



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

The Institute Family Res

C O N F E R E N C E

To provide as broad a coverage as possible, two views of the conference proceedings are presented. Even so, in presenting an overview, it is impossible not to be selective, giving only a flavour of the conference and omitting or passing lightly over papers of high quality.

Family studies is a hybrid

Kate Funder

1 Family studies is a hybrid. Its sources range from national statistical collections to experimental studies; interpretations depend on theory based in diverse disciplines – from clinical psychology to economics; research questions derive from policy concerns such as employment, housing, family law and child protection; and findings inform policy development.

Family studies in Australia has its own characteristics, too. It is less tied to home economics/family science than is the case in the United States, and it is identified more with service evaluation and applied goals than linked with basic sociology, law, and economics, as tends to be the case in the United Kingdom and Europe (Funder et al. 1996).

Both the richness of family studies and some of the dilemmas inherent in its diversity were reflected in the program for the Institute's Fifth Australian Family Research Conference – *Family Research: Pathways to Policy*. A family research conference cannot, however, be all things to all people, and the 1996 Brisbane conference will appropriately suggest future directions for conferences and family studies generally. Whatever the new directions, maintaining quality

and drawing on new areas of study are goals for future conferences and for family studies in general.

One such extension for future conferences might be to attract more international participants. International comparisons serve to discriminate between macro causes of family changes and national or group effects. Similarly, policy developments need to be tested across national boundaries. We had a small but significant contingent of overseas participants at the conference from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand who helped extend the ambit of the conference beyond the national boundaries.

A possible extension of family studies into new areas of inquiry might in future lead to the inclusion of papers from social history, for example. Work such as that of La Rossa (1995), demonstrating the evolution this century of the meaning of 'father' in popular American magazines is an illustration of the importance of historical depth in family studies, and the usefulness of an historical perspective in debates over work-family roles, child care, and family support services. Perhaps for the next conference we will cast an even wider net.



Keynote speaker Professor Paul Amato, Department of Sociology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA.



Ruth Weston, Researcher, Australian Institute of Family Studies.



Four members of the Institute staff enjoy the Conference Dinner on board the river boat *Kookaburra Queen*. From left: John Shelton, Wendy Stone, Adam Tominson and Viviana Lazzarini.

Pathways to Policy

The conference banner – pathways to policy – opened the way for examination of the complex relationships between policy development and research. In its simplest form the research-policy nexus can be described as either research directed by specific policy objectives – How should child care be funded and provided?

Under what conditions is family mediation effective? – or, research directed to understanding basic causes and interactions between people and social and economic structures, the implications of which are applied in policy development.

This dichotomy between basic and applied research is too polarised, but research may be considered along a dimension

ate's Fifth Australian Research Conference

P R O C E E D I N G S

2

V I E W S

KATE FUNDER considers a selection of papers as examples of basic and applied research in family studies, and **IAN WINTER** discusses some of the themes introduced by keynote speakers and how they were developed in a range of papers.

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 ►

ranging from basic and theory driven research to applied research and evaluation. We may agree, however, that there is nothing so practical as a good theory, and the best research, while anchored in the real world, provides the basis for replication and testing over a range of policy questions. How did the Brisbane conference measure up along such a dimension?

Some basic research informing policy

Symposia on sibling relationships and divorce outcomes for children are examples of basic research with a range of policy implications. Professor Patricia Noller convened a group of papers (Sheehan, Feeney, Noller and Peterson; Peterson and Brown; Feeney and Humphreys) from the University

of Queensland which examined intra-familial relationships and their impact on child wellbeing and family functioning. These papers, embedded in social and developmental psychology, have implications for family policies in day care/education. How should siblings be placed? In family law, what wisdom can be offered about the importance of siblings to the wellbeing of children after

parental separation? And in parent education, conflict management in families, and guidance, what does sibling rivalry imply for family functioning?

The interface between family relationship and public policy is nowhere more difficult than where abuse and violence are concerned. Craig and Strahan's paper on responding to abuse in religious families



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

adds a further consideration to general problems of disclosure and help-seeking by examining the incidence and treatment of abuse in religious communities. Their work points to the need for public policies developed to minimise domestic violence, to look closely at how well general principles apply to special groups – in this case ones in which religious authority may interact with power to increase the risk of domestic violence.

