Reviewer's report

Title: Family functioning and parenting factors as mediators of the relationship between the ethnic minority status and child problem behaviour: the Generation R Study

Version: 1 Date: 19 September 2012

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BMC Public Health review: 19th September 2012

Family functioning and parenting factors as mediators of the relationship between the ethnic minority status and child problem behaviour: the Generation R Study

This paper analyses data from 4,282 pre-school children in the Generation R prospective cohort study in the Netherlands. It compares child behaviour at age three across ethnic groups after adjusting for a variety of appropriate confounders and mediators. The results suggest that pre-schoolers from ethnic minority groups are more likely to present problem behaviour than native Dutch children but that this association is mediated by family functioning and parenting factors as well as by socio-economic factors.

This is a very nicely written paper in which the research questions are well-defined. The title and abstract are clear and accurately convey background, methods and findings.

Background: this section summarises previous work nicely and succinctly highlights the gaps in the literature and the research questions to be answered in this instance.

Methods: the data are from an established cohort study and there is no evidence to suggest that they are anything but sound. On the whole methods are appropriate although I wonder whether why the authors chose not to use more proximal measures of family functioning – one might speculate, for example, that the association between maternal psychopathology and child behaviour might be even stronger (and more important) if the measures were closer together. Appropriate confounding / mediating factors were chosen for the model although it is not always clear when these were measured and statistical analyses are appropriate given the nature of the data. In addition (as noted in more detail below), there are other factors which might have been included in the analysis but were not (e.g. maternal affect after the birth of the child, time spent in day care or with the main carer) that might influence the findings; if they cannot be included in the analyses then some discussion regarding their omission would be useful I think.
Results: the findings from the data are reported appropriately and tables and figure are clear and comprehensive.

Discussion: results are summarised appropriately and some strengths and limitations of the study are stated (although others, eg restricted confounders / mediators) are missing. The authors state (p.12) that causal relationships cannot be warranted given that some of the data was collected cross-sectionally but I also wonder whether the distal nature of the family functioning measures (collected ante-natally) muddies the findings a little – while I can see that maternal depression in pregnancy is an important factor, I also think that maternal psychopathology after the birth of the child may also be important and I would like to see that considered as well, if not in the analyses then certainly in this section.

The authors also suggested (p.12/13) that language and cultural barriers might explain some of the generational effects: I’m not convinced by this argument as the measure of child behaviour is maternal report: surely language and culture at home would not be affected by such barriers... a little more clarification here would be helpful. Similarly, there is discussion of the effects of acculturation occurring in different rates in parents and children (p.13): while this is more than plausible in older children, is it really likely to have had an effect on these pre-school children? Without information about time spent in day care or away from the main carers I feel that this may be a step too far! I also agree with the authors that prenatal stress may influence the development of stress systems in the child but these are likely to be modified by post-natal maternal affect / psychopathology and again, without accounting for these factors in this analysis I feel that the interpretation of these results needs to be modified a little.

In summary, this is an interesting paper and one which I think can add something to the literature. I would suggest acceptance for publication after revision as noted above and listed again here for simplicity:

1. Clarification re: why only pre-natal measures of family functioning were used and consideration of more proximal variables that may have a concomitant effect on child behaviour
2. Clarification regarding when data on confounding variables was collected
3. Consideration of variables that were not included in the analysis that may well confound or at least modify the findings reported here.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.
Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests