Do omega-3 food supplements improve children’s reading and behaviour?: the DOLAB (DHA Oxford Learning and Behaviour) study

Researchers from the Department have published a study that promises to re-ignite debate about whether improving children’s diets might have benefits for their behaviour and learning as well as their physical health.

Why was this study carried out?

The diets of UK children are typically low in the omega-3 fat DHA (docosahexaenoic acid, found in seafood), which is essential for mental as well as physical health. In recent years there has been interest in whether an increased dietary intake of omega-3 fatty acids might have benefits for child behaviour and learning, with some positive evidence from small, well-controlled studies of children with ADHD (attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder) and related conditions. This evidence has led to the suggestion that similar benefits might extend to other children from the broader school population.

Aims of the study

The DOLAB study - a randomised, double blind, placebo controlled trial - was designed by Professor Paul Montgomery and Dr Alex Richardson to explore whether healthy children (aged 7-10 years) from a large general school population might benefit from omega-3 DHA supplementation.

The expected benefits from this intervention were an improvement in reading ability (the key outcome given the importance of literary skills in educational progress) and working memory, as well as a reduction in behavioural problems (ADHD symptoms) as rated by parents and/or teachers.

Who took part?

Over 1300 healthy children aged 7–10 years from 74 mainstream primary schools in Oxfordshire were invited to take part and 362 children participated taking either three capsules containing DHA or three placebo capsules a day. Reading, working memory, and parent and teacher-reported behaviour were assessed both at baseline and after 16 weeks of dietary supplementation. The study focused on children whose reading performance fell within the lowest third of the normal population distribution.

Key findings

Results provide the first good evidence that dietary supplementation with omega-3 DHA might improve both the behaviour and learning of healthy children from the general school population.

Only children with initial reading performance in the lowest 20 per cent of the normal distribution showed benefits for reading, suggesting that for this outcome DHA should be regarded as a targeted intervention for the poorest readers rather than a universal one. However, reductions in parents’ ratings of ADHD-type symptoms were evident across the entire sample, suggesting that DHA may have broader applicability for behavioural problems.

The results thus extend previous findings from clinically-defined groups to healthy but underperforming children from the general school population, and suggest that dietary deficiencies of DHA might have subtle behavioural and cognitive effects on children in general.

What next?

We have secured funding to carry out a confirmation study, looking at the effects of DHA in children whose reading performance falls within the lowest 20 per cent for their age. This will be a larger study than the first, and we anticipate enlisting the help of at least six local authorities, increasing the generalisability of our findings.

Child learning and behaviour problems create substantial costs for society as a whole as well as for those affected and there is an urgent need for safe, effective interventions to address these problems. If the results from the first study are confirmed, the implications would be profound.
Head of Department report

Welcome to this year’s edition of Barnett House News.

2011-12 has been a very exciting and successful academic year for the Department of Social Policy and Intervention (DSPI).

We continue to attract a significant amount of research funding. Colleagues have been successful in securing funding from a diverse pool, including the Economic and Social Research Council, European Commission, the John Fell OUP Research Fund, and UNICEF as well as industry sponsors.

Outstanding accomplishments by our ‘early career’ scholars are evidenced amongst others by the award of a Future Research Leaders grant by the Economic and Social Research Council to Dr Stuart Basten. This will provide Stuart with the opportunity to further develop his independent research trajectory over the course of the next couple of years.

I am confident that achievements such as Stuart’s will provide motivation and encouragement to the next generation of outstanding graduate research students to enter academia. Supporting young scholars is one of our top priorities. We plan to invest into two additional DPhil scholarships for promising and outstanding graduate research students each year beginning in the academic year 2013-14. We hope that we will be able to raise additional funding from various sources, including donations from alumni, to further expand our scholarship programme for DPhil students in the years to come. As in previous years, the DSPI will also continue to invest in postdoctoral researcher positions to provide early career scholars with the opportunity to independently develop their research.

The DSPI is very proud to have had the opportunity to co-host the distinguished Harvard academic Professor Theda Skocpol as the Astor Visiting Lecturer in May 2012, and to welcome a number of world-leading academics to our seminar series on family policy.