In his keynote address, Professor Paul Amato addressed a series of questions about the nature of divorce and its effects on children: If I divorce will my children be more likely to divorce? How much damage does divorce do to children? Professor Amato considered longitudinal research on families over almost 20 years in drawing his conclusions that children are somewhat more likely to follow their parents into divorce, and that small but statistically significant deficits in wellbeing are evident in young adults whose parents divorced.

In the paper session on divorce outcomes for children, two very challenging perspectives on child wellbeing following divorce were presented, by Dr Rosemary Dunlop and Dr Bryan Rodgers. Dunlop's paper reported on a longitudinal study over ten years of the impact of divorce on adolescents. This painstaking research examines the development of young people's lives in intact and divorced families. It elaborates the complexities of family life which appear to form young adults, ideas about their family of origin and their own intimate relations. Family relationships, regardless of family type are important in young adults' wellbeing. It is a perspective that challenges many predictions about outcomes based on either

crisis perspectives of divorce, or predictions based on statistical differences observed in epidemiological studies of divorce.

Rodgers used a meta-analysis of Australian divorce studies to examine whether national differences exist in the impact of divorce on children. In broad terms his findings are consistent with Amato's data in the United States. The major points in these papers are that divorce, crudely represented as a life event, carries some risks for children. Family relationships and functioning (especially chronic disharmony) are bad for children; having a steady parent is good for children; and the differences described by large population studies are a poor indication of how any particular child will be affected by divorce.

Another common thread in this work is the investment in long-term basic research. Its implications for policies are, however, quite evident. Amato summarises some of these in advocating investment in family support and rejecting impediments to parents divorcing. The latter, he argues, would result in informal separations, with the same results as divorce, or constrain warring parents within the same house, which is sometimes more damaging for children than divorce itself. Family support policy and family law reforms (FLA 1995) are obvious beneficiaries of this kind of research.

Other research on children's wellbeing demonstrated breadth in perspectives and approaches, as well as in the practical policy concerns it addressed. In the session on children's wellbeing, Dr Sharne Rolfe examined the micro-interactions between babies and their parents and daycare workers; babies seemed to enjoy their interactions with parents more than

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.

those with caregivers. This work is part of ongoing research informing questions of the quality of daycare and the combined effects on babies of daycare and parent care.

In a different vein, Ruth Weston's paper on the wellbeing of young people in families with non-English-speaking backgrounds drew on the Institute's Australian Living Standards Study, a large national survey designed to examine access to wealth (income, services, quality of life) and individual wellbeing throughout

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

Australia. Weston's work, both in this paper and elsewhere, shows the importance of language acquisition for educational achievement and wellbeing of young people. It also addresses issues about the entry of young people from non-English-speaking backgrounds into mainstream Australian life, thus informing immigration and settlement policies.

Policy analysis

Welfare policy: Whose responsibility? was the topic addressed by two keynote speakers,

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.



Ensuring the smooth running of the Conference are, from left: John Shelton, AIFS Business Manager, Catherine Rosenbrock, AIFS Marketing Manager, and Annette Dowie, AIFS Publications and Distribution Officer.

Professors Bob Officer and Bettina Cass. Officer, the Chair of the National Commission of Audit, challenged the concept of the welfare state. His analysis of the ageing society and the costs of care invited focused debate on the affordability of preserving standards

of living across age cohorts, and between the employed and unemployed (or under-employed) in a shrinking job market. Cass, Professor of Social Policy at the University of Sydney, accepted the challenge and reversed the question, essentially asking how we

could afford the social costs of *not* maintaining public responsibility for standards across groups in society.

Debates such as this one can clearly be only the beginning of a process of examination, and should be continued in other forums where more middle ground can be established. If there was a weakness in the conference it was possibly in not attracting papers from both ends of the spectrum of economic theory which would carry this debate to more refined propositions.

