of the NT programme, while the NT skills of step-fathers seem to be less important. In sum, the analyses indicate that children are in fact affected by their fathers even when the fathers do not live with them. Yet to some extent parent presence seems to play a role, as boys are more affected by non-resident fathers who live geographically close than by those who live farther away.

Study IV: Family structure and children's living conditions. A comparative study of 24 countries

In research on family type and child outcomes, measures of educational performance and educational attainment are frequently used as dependent variables, the general finding being that children with divorced parents perform and attain at a lower level than children living with two original parents (see Jonsson and Gähler 1997; Ringbäck-Weitoft, Hjern and Rosén 2004 for Swedish data; Astone and

McLanahan 1991; Sandefur and Wells 1999 for American data; Mahler and Winkelmann 2004 for German data). Also with regard to other types of outcomes, children in non-intact families are generally disadvantaged. The bulk of research has shown that children with divorced parents have poorer living conditions than do children living with two original parents, although overall the family type gap is modest (Amato and Keith 1991a; Amato 2000). There are reasons to believe that differences in resources between two-parent and single-mother households exist in most if not all countries. To date, there has been little research on the question of whether the “effect” of single-motherhood on child outcomes varies across countries. A recent meta-analysis and literature review of the OECD countries, however, did not find any systematic variation that could be linked to, e.g., national social policies (Chapple 2009).

Study IV analyses whether a set of living conditions, as reported by the children themselves, differs between those who live with both original parents and those who live with a single mother. More importantly, I examine whether the association between family structure and children’s living conditions varies systematically across countries. The purpose is exploratory and descriptive. The living conditions focussed on are social support, health, and material resources. The empirical analyses are based on cross-national data from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study of 2001/02. Within the HBSC research project, cross-sectional surveys with children of 11, 13 and 15 years of age have been conducted regularly since 1983/84. The focus is on health and health-related behaviours but some questions on other issues are included as well. The 2001/02 survey included 36 countries and regions of Western and Eastern Europe as well as Israel, Canada, and the US. The data are nationally representative, with some exceptions. The sampling technique was cluster sampling through school classes and the sample is approximately 1,500 students in each of the three age groups, i.e. a total of approximately 4,500 from each country.⁷ In Study IV, the method used is logistic regression, with the estimation of robust standard errors as the respondents are clustered within school classes. In a majority of the 24 countries studied, systematic family type differences are shown in that children in single-mother households report lower resources compared with children living with two original parents. The absolute family type differences are, however, relatively modest overall. This reflects the previously observed finding that there is a small but consistent gap in well-being between children in divorced and

⁷ For more information on the HBSC, see www.hbsc.org; Currie et al. (2009).

in two original-parent families (Amato and Keith 1991a; Amato 2000). No clear pattern is found with regard to differences between countries in the “effect” of family type, which is a result consistent with the findings of Chapple (2009).

Concluding remarks

The four empirical studies that make up the dissertation analyse different aspects of children’s living conditions “here and now”. In particular three general themes can be traced: health; family and social relations; and education and conditions in school. The dimensions studied are central both from an academic perspective and from the perspective of policy-oriented child indicators. These are central resources in the level-of-living framework as outlined by Johansson (1979) and constitute three of the level-of-living dimensions of children and young people. In addition, health, social relations, and education are fundamental features of child well-being according to UNICEF (2007) as well as the European Commission (2008; see also Bradshaw, Hoelscher and Richardson 2007; Bradshaw and Richardson 2009) and the OECD (2009). These dimensions are also represented among the indicators suggested in the governmental reports on the monitoring of child politics in Sweden (Ds 2005:59; Ds 2007:9). Moreover, health, family relations, and education are expressed as rights in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and constitute three of the eight thematic areas of the Convention (Santos Pais 1999, pp. 9–10).

