Cultural Diversity and Family Exchanges

Picture: Don White

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The popular perception of the cohesiveness of migrant families compared with Australian-born families is that migrant families are relatively self-reliant. This paper examines the availability and dynamics of family supports across a range of Australian families to determine whether distinctive patterns exist for families from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

Recent societal change in Australia is contributing to a policy shift away from state based supports for families towards the promotion of family 'independence' and self-reliance. The popular perception of the cohesiveness of migrant families compared with Australian-born families is that migrant families are already relatively self-reliant. However, this stereotype is challenged by factors such as the specific characteristics and needs of migrant families as well as the impact of family and migration policies. Indeed, the question needs to be asked: How well are migrant families faring in an era of family self-reliance? The availability and exchanges of family supports are central to answering this question.

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This paper examines the availability and dynamics of family supports across a range of Australian families to determine whether distinctive patterns exist for families from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

The first part of the paper provides an overview of cultural diversity in Australia, the general directions of immigration and family policies, and a summary of current research in family exchanges. The second part includes an analysis of data from the Australian Institute of Family Studies Australian Life Course Study on exchanges within a range of culturally diverse Australian families, followed by consideration of the extent to which families from non-English-speaking backgrounds reveal distinctive patterns of exchanges.

Cultural Diversity in Australia

Along with the United States, Canada and Israel, Australia has been one of the great immigrant-receiving nations of modern times. The statistics are impressive. The year 1995 marked the fiftieth anniversary of Australia's post-war migration program. Since 1945 almost 5.5 million people have come to Australia from as many as 170 countries. Of these, some 500,000 arrived under humanitarian programs, initially as displaced persons immediately after World War II and later as refugees fleeing war and other forms of civil strife. During this period Australia's population has risen from about seven million to 18.2 million.

The main source of all settlers throughout these decades 1945–1995 has been the United Kingdom and Ireland, and New Zealand the second largest source country. However, the proportion of immigrants from the United Kingdom and Ireland has steadily declined from 48 per cent of the total in the 1947–51 period to just over 11 per cent in 1995–96. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s continental Europe provided the other major source of settlers, with significant numbers arriving from the Netherlands, Germany, Italy, Greece and the Former Yugoslavia.

With the dismantling of the 'White Australia' policy, which was finally achieved in 1973, immigration from Asia steadily increased. Since then Australia has received immigrants from many Asian nations, with large groups from Vietnam, China, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. The range of countries from which Australia draws its immigrants has continued to broaden with significant numbers in recent years arriving from countries in the Middle East, the Pacific Rim, and South America. By mid-1995, 23 per cent of Australia's population had been born overseas compared with 10 per cent in 1947. Settlers born in non-English-speaking countries represented around three-quarters of the total intake in 1996.

While most data on immigrant diversity is expressed in terms of country of birth, it is important to note that some immigrant groups define themselves primarily in terms of their ethnicity, language or religion.

The impact of post-war immigration has been the major source of diversity in Australia, whether based on country of birth, ethnicity, religion or language. It has made a marked impact on Australia's economic, social and cultural life and, in the process, changed Australia's identity from being an outpost of British civilisation to a multicultural nation.

