

So what did you make of that session?

Ian Winter

2 ‘So what did you make of that session?’ was the question I found myself asking during the coffee and lunch breaks of the Fifth Australian Family Research Conference, as I attempted to stay abreast of the five concurrent sessions. With the breadth of the conference program testing the roving skills of any reporter, the coverage of this report is inevitably partial, primarily reflecting the conference sessions I attended.

Under the headings ‘Policy research and policy development’, ‘Corporate responsibility and the family’, and ‘Economic restructuring and family living standards’, I discuss some of the key themes raised by keynote speakers and how these were developed further during the paper sessions.

Policy research and policy development

The Commonwealth Minister for Family Services, the Hon. Judi Moylan, drew out the theme of the conference *Family Research: Pathways to Policy* in her opening address. She stressed the need for better communication between policy makers and researchers, policy relevant research that presented findings in an accessible manner, and the inclusion of policy makers and practitioners in the design stage of research programs.

Some of these issues were developed further in the conference session *Approaches to the Conduct and Implementation of Policy Oriented Family Research*. Lee Wightman highlighted some of the barriers to the effective use of research in policy making, including the values–facts dichotomy, the

differing time frames of research and political decision making, and non-uniform national laws. She argued that these barriers needed to be overcome, particularly as recent changes in public sector management approaches, from a focus on inputs and process to outputs and outcomes, created a greater role for research.

Corporate responsibility and the family

Ron Burke, representing the major sponsor of the conference, the National Australia Bank, argued for the corporate sector to take responsibility for the re-building of social capital, for it not to ignore the community stress that could be caused by corporate decision making, and to balance the interests of shareholders with community obligations. While Cox (1995) has main-

tained that social capital and competition were not mutually exclusive, Burke advocated a re-emphasis on civic values. He maintained that there was a role for the corporate sector in providing financial and marketing assistance to community groups as they attempted to re-build social capital which, while easily depleted, is not easily replaced.

Papers in the session, *Work and Family Preferences*, picked up on this theme of corporate responsibility but asked for its exercise more directly within the work-place. Brennan, Cass and Arrowsmith, asked the question: what are the implications for ‘family friendly’ policy making of an industrial relations environment in which the growth of ‘precarious labour’ (jobs which are temporary, insecure, casual or seasonal) play an increasingly prominent part. Brennan’s presentation emphasised how corporate responsibility appeared to be left wanting as increasing ►

numbers of personnel worked in non-fixed time jobs and on casual contracts. She posed the meaning of this increasing job uncertainty in relation to children's needs and the provision of child care services.

Given the dramatic changes that the Australian labour market is currently undergoing, the needs of families in relation to these changes quite properly attracted continuing attention. Papers by Wilson and by Glezer sought to explain the work preferences of women with children. Wilson, drawing from international debates about the extent of choice women can exercise in work-family issues, concluded, perhaps not surprisingly, that degrees of choice change as family income increases. For low income parents, however, it was found that government provision of a Parenting Allowance was an important factor affecting their decision of whether to remain in paid work or not.

Baker compared the 'choices' of sole mothers in Australia and Canada. She found that the Sole Parent Pension in Australia allowed mothers some choice to care for their children at home or to enter the labour force. This situation bettered that of Canada where no equivalent pension exists. In Canada relatively unqualified people with family responsibilities are expected to find their own jobs and child care in a competitive labour market. Yet, despite these social policy differences, 53 per cent of children living in Australian one-parent families were below the poverty line, compared to about 49 per cent of Canadian children in one-parent families.

In the session *Caring and Workforce Participation*, including two papers by Turvey and Thompson and one by Watson and Mears, the primary focus of social policy on the provision of child care services and maternity and paternity leave was criticised for not incorporating the pressures women also faced in caring for the elderly and the disabled. The findings from Turvey and Thompson pointed to 'internal' factors such as the disability of the care recipient, the care provided and the amount of informal support available, and 'external' factors such as the provision of support services, income support and workplace conditions, as having a significant impact on combining caregiving and employment.

The call for greater understanding of elder care was furthered by de Vaus in a paper focusing on children's responsibilities to elderly parents. The findings demonstrated that many people accept that adult children have some responsibilities and obligations for the wellbeing of their elderly parents, yet acceptance of this was by no means universal, unequivocal or without qualification. Given this, de Vaus highlighted the dangers of policy forging ahead on the basis of misplaced assumptions about the levels of support available from families for their ageing family members.