Though not in focus here, health, social relations, and education are also of importance for children’s well-becoming, i.e. for children as future adults. Health status in childhood is associated with health in adulthood (Haas 2007). Furthermore, it has been put forward that child health is linked with future educational and labour market outcomes (for a review, see Currie 2009). Social relations in childhood are related to adult health. Being bullied in childhood (Lund et al. 2008), having low peer status in the school class (Östberg and Modin 2008; Almquist 2009) as well as being exposed to conflicts in the family (Gähler 1998; Gähler and Garriga 2009) are conditions that are associated with a higher risk of ill-health in adult life. Also family type can be seen as a (structural) aspect of social relations. Experiencing parental divorce in childhood is associated with poorer living conditions in adulthood, although effect sizes are weak (Amato and Booth 1991; Amato and Keith 1991b). Educational performance and educational choice predict future occupation and social class position (Erikson and Jonsson 1996).

Consequently, important as it is to study children's well-being here and now, research on the long-term implications of childhood conditions is obviously also of significance.

In the present dissertation, three of the papers are based on representative surveys with children as respondents, while one paper uses register and census data because this is more appropriate for the research question. In the study of children's living conditions, children's own reports are fundamental to achieving high validity. Data based on direct information from the children themselves also provide possibilities to include children in the democratic process: they make their voices heard by reporting on their living conditions, i.e. "how things are". This is in accordance with both the level-of-living perspective and with children's fundamental right to participation as expressed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Research can also assist not only in providing information about "how things are", but also in finding targets for policy by mapping possible causes of welfare problems. What follows is the challenging task of the political parties to, jointly with experts, formulate policies that aim at improving the situation of children and young people (cf. Johansson 1979).

Finally, with regard to future research on the living conditions of children and young people, what is the direction to go from here? First, in order to receive direct information from the young people as well as to make generalizations possible, population-based child surveys will be highly relevant also in the future. Particularly representative child surveys that also take into account intergenerational aspects are called for. Given the limitations in children's and young people's ability to give accurate reports on, e.g., their parents' socioeconomic characteristics (Currie et al. 1997; Andersen and Kjærulff 2003), an obvious advantage is the possibility to link information gathered from children with information gathered from parents. Examples of nationally representative surveys where both children and parents are included as respondents are the Level-of-Living Survey (LNU) and the Living Conditions Survey (ULF) in Sweden, the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) in the UK, the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) in Canada, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) and the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) in the US. As important as these studies are, one limitation is the lower age limit for participation in the child interviews, meaning that information on the youngest children's living conditions is collected from parents. In the Child-LNU, for instance, only children who turn ten to eighteen during the year of the data collection (i.e., year 2000 for the first survey) are interviewed and information on children younger than ten is collected from parents.

Consequently, a challenge for the future is to develop and try out methodologies that enable the collection of direct information on the living conditions of younger children too within the already existing frameworks.

A second challenge for future empirical research on children and young people is that new types of family constellations need to be taken into consideration, both in theory and in the data files. In Sweden, the parental separation rates declined after 1999, but since 2006 or so the separation rates have been more or less constant (SCB 2009b). This means that non-traditional family forms following family dissolution continue to be important. While “single parents” and in particular “single mothers” are frequently studied household types, in some countries including Sweden it has become a common arrangement for children with separated parents to share their time equally between parents’ homes. In Sweden in 2007, among children with parents not living together, 28 per cent divided their time equally between the mother and the father (SCB 2009c) compared with four per cent in 1992/93 (SCB 2007, p. 128). For these families, it is probably not accurate to talk about “single parenthood” in the traditional sense. Other non-traditional family forms, which are not consequences of parental separation, will certainly also grow more common in the future. Such family types include “rainbow families”, i.e. with two parents of the same sex (but also other constellations, e.g. more than two parents) and families with single women who become parents through insemination or adoption. A delicate issue on the future research agenda will therefore be to consider a broader array of family types and of living arrangements, and to analyse what these mean to the children.

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