Policy Context

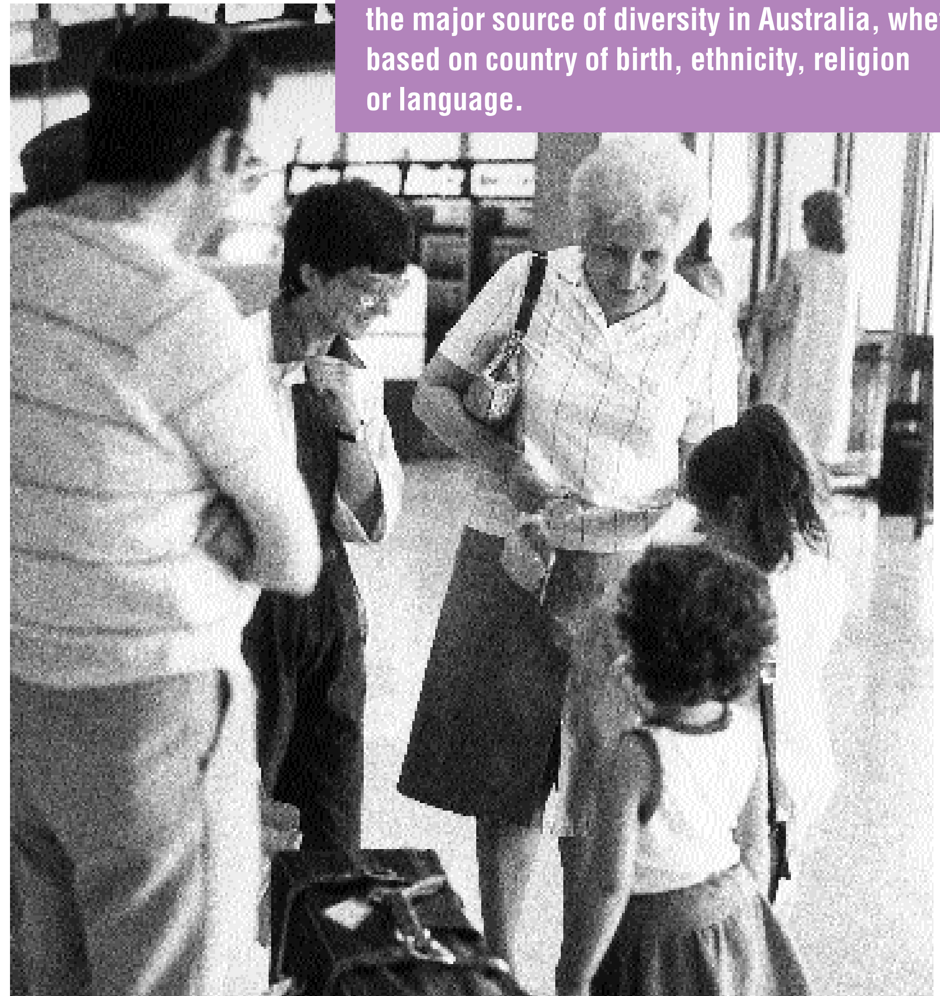
Developments in two government policy areas – immigration and settlement policies, and family policies – are relevant to family exchanges of immigrant families.

Immigration and settlement policies

A policy trend in immigration and settlement services during the 1990s has been in the direction of reduced government expenditure and a more economically focused migration program. This has led to tighter management of the migration program, the introduction of cost recovery for migration services, and the elimination of services to some categories of immigrants.

For example, the migrant intake for 1996–97 was cut by 11 per cent to 74,000, including a 25 per cent reduction in family reunion. Within this intake there has been an increase in numbers of skilled migrants and a reduction in numbers coming under family reunion. In particular, business migration has been encouraged and investment-linked migration visas introduced.

The impact of post-war immigration has been the major source of diversity in Australia, whether based on country of birth, ethnicity, religion or language.



Other policy and administrative changes have led to increases in fees and charges for immigration procedures and services, including visas and tuition under the Australian Migrant English Program for certain categories of entrants. A major change has been the general extension to two years' residence in Australia before immigrants become eligible for a range of social security payments and benefits.

These changes have several implications for the composition and settlement of the immigration intake and the need for family exchanges.

First, the decline in family reunion numbers will mean that there is less likelihood that extended family members such as parents and siblings will be able to join their family members in Australia. This will have the effect of decreasing the assistance available for some families.

Second, some of the more recent immigrants from the business migration stream will have considerable financial and other resources to enable them to meet their practical and financial settlement needs.

Third, the maintenance of the refugee and humanitarian intake will mean that there will continue to be a group of the most needy immigrants, often without the resource of other family members to help with their practical, financial and emotional needs.

Family policies

The directions noted in immigration and settlement policies have their counterpart in family policies. Government policy directions have been towards shifting the boundaries between government and family responsibilities, with families being encouraged to assume greater responsibility for meeting their needs and to have less reliance on state provision.

This has a number of implications. First, the principle of smaller government is

leading to the contracting out of services to private agencies rather than services being provided directly by government. Second, there is a move towards user pays policies which place responsibility upon families to pay in part or in full for the services they consume. Third, the state is increasingly placing resources at the disposal of the family through the taxation system or cash payments, rather than through direct government provision of services.

Such policy directions are leading to changes in the provision of services and resources in areas such as child care, youth allowances, and facilities and services for frail older people.

One impact of the changes in both immigration and family policies is to encourage greater family self-reliance in meeting their financial and practical needs. Thus it is expected that family members, both within the household and beyond, will have the capacity and the desire to provide various forms of assistance to other family members.

The extent to which overseas-born Australian families from non-English-speaking backgrounds meet this expectation is the main focus of this paper.

Family Exchanges

In looking at the issues surrounding family exchanges, this section discusses how 'family' is defined, the relevance of proximity of family members to one another, the frequency of contact between family members, and the types of family assistance provided and received by family members.