Economic restructuring and family living standards

In his keynote address, Professor Bob Gregory, Head of the Division of Economics and Politics at the Australian National University, presented

an engaging analysis of the significance of industrial change for families, between 1979 and 1995. Examining the impact of unemployment on men and women with dependents, Gregory demonstrated that, in terms of gaining access to full-time jobs, fathers had done less well than all other men aged under 60 years. Mothers, however, had fared better than married men, picking up an extra 429,000 jobs, but only 10 per cent of these had gone to mothers whose partner was out of work. Extrapolating the analysis of the unemployed parents to the circumstances of children, households where neither parent had paid work had risen over the period by 175,000. The implication of this is that approximately 18 per cent of Australian children lived in a house where both parents were out of work.

Yet, due to the concentration of the unemployed in particular parts of our cities and rural towns, 10 per cent of Australia's postcode zones house families where about half the children live in homes where neither parent has a job.

With the growth of two-income families all but static and unemployment for families with dependents worsening, especially for sole parents, Gregory identified a trend towards work rich and work poor families – a situation of social polarisation that meant Australia was no longer one nation. Gregory warned of the growth of an underclass and argued that policies relying on faster job growth alone would not provide the answer – the jobs boom of 1982–84, only lowered from 14 per cent to 12 per cent the percentage of

families where neither parent worked.

Papers from a session entitled *Living Standards: Change Over Time* teased out some of the other details of the implications of economic restructuring and industrial change for Australian families. Bryson and Winter's study of social change in a working class suburb, showed how jobs, incomes and housing were the basis of common experiences across the community in the 1960s, but of economic divisions by the 1990s. Saunders and Urquhart assessed change in family living standards between 1976, 1984 and 1994. Focusing on expenditure rather than income, they demonstrated how living standards for both sole parent and couple families fell from 1975–76 to 1984, and then went up in the period 1984 to 1993–94.

The precision of analyses focusing on expenditure will undoubtedly be strengthened by the work of the Budget Standards Unit at the NSW Social Policy Research Centre. A symposium, presented by Bittman, Chalmers and Murray, outlined how budget standards will be developed for 12 different household types to capture the cost of children, the costs of labour market entry, the costs of retirement and the costs of sole parenthood. The power of this style of analysis is that it includes data on the wide range of items (that is, more than just income) that comprise a household's living standards. Papers in the symposium focused on housing and food.

The notion that living standards comprise more than just a household's income was furthered in a later session, *Living Standards: Low Income Families*. Herbert, Roche and Smith's

overview of the Department of Social Security's Community Research Project, which is evaluating the value of community resource information centres, usefully reminded conference delegates of policy directions, other than income support, that may improve the living standards of low income families. Turning from formal support mechanisms to the informal sector, Short underlined the importance of 'kinship economies' in the maintenance of a 'decent' standard of living. Her study of 'emergency relief' recipients highlighted how such relief acted as a substitute means of support for those estranged from kin or those without kin who have resources to 'share'.

Questions raised during the living standards stream probed for information about the implications of the presented findings for children in disadvantaged households. The common response was that this was just not known as the data were unavailable; it would appear that this is a continuing gap in socio-economic analyses of family living standards. Work is underway to bridge the gap however, notably that of the aforementioned Budget Standards Unit and that of the Brotherhood of St Laurence – Janet Taylor presented an overview of the 'Life Chances of Children Study' which commenced in 1990. The study seeks to increase understanding of the effect on children of low family income over a period of time and to compare the lives of children in low income families with those of more affluent families.

If socio-economic approaches to family research have tended to ignore the interests of children, the same cannot be



Above: Dr Kathleen Funder responds to Justice Michelle May's address at the Conference launch of *Remaking Families*. Left: Lixia Qu, Researcher, Australian Institute of Family Studies.





This is an overview of the
Institute's Fifth Australian
Family Research Conference
held in Brisbane, 27-29
November 1996.



Deborah Whithear, Manager of the Institute's *Australian Family & Society Abstracts* database (left) and Annette Dowie, AIFS Publications and Distribution Officer.

said for family research informed by psychology. The session *Children's Wellbeing*, explored some of the themes raised by Dr Harry McGurk, Director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, in his opening address. McGurk commented on the Commonwealth's proposals for quality assurance in child care. He was critical of changes to the funding of child care that were announced in the 1996 Budget and of the proposal by the Small Business Task Force to make quality assurance voluntary.