DSPI will celebrate its centenary in academic year 2013-14. Baroness Ruth Lister will kick start the year of celebrations with the Sidney Ball Lecture in December 2013. In addition to various academic activities throughout the academic year, Barnett House plans a reunion for July 2014. For further and up-to-date information, please, visit our departmental website from time to time or send us an email.

I hope you enjoy reading this year’s Barnett House News.

Professor Martin Seeleib-Kaiser

Staff changes

We are pleased that Professor Mary Daly is joining us in October 2012 as Professor of Sociology and Social Policy. Mary is currently a professor of sociology at Queen’s University Belfast, and has published on various fields, including gender, family, care, poverty, welfare state, and labour market. Much of her work is comparative, in a European and international context, and interdisciplinary.

Peter Kemp has resigned as Barnett Professor of Social Policy to join the new Blavatnik School of Government. As Head of Department, Peter contributed significantly to the Department’s transformation.

Pat Buckley retired from the Department in September 2012, after 12 years working on the administrative team.

Members of the Department honoured

The Department was delighted that the work and the contribution to social sciences research of two of its members was recognised in the recent Honours Lists.

Robert Walker, Professor of Social Policy, was awarded an MBE in the New Year’s Honours list for his services to social policy research. Robert’s research interests are in the areas of poverty, social exclusion, family dynamics and budgeting strategies, children’s aspirations and employment instability and progression.

Ann Buchanan, who was Professor of Social Work and Director of the Centre for Research into Parenting and Children at Barnett House and remains a Senior Research Associate at the Department, received an MBE in the Queen’s Birthday Honours for her contribution to social science research. Ann’s research focuses on promoting wellbeing in children, especially children at risk of social exclusion.
**Centenary of Barnett House**

In the academic year 2013-14, we will be celebrating 100 years of rich history: Barnett House has played a significant part in many of the key debates in the history of voluntary endeavour, social policy, and social research in Britain. Alumni have held or hold prestigious positions in academia, the professions and public service, nationally and internationally. All of this adds up to something worth celebrating.

One of the key aims of the Centenary celebrations is to reinforce the connections we have with our alumni. We would like to invite you to all events held during the Centenary year, most notably to the Centenary Sidney Ball Lecture to be delivered by Baroness Ruth Lister on 4 December 2013, and to an Alumni Reunion Weekend on 12-13 July 2014.

We will be developing a section of our website ([www.spi.ox.ac.uk](http://www.spi.ox.ac.uk)) to let you know about the events. We would also like to celebrate the achievements of our alumni on a new alumni section of the website. Please contact us if you would like to be featured or have news to announce.

**The Sower**

Barnett House was founded in June 1914 in memory of Canon Barnett (1844-1913), an Anglican clergyman and social reformer married to Henrietta Weston (1851-1936). In 1873 the Barnett family settled in Whitechapel, then a poor area in the East End of London, where they worked unceasingly for the poor of their parish. Barnett kept in close contact with Oxford (where he had studied), with the group around the philosopher and social reformer T. H. Green, Arnold Toynbee and Sidney Ball, all closely involved in adult education and university reform, civic education and welfare reform.

When Toynbee died, Barnett proposed his memory should be celebrated in practical action, through the founding of a ‘settlement’. This was at a meeting in November 1883, called by Sidney Ball in his rooms at St John’s. Toynbee Hall in the East End of London, the first university settlement, was the result; and Barnett was appointed first warden. When Barnett himself died in 1913, a group of his disciples met in Sidney Ball’s rooms (thirty years to the day after the meeting proposing Toynbee Hall), to set up a new institution in Oxford in his memory; not this time a settlement, but a centre combining study, training, adult education and local involvement.

Barnett House used the Sower as its emblem, taken from George Frampton’s sculpture on Canon Barnett’s memorial in Westminster Abbey, with its inscription ‘Fear not to sow because of the birds’ drawn from a biblical parable. A drawing of the Sower, with the inscription ‘Edidit fructos centuplum’ (‘He brought forth fruit a hundred-fold’) – a reference to its central function of teaching – was used by Barnett House for many years as the company seal and as its library bookplate, and has been revived for the Centenary.