Definition of family

This paper adopts an inclusive definition of 'family' which extends beyond the 'nuclear' family resident in a single household to 'a wider range of relatives by birth or by marriage (whether legal or de facto) who may live in separate households but who are linked by mutual experiences, affection, obligations and exchange' (Millward 1998). There is considerable research evidence that the wider extended family provides the central core of support networks for individuals in a range of circumstances (McDonald 1995; Millward 1992).

While the extended family living in a number of households may provide an important network of support for many Australians, it should be noted that variations to this norm exist both across and within the various family types examined here. Among these variations to the extended family are immigrant families which may be spread over two or more countries, and refugees whose family ties have been lost through traumatic events in their countries of origin (Cass 1994).

Proximity of family members

Proximity of family members can be measured in terms of the physical or geographical distance of family households from each other. While proximity of households in itself is no guarantee of frequency of contacts or of family support, it does provide the potential for both to occur. Allied to proximity must be the willingness of relatives to help each other which, in turn, is dependent on the nature of their relationship.

Two extremes related to proximity of family members are more likely to be found among overseas-born Australians – the extended family being located overseas, and the extended family being co-resident in the one household. Neither of these patterns is common for Australian-born people, particularly those of English-speaking background.

The location overseas of the extended family can lead to a degree of social isolation. Kendig (1986: 17) notes that 'migration from the country of one's birth, especially if the move is made late in life, can have a major impact on the pool of family and other close relationships'. In these cases, contact with their family in the country of origin is maintained by return visits, telephone and video contacts, seeking marriage partners overseas, and the sending of remittances overseas.

Where the extended family is co-resident, this may be influenced by a number of factors such as values of family members, size and location of housing, family resources, and the inability of family members to live separately because of language and cultural difficulties (McDonald 1991: 105).

In co-resident extended families, grandparents, parents and children may live in the one household. This is generally the home of the middle aged children and is more common among Southern European, Asian and Middle Eastern families in Australia than families from Anglo or Western European backgrounds. However, this coresidential arrangement is contrary to the more traditional one found in some overseas countries where married children live in their parents' home. In situations where parents live with their adult children the flow of support and the positions of power are reversed. This form of co-residence not only makes intergenerational sharing of domestic tasks and mutual assistance more likely but it is a necessity if the family is to provide constant personal care (Kendig 1986: 18).

Contacts with family members

While there is no guarantee that living nearby will mean frequent contact between family members, proximity does seem to be a pre-condition for frequent contact to occur. This is supported by the Australian Living Standards Study, conducted in 1992–93 by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, which found that the majority of the 4,900 family households surveyed had kin within reasonable proximity and enjoyed a great deal of contact within extended family networks.

The study produced a number of important findings related to family contact of relevance to this discussion. For example, people from non-English-speaking backgrounds had the lowest levels of kin available, with many having no relatives from the parents' immediate family of origin available at all. However, where people from non-English-speaking backgrounds had relatives living in Australia, they had the most frequent contact with them (Millward 1998).

Apart from structural factors such as proximity, variations in contact between family members derive from the different values they hold, especially those related to parental expectations and filial obligations.

There is considerable variation in attitudes towards filial obligation across groups from different ethnic backgrounds. For example, 'Australians who come from Asia, Southern Europe, and the Middle East placed more weight on all forms of responsibility and obligation than those who came from Western Europe and from Anglo backgrounds' (de Vaus 1996: 19).

de Vaus canvasses several likely reasons for these differences including: the less developed welfare state in these regions, which requires greater family responsibility in the care of the elderly; the poor economic situation of some immigrant groups, which requires greater support from families; and the marginalisation of some immigrant groups within the dominant Australian culture, which can make for greater cohesion within both the community and family and lead to the ethic of 'looking after one's own.' Finally, de Vaus puts forward the more general argument that advanced industrial capitalistic societies with their emphasis on individualism are antithetic to the development of familistic values, and that people from those societies would score lower on family obligation measures than those from countries where industrial capitalism is less advanced (de Vaus 1996: 20).

Family assistance

What types of support are provided by family members, both within and beyond the household? A number of categorisations exist including one proposed by McDonald (1995) which includes financial (money), physical (providing care or assistance), emotional (love, understanding, counsel), legal (guardianship), and spiritual (performing religious duties). Whatever schema one adopts, it is clear that the extended family provides a network of family supports which touches almost all dimensions of personal, economic and social life (Finch 1989).

