

English language skills and parents' wellbeing

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Access to information is a vital stepping stone in the process of managing everyday affairs. With the enormous expansion of information which can now be received through technological advancements, there is a growing concern that certain sectors of society will be left behind. Of particular concern are those who do not speak the local language, and their families. How do they fare in terms of socio-economic status and personal wellbeing?

The Australia of the mid 1990s is a multicultural country, one of the most ethnically diverse in the world. In an ideal world, this diversity would be reflected not only in the services available to all citizens, but also in research, especially on the family.

In early studies, immigrants were treated as a homogeneous group. More recently, researchers have compared immigrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds with other immigrants, on the grounds that, despite their diversity, immigrants with non-English-speaking backgrounds have common problems in coping with a culture dominated by another language (Bottomley and de Lepervanche 1990).

However, not all immigrants with non-English-speaking backgrounds have a poor command of English – a factor not taken into account in much of the research. In recognising that English language skills vary within this group of immigrants, the study reported here seeks to assess implications of English language skills for those with non-English-speaking backgrounds. Specifically, attention is directed to socio-economic patterns and to health and sense of wellbeing.

The following analysis is based on data from the Australian Living Standards Study, undertaken by the Australian Institute of Family Studies between late September 1991 and April 1993. The study examined the living standards of families with at least one child aged less than 20 years, irrespective of whether or not the child was living at home. In all, about 5,000 households in rural and outer, middle, and inner metropolitan areas in various states were surveyed. Translators were employed where necessary.

Around 15 per cent of families participating in the study were classified as having a non-English-speaking background on the grounds that a parent spoke a language other than English at home (N = 662). Of these, 32 per cent indicated that a parent had a poor or no command of English (here called 'limited-English' families), while the remaining 68 per cent indicated that both parents or sole mother were proficient in English (here called 'sound-English' families). (This

question concerning command of English is currently used in the census of the Australian population conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.)

In the present analysis, these two 'language' groups are compared with families in which only English was spoken at home (here called 'English-only' families). Of couple families classified as limited-English, difficulties with English were most commonly reported for both parents (54 per cent), followed by mother only (36 per cent). Only 10 per cent of limited-English couple families indicated that only the father had difficulties with English.

Not surprisingly, parents in limited-English families were more likely than their sound-English counterparts to have

been in Australia for less than ten years – couple fathers 54 and 41 per cent respectively; couple mothers 61 and 45 per cent respectively; sole mothers 59 and 35 per cent respectively.

As shown in Table 1, Asian and European countries were among the most common birthplaces of parents with non-English-speaking backgrounds, although some differences were apparent according to command of English and family type.

Socio-Economic Status

Figure 1a shows that, of the three groups, the limited-English families were the most likely to have incomes below the poverty line and the least likely to have incomes of

at least twice the poverty line. As expected, sole-mother families in the three groups fared worse than their couple counterparts. The pattern of circumstances of the sound-English families are closer to those of the English-only than the limited-English families.

Consistent with their low incomes, the limited-English families were the most likely to have no parent in paid work and, again, the pattern of work status for the sound-English group was more similar to that for the English-only families than for the limited-English group (Figure 1b). For the English-only and sound-English families, paid work was most likely to apply to both parents, followed by father only, whereas much the same proportions of limited-English families had both parents in paid work, father only in paid work, or neither parent in paid work. Not surprisingly, a relatively high proportion of all sole mothers were without paid work, but this situation was particularly common for sole mothers with a poor command of English.