**Barnett House history project**

In preparation for the Centenary, a research team, funded by the Nuffield Foundation (Teresa Smith, Eve Colpus, Katie Field, Jennifer Park, Liz Peretz and George Smith) is charting the history of Barnett House to be published in a book that will be launched in June 2014. The book will be more than simply a celebration of 100 years, as the twists and turns in the Barnett House story throw considerable light on the pressures and tensions of running an institution of higher education that grapples with contemporary social issues and practical professional training while retaining its academic independence and standing. After the initial optimism and certainty of the founders about its direction, there were many difficult transitions, with pressure either to focus more on practical and applied work or on more academic research as befitted its prestigious university setting.

While Barnett House was in 1914 physically at the heart of the university and was set up by leading reformers in the university, it was an independent institution. It was established ‘to advance the systematic study of current social and economic questions’, to encourage and train people to take up social and caring work, particularly in the urban ‘settlements’ in disadvantaged areas such as London’s East End, and to promote adult education. This was before Oxford had an economics department or degree, and 10 years before the Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE) course was established.

Barnett House began its first social work training during World War I as a module in the University’s Diploma in Economics and Politics, a non-degree course which recruited many women, overseas students and ‘working men’ – highly innovative for its time, as Oxford only granted full status to female students in 1920: membership of the University, with the right to be formally matriculated and to take degrees.

Over the years Barnett House gradually moved into a closer relationship with the university and in 1960 officially became a university department, then as now based in Wellington Square. Perhaps the most surprising findings so far have been the many continuities over the 100 years: Barnett House was from the very start a multi-disciplinary and international institution of learning and research; it has taken Rhodes scholars since World War I and has had significant numbers of non-UK students since 1918. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries it has further developed its international reach, by developing a truly global research trajectory with an international group of faculty members, researchers and students.
Sidney Ball Memorial Lectures

The Sidney Ball Memorial Lectures were first established after World War I in memory of Sidney Ball. Ball was a philosophy fellow at St John’s College, Oxford, but also a political radical and university reformer. He was convinced that contemporary social and economic problems should be studied at Oxford, and was the first president of Barnett House when it was formed in 1914.

Sidney Ball died in March 1913, and the first lecture was given in 1920 by the Rt. Hon. Sir Horace Plunkett on The universities and rural life. The second lecture in 1922 was given by Sir William Ashley on Scientific management and the engineering situation.

The Memorial Lectures were given annually from 1923 until 1947, addressing ‘modern social, economic or political questions’. A number of distinguished speakers delivered lectures, including the economist John Maynard Keynes, historian George Macaulay Trevelyan and Mrs Sidney Webb, a sociologist, economist, social reformer and co-founder of the London School of Economics and Political Science. The annual series was revived in 2006-07, and the 2011 lecture was given by Professor Mark W. Lipsey of the Peabody Research Institute, Vanderbilt University, USA.

2011 Lecture Evidence-based interventions in juvenile justice: concepts, research, practice, and frontiers

Evaluations of social programmes have often found little evidence of impacts. As a result there has been increased interest in developing programmes based on prior research that has already shown positive effects. Such interventions are often “name brand” programmes certified by some group as supported by credible research, e.g. Functional Family Therapy. In his talk, Mark Lipsey took a different perspective, with an emphasis on the generic program type, e.g. family therapy, a category that includes name brand and other programmes that share the distinctive characteristics of that programme type.

Much more research is available on the effectiveness of programmes of a given type than on any individual name brand programme of that type. Moreover, such research generally shows that the effects of the name brand evidence-based programmes, on average, are not notably better than those of similar homegrown programmes. This situation was illustrated with the findings of a large review of research on interventions for juvenile offenders. This demonstrated that many types of interventions tended to show positive average effects on re-offense rates, although the results of individual studies of these interventions showed wide variation around these averages. Further analysis revealed that much of that variation could be accounted for by the amount of service provided, the quality with which the intervention was implemented, and the risk level of the juveniles served.

These results were used to develop an instrument that can be used to rate programmes for juvenile offenders according to how closely they match the profiles of the interventions found most effective in the review (called the Standardized Program Evaluation Protocol or SPEP). A study of the ratings generated by this instrument on a range of established programs used by the Arizona juvenile justice system in the U.S. demonstrated that juveniles served by programmes with high ratings did indeed have lower reoffending than similar juveniles served by lower rated programmes.