Drawing on a range of basic research, McGurk demonstrated the importance of parents' caretaking practices in fostering social, intellectual and communicative competence in children. Then, travelling a pathway between an established body of academic research and policy development, he argued that social policy must ensure that child care services complement effective parenting. Hence the need for mandatory quality assurance in the delivery of child care services, well trained and qualified child care staff, and better pay

and conditions. The address closed with a call for the Commonwealth to learn from the mistakes already made by countries that had tried and failed to improve child care quality via market forces.

Closing remarks

The Institute's Fifth Australian Family Research Conference presented a wealth of research findings of great value to policy development, much of which enjoyed wide media coverage at the time of the conference. To ensure that the pathways to policy continue to be travelled, however, social policy researchers will need to think imaginatively about strategies to enable ongoing dialogue between research and policy development, rather than relying upon the episodic dialogue of conferences.

Reference

Cox, E. (1995), *A Truly Civil Society*, Boyer Lectures, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Sydney.

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Conference Poster Session

One of the main features of the Institute's Fifth Australian Family Research Conference was the Poster Session held on the second day in the main auditorium. Twenty presenters, representing a diverse range of academic and service provider organisations, attracted a large and interested audience who was able to view the posters and discuss with presenters the research and programs on display.



Pat Jewell, Children's Protection Society, Melbourne.



Elizabeth Parry, Special Education, Edith Cowan University, Perth.



Jaz Beer, Family Statistics Unit, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.



Christine Kilmartin, Australian Institute of Family Studies.



Susan Greig, Moreland Community Health Service, Coburg, Victoria.



Jan Nicholson, School of Public Health, Queensland University of Technology.



Marina Harvey, Workfam, Sydney



Helen Murray, Centacare, Brisbane.



Wendy Stone, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

of other cognate interests to the themes of the Institute's Australian Family Research Conference can only increase the hybrid vigour of family studies in Australia.

References

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- La Rossa, R. (1995), 'The culture of fatherhood and the early 20th century popular press', Paper presented at the 57th Annual Conference of the National Council on Family Relations, Portland, Oregon, November.

Note

- 1 Sociometrics Corporation, 170 State Street, Suite 260 Los Altos, CA 94022-2812 Fax: 415-949-3299, Phone: 415-949-3282, E-Mail: socio@socio.com, SAMPLE Sociometrics, <http://www.socio.com/search.htm>

Kate Funder is a Principal Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, and member of the Conference Program Committee.

New Institute Book Launched

The launch by Justice Michelle May of the Family Court of the Institute's latest book, *Remaking Families: Adaptation of Parents and Children to Divorce* provided a fitting end to the first day of the Australian Family Research Conference.

Remaking Families, by Dr Kathleen Funder, a Principal Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, is the third and final publication from the Institute's long-term study of the effects of divorce. *Remaking Families* shows that, contrary to popular belief, most parents and children appear to be living productive and settled personal and family lives six or so years after separation.

In launching the book, Justice May said, 'In my view, it shows that divorce alone does not damage children, it is the way the adults around them behave.' The findings in the



Justice Michelle May of the Family Court of Australia launches *Remaking Families*, by Kathleen Funder, at the Institute's Fifth Australian Family Research Conference in Brisbane.

book supported the recent changes to family law, particularly the concept of the continuing responsibility of *both* parents for their children.

Justice May spoke of the importance of parents making their own arrangements in relation to their children, and the Family Court's assistance for parents trying to reach agreement. Court intervention, she said, should be seen as a last resort for parents who can't agree. It was important to

understand, however, that the majority of parents are able to agree about arrangements for their children.

Although the findings of the book are largely positive, Justice May emphasised two issues of continuing concern – the curtailment of educational opportunities for some children which are the consequence of the failure of non-resident parents to contribute properly to their needs, and the stress on sole parents and their need for affordable housing, jobs and support in their child rearing responsibilities.

Remaking Families introduces the children of the parents interviewed in the first two stages of this long-term study. Justice May kept her final comments for them: 'We all know that children are keen and accurate observers. What they experience, they will pass on. I found the children's stories touching and demonstrated how much they understood about the behaviour of the adults around them. Parents should not forget that.'

– Catherine Rosenbrock
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