Figure 1c refers to the present or most recent occupational status of each parent. Again, the greatest differences are apparent for the limited-English families: around three-quarters of parents in this group and 18 to 45 per cent of other parents had worked in blue collar jobs. For couple

Table 1 Country of birth by language group and family type

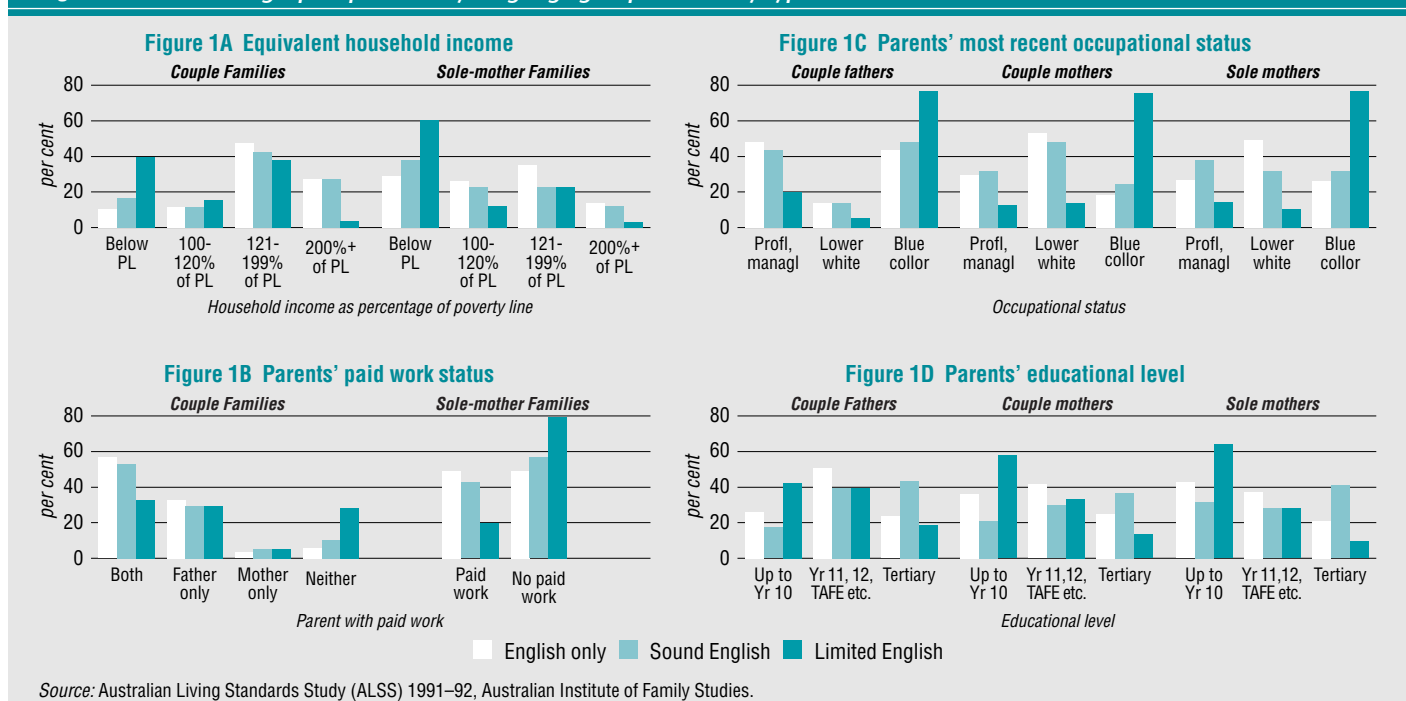
	Couple fathers			Couple mothers			Sole mothers		
	English only %	Sound English %	Limited English %	English only %	Sound English %	Limited English %	English only %	Sound English %	Limited English %
Australia	78	18	2	80	18	1	81	12	3
Other Eng.-speaking	14	3	0	14	2	0	14	2	0
SE, Sth Asia	2	21	29	2	26	29	1	19	43
NE Asia	<1	6	25	<1	8	25	<1	7	3
Europe	5	30	20	3	26	20	3	26	11
Sth, Central America									
Caribbean	0	5	8	0	5	9	0	12	23
Mid East, Nth Africa	<1	9	15	<1	7	15	<1	14	11
Other	1	8	1	1	8	1	1	7	6
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

fathers and mothers (taken separately), patterns of occupational background were similar for those in English-only and sound-English families. For sole mothers, on the other hand, professional or managerial backgrounds were more common for the sound-English than for the English-only group.