The primary practical implication of these findings is that evidence of effectiveness is not limited to the name brand programs that appear on the various lists of evidence-based programs. There is also evidence supporting the effectiveness of some generic programs as well, thus the scope for use of evidence-based programs is much wider than that allowed by the prevailing approach.

2012 Lecture

This year we celebrate the seventieth anniversary of the Beveridge Report, which was highly influential in the founding of the welfare state in the UK. Sir William Beveridge, who chaired the report, delivered two Sidney Ball Lectures.

We are delighted to have Professor John Hills from the London School of Economics deliver the 2012 lecture, entitled The reform of the welfare state and the dynamics of people’s lives. The lecture will take place on 31 October 2012 at 5 p.m. in St Antony’s College. All welcome.

Podcasts of the Sidney Ball Memorial Lectures are available at http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/sidney-ball-memorial-lectures
Conferences and workshops in 2011-12

An important part of the Department’s work involves providing opportunities for colleagues from around the world to gather to discuss and explore research themes and collaborations. The Department hosted three workshops during 2011-12.

Workshop in comparative methods

A Workshop in Comparative Methods took place at the Oxford Institute of Social Policy on 12-14 January 2012, providing an overview of and introduction into various comparative methods. The workshop presentations were based on the research project *Integrating macro and micro perspectives in cross-national comparison: Dynamic policy structures and individual outcomes*, which is funded as one of four projects within the Economic and Social Research Council Methods for Comparative Cross-National Research Initiative.

The workshop also provided space for the 40 international participants to present and discuss issues they are grappling with in the realm of comparative methods. Members of the project team are Dr Emanuele Ferragina, Professor Martin Seeleib-Kaiser (Principal Investigator), Dr Mark Tomlinson (now University of Sheffield) and Professor Robert Walker.

Poverty and shame workshop has global impact

A workshop held in March 2012 generated an avalanche of ideas for engaging the public and governments in more serious thinking about appropriate policy responses to the continued existence of poverty globally.

The workshop, sponsored by John Fell OUP Research Fund, brought together key policy actors and media experts from around the world to explore the implications of research, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Department for International Development, that shows people in many countries feel ashamed by their poverty and are despised and humiliated by those who are more affluent. This shame is wounding, reduces people’s agency, and may be exacerbated by anti-poverty programmes that deliberately or inadvertently stigmatise participants. The workshop generated an initiative to promote the principle that governments should have respect for the rights and dignity of people covered by social security and social assistance provisions that was successfully incorporated into the International Labour Organisation (ILO) *Recommendation concerning national floors of social protection*, approved by 184 countries in June 2012.

Social policy in a developing world

Rebecca Surender organised a one day conference on 8 June 2012, titled *Social policy in a developing world*. Approximately 60 people attended the event from the UK and overseas universities.

The conference examined the challenges and opportunities facing social protection systems in the global south and assessed current strategies for addressing poverty and welfare needs. Presentations examined the role of main institutions for shaping welfare policy and delivering services including the World Bank, IMF, NGOs, the informal economy and the private sector as well as some of the main mechanisms involved, such as social security, conditional social assistance, public works and social entrepreneurship. A particular focus was the extent to which the analytic models and concepts for the study of social policy in the industrialised North are relevant in a development context.
Student news

The George and Teresa Smith Awards were launched in 2010, established by five former students wishing to thank the Department for the opportunities and skills gained during their time in Oxford, and to honour George and Teresa Smith for their hard work. The annual awards acknowledge academic achievement in Comparative Social Policy and Evidence-Based Social Intervention. The students have purchased two plaques on which the names of the winners will be engraved each year. The Department is grateful to the alumni for enabling it to recognise students' hard work and achievements. In 2011 the awards were won by Verena Stocker (Comparative Social Policy) and Sean Grant (Evidence-based Social Intervention).

The Department also awards an annual Barnett Prize for the best paper submitted. In 2011-12, two awards were made: to Sean Grant for his paper The reporting quality of complex social intervention trials: a systematic review of reporting guidelines and trial publications, and to Rebecca Waller for her paper Do harsh and positive parenting predict parent reports of deceitful-callous behaviour in early childhood?

