Diverging Destinies: Introducing the Role of Social Environment and Genetic Sensitivity in the Effects of Family Instability

Result in Brief

Children’s life course in the hands of both their social environment and genetic predispositions

EU research under the DIVERGE project has investigated the joint role of social environment and genetic sensitivity in documented negative impacts of family instability.

Today, a substantial proportion of children experience parental separation and divorce. Many parents find new partners and build joint or new families. Whereas such family instability may have detrimental consequences for children's behaviour and mental health, it is unclear whether these negative effects are evenly distributed. The Marie Skłodowska-Curie project DIVERGE has investigated the role of social environment and genetic sensitivity in the effects of family instability from a cross-disciplinary perspective.

Impact of social environment and genetics

“The project uses new and unique data and combines insights from social and developmental science to advance knowledge on three connected issues,” outlines the fellow, Lisbeth Loft. DIVERGE investigated if multiple changes in the family structure had an impact and if children with fewer resources in their social environment were more vulnerable. Lastly, the negative effects of greater genetic sensitivity were subject to analysis.

“It is important to improve our understanding of heterogeneity in effects of family instability because it allows us to more effectively address barriers to children's development and families’ social mobility,”
emphasises Loft. DIVERGE results will help explain why some children overcome the experience of social disadvantage while others don’t. The result will be more appropriate interventions and programmes serving children and families to reduce children's negative outcomes.

**Challenges met head-on**

As Loft outlines, “the data I initially planned to use turned out to be unavailable even though I was assured of its availability at planning stage.” The researcher, undaunted by this hurdle, managed to overcome the unexpected challenge by engaging much more in the availability of other new data. “I learned that when you are working on a research topic at the very forefront of scientific development, the type of data needed can change very rapidly due to methodological progress. Luckily for my project, new and improved data sources became available just at the right time,” she comments.

**Beyond the ivory towers of research**

Loft is eager to acknowledge that the Marie Curie (MC) grant enabled her to understand the importance of research outside the strict walls of the research community. “I went beyond my comfort zone and actively participated in public debates and media that linked to policymaking in a direct and applied manner,” she emphasises.

New frontiers explored in inequality research during DIVERGE were aired at the ‘Better Lives for Children and Youth in Denmark’ conference in Copenhagen. The study has important research and policy implications. “I also presented DIVERGE gene-environment research at a hearing of the Danish Parliament, an honour as there was an extraordinary array of experts presenting,” Loft comments. The focus of the proceedings was on children and the benefits of early intervention programmes.

Looking forward, she has successfully obtained funding for a large interdisciplinary research project at the University of Copenhagen where she will be able to build on the research conducted during her MC grant. Having also prioritised links to policymaking entities, specifically the Danish Ministry of Children and Education, the result is a bridge between research and policy. “I will likely further strengthen this link, to place my research closer to the actual workings of policymaking to improve the ways research can serve as a foundation for social intervention programmes,” Loft concludes.

**Keywords**

DIVERGE, children, social environment, family instability, policy, genetic sensitivity

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