Can we assume that the limited-English families will 'catch up' to the sound-English families in terms of financial status and employment in the future, or do the groups differ in fundamental ways that may impede such achievements?

While the English-language skills of some parents are likely to improve with length of residence, educational attainment represents one fundamental difference between the two groups that may impede the progress of limited-English families. Figure 1d shows that parents in such families were the most likely to have no more than Year 10 of schooling, while parents in sound-English families were the most likely to have tertiary qualifications. In general, these differences in patterns of educational attainment were apparent for those from each of the most

Figure 1 Socio-demographic patterns by language group and family type



common birthplaces listed in Table 1. With such differences in education, it may take more than one generation for any catching up to occur.

Health and Sense of Wellbeing

Although disadvantaged relative to the other groups in terms of socio-economic status, parents in limited-English families may not necessarily be unhappy with their lot. After all, these people may feel that they are much better off than they would have been had they stayed in their country of origin, and the future they can offer their children may seem much brighter.

There is controversy concerning the ways people arrive at judgements of how satisfied they feel (Veenhoven 1996). Some argue that levels of satisfaction derive from the perceived gap between actual circumstances and those aspired to or expected. Aspirations or expectations, it is argued, are based on various standards of comparison including perceived current circumstances of peers and past personal situations. Veenhoven maintains that such comparisons may play a role in satisfaction with certain domains of life (such as income), but that satisfaction with life in general is more likely to be inferred from reflections upon past emotional experiences – if past feelings have been mostly positive then life will be judged as good.

In addition, a general disposition towards happiness or unhappiness may colour perceptions of circumstances, thereby influencing satisfaction.

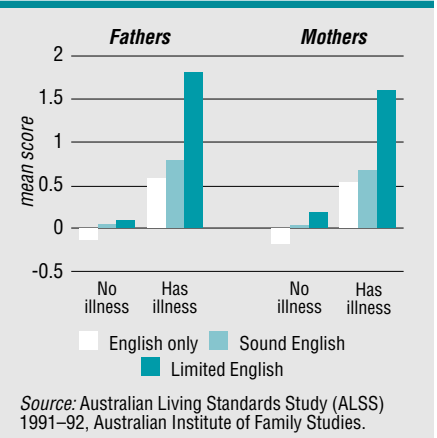
Table 2 lists the various personal wellbeing measures examined. For simplicity, separate results for couple and sole mothers are not provided. However, family type is taken into account later on, along with other factors such as residential location and income. With the exception of the last measure presented (perceived unwellness), high scores reflect relatively high wellbeing. Circumstances generating the highest satisfaction are listed first. (See accompanying boxed inset for explanation of measures used in Table 2.)

Mean scores varied significantly across the three 'language' groups for all measures except one for both sexes (employment situation for those not employed) and three others for fathers only (sociability and satisfaction with family relationships and with financial status). However, some of the significant differences were small and may not necessarily translate into meaningful differences in everyday life – for example, satisfaction with family relationships for mothers.

Differences between groups

As Table 2 shows, where differences were significant, the greatest contrast usually occurred between those in the English-only

Figure 2 Parents' sense of unwellness by chronic illness, language group and gender



and limited-English groups, with the latter group indicating the lower wellbeing. For some issues, the sound-English group was similar to the English-only group (for example, satisfaction with education/qualifications for both sexes). For other issues, the sound-English group was similar to the limited-English group (for example, satisfaction with housing for both sexes). Finally, all three groups differed significantly from each other on some issues – with the wellbeing of the sound-English group falling between that of the other two

Personal Wellbeing Measures

Most of the measures focus on level of satisfaction, based on ratings on scales ranging from 1 'Extremely dissatisfied' to 9 'Extremely satisfied', with the mid-point (5) being labelled 'Mixed feelings'. Some of the satisfaction items refer to each parent's average rating for related issues. For example, the family relationships item includes relationships between self and children, partner and children, and children within the household, while that for financial situation covers family income, personal income, and money personally available.