Each year the Department awards funds to students to support them presenting at conferences. We are delighted that Mahima Mitra won the prize for the Best Student Research Paper at the European Early Childhood Research Association (ECERERA) conference held in Portugal in 2012.

Sean Grant

Randomised controlled trials (RCTs) of complex social interventions are increasingly used for decision-making in evidence-based policy and practice. Greater attention to the rigour of conducting RCTs has led to greater attention to the quality of reporting RCTs. In response, collaborations of researchers and journal editors have made a concerted effort to develop reporting guidelines that assist authors in writing high quality journal articles.

The Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials (CONSORT) Statement is a reporting guideline specifically for RCTs. Since its publication, countless reviews have demonstrated improvements in the reporting quality of medical RCTs, yet several studies indicate persisting deficiencies in the reporting of complex social intervention RCTs. Consequently, many researchers have suggested modifying CONSORT for social interventions because of their unique, complex features.

My DPhil research focuses on developing an official CONSORT Extension for Complex Social Interventions. For the first phase of the project, I conducted two systematic reviews that comprehensively assessed reporting guidelines for and the reporting quality of complex social intervention RCTs.

Results indicate that CONSORT guidelines employed better practices in development and dissemination, yet other guidelines yielded 89 modified standards for complex social interventions not found in CONSORT. Moreover, the reporting quality of RCTs across several social and behavioural sciences was consistently inadequate. These findings suggest that current reporting guidelines are insufficient in their development for and impact on reporting complex social intervention trials warranting a new CONSORT extension.

Bárbara A. Zárate

My research focuses on the democratic politics of welfare regimes in developing countries, particularly in Latin America. With the highest income inequality in the world, countries from this region face significant social policy challenges to incorporate those sectors of the population that have been historically excluded from the social contract. Even though the democratisation process in the region brought political opportunities for citizens collectively to organise and channel their demands through non-conventional forms of political participation, little research has been done on the relationship between social mobilisation and social policy.

My research looks at the nexus between collective protest, preferences for redistribution, and governments’ social spending choices. Particularly, I analyse how demonstrations, strikes and riots by organised labour and ordinary citizens influence social spending choices of political leaders in the region.

The study involves quantitative analysis of the relationship between health, education and social security spending and different protest events in 18 Latin American countries over the period 1970-2008.

The results show that in democracies collective protest has differentiated effects on social spending with labour-related protest having a strong positive effect on social policy, particularly on social security spending. Results also confirm previous research that has found a positive effect of democracy on human capital spending. Overall, these results suggest that while democratic governments may favour more redistributive types of social spending (i.e. education and health), organised labour is able to obtain policy concessions when carrying out strikes.
Alumni news

**Derek Kilmer** graduated from Princeton with a degree from the Woodrow Wilson School and completed a DPhil at the Department as a Marshall Scholar. Derek’s thesis compared the experiences of mining communities in South Wales and timber towns in the Pacific Northwest. After working briefly for McKinsey & Company he joined the Economic Development Board for Tacoma-Pierce County.

Derek has been a representative in the Washington State Legislature since 2005, where he is recognised as an authority on economic development and job creation. Derek received the highest rating of any state Senator from Enterprise Washington’s Business Institute and is the three-time recipient of the “Leader of the Year” Award from the Washington Economic Development Association. Derek also serves as the Vice-President of the Economic Development Board for Tacoma-Pierce County, a non-profit organisation focused on helping businesses expand and creating jobs.

Derek has been a tireless champion of education. As past chair of the Senate Higher Education & Workforce Development Committee and trustee of a local community college, Derek has fought to expand access to financial aid to college students and promote lifelong learning. Derek is now running for the US Congress in the district where he was born and raised.

**Kristen Underhill** completed the MSc in Evidence-Based Social Intervention in 2005, followed by the DPhil in 2007. While at Barnett House, Kristen worked with Paul Montgomery and Don Operario, focusing on behavioral HIV prevention and systematic review methods. After finishing her DPhil, Kristen received her Joint Degree (Juris Doctor) from Yale Law School and completed a DPhil in Political Science from the National Institutes of Health (NIH)-funded postdoctoral fellowship in the Department of Community Health at Brown University. At Brown, Kristen benefited from the continued mentorship of Don Operario, and she used the skills she learned at Barnett House to collaborate on new reviews and primary studies. She was subsequently awarded an NIH grant to study the acceptability of a new biomedical strategy for preventing HIV, and she is affiliated with the Yale Center for Interdisciplinary Research on AIDS and Yale Law School.

Kristen has found that her DPhil training was invaluable, providing her with the research methods she uses on a daily basis and the career mentorship she needed to develop an independent research agenda. "I have benefited immensely from my close contact with faculty at Barnett House, and the department’s emphasis on methodological rigor and academic publishing were outstanding preparation for my current work."

**Benjamin Todd Jealous** is the 17th President and CEO of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the oldest and best known civil rights organisation in the United States. Founded in 1909, the NAACP has played a key role in the civil rights movement for over a century.

Ben began his career as a community organiser in Harlem in 1991 with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. In 1993, after being suspended for organising student protests at Columbia University, he went to work as an investigative reporter for Mississippi’s frequently-firebombed Jackson Advocate newspaper. After completing his degree in political science at Columbia University, he won a Rhodes scholarship and took the MSc in Comparative Social Research (now the MSc in Comparative Social Policy) at the Department in 1997-98.

Over the past two decades, Ben has helped organise successful campaigns to abolish the death penalty for children, stop Mississippi’s governor from turning a public historically black university into a prison, and pass federal legislation against prison rape. His journalistic investigations have been credited with helping spur official investigations into law enforcement and corruption.

**Huck-ju Kwon** studied politics at Seoul National University, Korea, and came to Oxford in 1990 for his DPhil on The welfare state in Korea: the politics of legitimation with a Swire Scholarship.

Kwon worked as a Research Officer at Sussex University, then in 1997 he returned to Seoul and taught Comparative Social Policy and the Korean Government and Politics at Sung Kyun Kwan University, before moving to Geneva to work as Research Coordinator at the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

In 2008, Kwon returned to Seoul National University where he remains a Professor at the Graduate School of Public Administration, and Deputy Director of the Asia Development Institute. He has also served on a number of government committees in the Republic of Korea.

Kwon has been active in the international academic community of social policy. He has served for Global Social Policy as Regional Editor for East Asia since 2003 and as Vice-President of the Research Committee 19 on Poverty, Social Welfare and Social Policy of the International Sociological Association since 2010. Kwon hosted the RC19’s annual conference in Seoul in 2011 - the first time it was held outside Europe.
Selected publications 2011-12


Ferragina, E. (2012) *Social capital in Europe: a comparative regional analysis*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. This book investigates the determinants of social capital across 85 European regions by complementing socio-economic explanations with a comparative historic-institutional analysis between two deviant cases (Wallonia and the south of Italy) and two regular cases (Flanders and the north east of Italy).

Kemp P.A. & Crook, T. (2011) *Transforming private landlords: housing, markets and public policy*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell. In this book, Peter Kemp and Tony Crook explore the ways in which the ownership, funding and public perception of private landlordism – ‘buy to let’ – has changed over the past few decades; and examine the role of public policy and other factors in that transformation.

Picot, G. (2012) *Politics of segmentation: party competition and social protection in Europe*. London and New York: Routledge. The book analyses how party competition affects reforms of social protection. It shows that not only the party in government matters, but also the party system within which parties compete against each other.

We are developing a section on our website for alumni news, and hope to feature alumni and their achievements. Please do contact us with information to add to the website, for example details of what you are doing now, books you have published, reflections on your experiences in the Department etc. Please contact us on editor@spi.ox.ac.uk or by post to Barnett House, 32 Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2ER.

The Department’s website, www.spi.ox.ac.uk, contains information about us, including details about staff and their research, news and events. As the Centenary approaches, keep an eye on the website for details of the celebrations.

Alumni have the opportunity to keep in contact via facebook pages for ‘Evidence-Based Social Intervention’ and ‘Oxford University Comparative Social Policy’, and potential students are directed there to find out more about the Department, the courses and Oxford.