Applied research

Under this heading, an array of papers tackled issues such as families and the media (Margaret Cupitt, from the Australian Broadcasting Authority); predictors of paying child support (Trevor Sutton); an evaluation of the Family Law Reform Act (Kate Funder); and an evaluation of family and youth homelessness (Michael Horn).

All these papers had their roots in quite specific policy debates. For example, Sutton presented an examination of



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.

Ian Winter is a Senior Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

20,000 child support cases to test propositions about payment and non-payment of child support. The outcomes are important in understanding opposition to the Child Support Scheme and offsetting the self-selecting representations made to Parliamentary Committees. This paper is a case in point, however, of how applied research benefits by a good theory, with the author testing the power of economic theories to predict payments.

The session on ageing was an example of studies with an interesting amalgam of basic and applied features. Helen Edwards and Patricia Noller examined the needs of carers and receivers of care and their relationships; the study was embedded in family relationship research, while informing policy on home care for the elderly. David de Vaus examined the norms of care across generations in order to establish a benchmark against which acceptance of age policies may be assessed.

Gender, power and money were the topics of two papers, again with very diverse methods, but with quite wide implica-

tions. Littlefield used decision theory to examine styles of organising family economics. The implications of such power were clearly drawn out in the Fehlberg's paper on 'sexually transmitted' debt. This intriguing title arises from her analysis of intra-couple loans and English law – an analysis that has important implications for banking policy and divorce law, particularly as more and more families have their income from small businesses. These two papers, as well as many others in the program, illustrate the importance in family studies of juxtaposing disciplines (clinical psychology and law) on topics relating to economic and legal issues of topical importance.

Surveys and future research

Professor Bob Gregory's demonstration of the omission of children's wellbeing from macro economic analyses was revisited in the session on surveys of children. The paper of Dean and Knott, from the Family Statistics Unit of the Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Adding the fourth dimension: statistics on children over*

time, addressed the need for longitudinal data on children in Australia and the possibility of deriving these from the Survey of Employment and Unemployment. As such data bases are very expensive to acquire, the need for consortia in planning, funding and using such surveys was evident in discussion. In the United States (Sociometrics Corporation¹), surveys are being compiled on CDs and marketed with excellent software which makes them available at reasonable cost to researchers. Responsible use of data collected on national samples funded by government grants clearly requires continuing investment in technology as well as good will.

Summary

It is difficult to point neatly to the strengths and weaknesses of the Fifth Australian Family Research Conference. On the strong side was the diversity in presentations, yet this was also a difficulty. People who sought greater depth in their area were sometimes disappointed by the brevity of sessions. The umbrella of future family research confer-

ences might well be used to convene day-long symposia giving participants more opportunity for debate on theory, methods, and the implications of findings for policy development.

In the same vein, some conference sessions (such as the Officer-Cass debate) highlighted polarities in current thinking on social welfare, the need for sustained dialogue in finding common definition of problems, and in seeking solutions outside the ambit of this conference. This goal may be beyond a general family research conference, but it remains a challenge if family studies is to inform policy development.

The happy coincidence of two other conferences, one before and one after the Australian Family Research Conference, suggests scope for further coordination. The Social Policy Research Centre Conference at Griffith University, and the Mental Health and Families Conference conducted by the Queensland University of Technology School of Public Health, enabled very useful interchange – and drove the scarce conference dollar further. The addition

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.



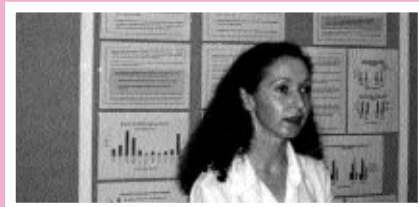
Jan Nicholson, School of Public Health, Queensland University of Technology.



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

- Funder, K., Edgar, D., Whithear, D., Brownlee, H., Glezer, H., Harrison, M., Hartley, R., McDonald, P., Ochiltree, G., & Wolcott, I. (1996), 'Family studies in Australia', in R. Hanks & M. Sussman (eds) *Marriage and Family Review*, vol. 22, nos. 3-4, pp. 287-332.
- 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
AIFS Marketing Manager