The self-fulfilment measure is also based on satisfaction ratings, specifically: satisfaction with 'what you are accomplishing in life', 'the respect or recognition you get', 'your independence or freedom', and 'the extent to which you are the kind of person you would like to be'. The sense of mastery and sociability measures represent shortened versions of those used by Pearlin and Schooler (1978) and Headey and Wearing (1992) respectively. The maximum possible score was 5.00.

Finally, perceived unwellness represents each person's average standardised score for reports on personal health, satisfaction with health (where ratings were reversed, so that high scores reflect dissatisfaction), and ratings of the amount of

time pain is experienced, and health interferes with social life, with ability to concentrate, and with the type or amount of

work undertaken. Scores on each measure were standardised because different rating scales were used.

Table 2 Indicators of personal wellbeing by language group and gender (mean scores)

	Couple Fathers			All Mothers		
	English only	Sound English	Limited English	English only	Sound English	Limited English
Satisfaction with:						
Family relationships	7.87	7.85	7.73	7.81	7.94	7.57*
Children's wellbeing	7.65	7.49	7.07***	7.83	7.56	7.24***
Life as a whole	7.20	6.76	6.28***	7.21	6.91	6.23***
Transport situation	6.94	6.62	6.60**	7.17	6.60	6.25***
Personal, emotional life	6.93	6.71	6.58*	6.81	6.65	6.22**
Housing	6.85	6.49	6.38***	6.89	6.44	6.37***
Overall living standard	6.80	6.28	6.05***	6.85	6.32	5.71***
Employment sitn (if employed)	6.73	6.24	6.30***	6.95	6.60	6.25**
Number of close friends	6.48	6.23	6.14*	6.96	6.50	6.37***
Level of education/qualifications	6.24	6.43	5.33***	6.18	6.12	4.87***
Amount of pressure experienced	5.58	5.04	5.34***	5.65	5.31	5.22**
Leisure/time	5.52	5.25	5.30*	5.55	5.12	5.23***
Financial situation	4.93	4.73	4.63	4.72	4.37	4.28**
Employment sitn (if not employed)	2.35	3.17	2.88	2.31	3.12	2.88
Sense of fulfilment	6.85	6.72	6.56*	6.77	6.78	6.32**
Sense of mastery	3.73	3.56	3.41***	3.68	3.50	3.22***
Sociability	3.37	3.38	3.41	3.64	3.53	3.47***
Perceived unwellness	-0.02	0.08	0.41***	-0.07	-0.11	0.46***

Notes: Maximum score for the 14 satisfaction items and for sense of fulfilment = 9; maximum score for sense of mastery and sociability = 5.

* p<.05; ** p<.01; *** p<.001

(Refers to overall significance of differences between means before effects of other factors were controlled).

groups (for example, satisfaction with life as a whole and sense of mastery for both sexes).

The greatest differences in satisfaction ratings of those in English-only and limited-English families were apparent for life as a whole, overall living standard, and education/qualifications for both sexes, and for mothers, transport situation and employment (if employed).

In evaluating the trends shown in Table 2, consideration should be given to the possibility that those with limited English skills may interpret words such as 'satisfied' and 'dissatisfied' differently from other groups. Thus those in limited-English families may not necessarily be less content than others. On the other hand, relevant research suggests that differences between nations or cultural groups in patterns of responses to satisfaction measures do not simply stem from measurement biases, semantics, or response styles, but rather reflect actual variation in subjective wellbeing (Veenhoven 1996). Furthermore, Table 2 shows that those in limited-English families did not indicate significantly lower wellbeing than those in sound-English families on all measures.

For all groups, the average satisfaction ratings concerning family relationships and children's wellbeing ranked first and second highest. However, the average for life as whole – which Headey and Wearing (1981) used as a general measure of morale – ranked seventh highest for fathers and mothers in limited-English families and third highest for all other groups. It thus seems reasonable to suggest that those in limited-English families were, in fact, less satisfied with their lives than other groups, even if their current socio-economic circumstances represented a marked improvement over those experienced in their country of origin.

Differences that were only marginally significant tended to become non-significant when the effects of the following factors were taken into account: socio-demographic circumstances (as outlined in Figures 1a–1d), country of birth, family life course stage (as measured by age of youngest child), and residential location (inner, middle or outer urban, or rural) and years in Australia. For the analysis for mothers, the effects of family type (couple or sole mother) were also taken into account.

Most of the other differences – such as satisfaction with life as a whole, sense of mastery and perceived unwellness – remained significant when these other factors were taken into account. Thus for these issues, factors such as their poorer financial status could not explain the lower wellbeing of parents in limited-English families.

Although parents in limited-English families indicated significantly higher sense of unwellness than one or both other groups, no significant differences were apparent in the proportions in each group who reported chronic health problems, that is, disabilities or chronic illnesses of a

moderate or serious type. The proportions indicating such problems ranged from 15–20 per cent of fathers in the three groups, and from 17–24 per cent of mothers. In the vast majority of cases, illnesses rather than disabilities were mentioned. The overall differences between the three groups in perceived unwellness could not be explained in terms of any differences in the types of illnesses reported. However, when parents do have a chronic illness, some may experience their condition differently from others (Powles and Gifford 1990).

In order to explore this issue further, sense of unwellness was examined for those with and without chronic illnesses. Figure 2 shows that sense of unwellness was particularly marked for the limited-English group who reported a chronic illness or disability. These parents seemed to be strongly affected by such health problems.

Although the sound-English and limited-English groups with chronic health problems tended to visit their general practitioner (GP) more frequently than their English-only counterparts, use of general practice services was particularly high for the limited-English sub-group with chronic health problems – a trend consistent with their heightened sense of unwellness. Of those with chronic health problems, at least seven GP visits in the previous 12 months were reported by 33 per cent of fathers in English-only families, 58 per cent in sound-English families, and 65 per cent in limited-English families. The respective percentages for mothers were 47 per cent, 58 per cent, and 66 per cent. Of those with no chronic health problems, at least seven GP visits were reported by only 8–16 per cent of fathers and 23–26 per cent of mothers.

Conclusion

In summary, the greatest differences in wellbeing were apparent between parents from English-only and limited-English families. Parents in limited-English families fared the worst on most measures of wellbeing. Those in sound-English families displayed similarly high levels of wellbeing as the English-only group for some measures – including the four objective indicators of socio-economic status – and similarly low levels of wellbeing as the limited-English group for other measures. For satisfaction with life as a whole and sense of mastery, all three groups differed significantly.

While the three groups did not differ in terms of the proportions with chronic illnesses/disabilities, parents in limited-English families who reported such health problems were particularly prone to experience a high sense of unwellness. The identification of factors explaining such trends represents an important area for future research – for example, the possible contribution of pressures linked with poor English skills and of cultural differences in

the way symptoms of illness are experienced. Such research would provide valuable insights into the nature of appropriate measures to improve the wellbeing of those with poor English and may help stem the tide of possible repercussions of unwellness, including the use of expensive medical services and worker absenteeism.

These results also have implications for research methodology and highlight the need to take account of command of English when describing the circumstances of people from non-English-speaking backgrounds. While there has been considerable criticism of researchers treating respondents with a non-English-speaking background as a homogeneous group, it is unlikely that general population surveys will enlist sufficient numbers to compare specific cultures. Command of English, on the other hand, seems a useful and important compromise.

In the absence of translators, almost all those with a non-English-speaking background who participate in research studies will be reasonably proficient in English. The above-mentioned differences suggest that it is important to view our usual samples of non-English-speaking background people as selective and non-representative. If interpreters are engaged in order to enlist those who have difficulty communicating in English, then command of English should be taken into account in analysis of results. However, use of interpreters is no guarantee that some cultural groups may interpret and respond to survey questions differently from other groups.

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