What is the direction of these family exchanges? The Institute's Australian Living Standards Study showed that association and exchange were stronger between adult respondents and their parents (often grandparents) than with their siblings or other relatives (Millward 1998).

This finding was confirmed by further Australian Institute of Family Studies research, the Australian Life Course Study, which asked people between the ages of

50 and 70 years about intergenerational exchange with their children. The study found that, in general, assistance flows from older to younger generations, with the middle generation (those in their fifties and sixties) providing most of the assistance in both directions (Millward 1998). Later life respondents were thus more likely to help their adult children than their elderly parents or parents-in-law.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics Survey of Australian Families (1992) also confirmed that the 'balance of the flow of transfers favours children rather than older parents: that adult children were more likely to receive help from their older parents than to give them help' (de Vaus and Qu 1998).

This intergenerational provision of support is mediated by a number of factors, including ethnicity. We have seen above that extended family ties can be disrupted by migration, sometimes severely in the case of refugees. Truncated families without the benefit of practical assistance in matters such as child minding or financial assistance for young adults, and without the parents/grandparents who provide cultural continuity, may suffer severe social disadvantage. Even where parents/grandparents in some immigrant groups live in Australia, they may lack the resources to provide practical assistance to their children.

In the case of immigrants from Southern Europe, the Middle East and Asia, a different pattern in intergenerational exchanges emerges. Despite the high value placed on helping one another, people from these regions were less likely to provide personal care/home help to their parents, and less likely to be receiving child care help from their parents. However, adults from these regions were more likely to be giving their parents financial support (de Vaus and Qu 1998). This may be explained by the fact immigrants from Southern Europe, the Middle East and Asia were more likely to have parents living overseas and to provide assistance to their parents through sending remittances.

Australian Life Course Study

To explore issues of family support in immigrant communities, data from the Australian Life Course Survey are used. This was a national random telephone survey of 2,685 adult respondents conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies during the final part of 1996, and an additional 63 respondents via translator in early 1997 (total N = 2,748).

It should be noted that as the period of interviewing spanned 1996 and 1997, some of the data presented here may pre-date some policy changes outlined above.

For the purposes of comparative analysis, four key groups of respondents have been defined, using a combination of country of birth, official language in country of birth, as well as the birth place of respondents' parents. As Table 1 shows, the four cultural groups are: born overseas in a non-English-speaking country; born overseas in an English-speaking country; born in Australia with at least one parent born overseas; born in Australia with both parents born in Australia. The proportion of these groups in the sample largely matches their representation in the Australian population as a whole.

Each of the groupings include considerable diversity related to countries of birth, languages spoken, ethnicity, and religious affiliation. Nevertheless, they do allow a comparison of those who have immediate experience of immigration (their own or their parents') with those who do not have such experience. The data also allow a comparison of overseas-born respondents from English-speaking with those from non-English-speaking countries.

Assistance flows from older to younger generations, with the middle generation providing most of the assistance in both directions.

Picture: Howard Birnstihl

Cultural Diversity and Family Exchanges

The following empirical analysis of cultural diversity and family exchanges looks at family characteristics and resources, and family values and attitudes about support.

Family characteristics and resources

The majority of overseas-born respondents in the Institute's Australian Life Course Study came from Europe, almost 30 per cent from different parts of Asia, and smaller numbers (8.9 per cent) from the Middle East and northern Africa. The period of arrival of the overseas born covers the whole period of post-war migration, with a majority (62.8 per cent) having lived in Australia for 20 years or more.

As noted above, earlier arrivals to Australia were likely to be from English-speaking countries and more recent arrivals from non-English-speaking countries. The great majority of respondents spoke English at home, including a majority of those born overseas in a non-English-speaking country. As many as three-quarters of those born in a non-English-speaking country stated that they spoke English well or very well.

Some 73 per cent of respondents were married or in de facto relationships. A higher proportion of those born in a non-English-speaking country were married, and a lower proportion were in de facto relationships than respondents in the other comparison groups. The great majority of respondents (81.5 per cent) were parents, with 56.7 per cent with children at home. Of all respondents, 36.4 per cent had at least one adult child aged 18 or older living independently outside of the household.

It is this latter group that is of interest in terms of proximity, contacts and flow of assistance between family generations.

While recognising that family support can be of various types, the financial resources of family members is an important requisite for certain forms of assistance. Significant differences emerged across the four different groups of respondents with respect to those whose main source of income was a pension/benefit or superannuation, and those with no personal income.

Those born overseas tended to have a greater reliance on pensions and benefits than those born in Australia. This may be related to the higher levels of unemployment experienced by certain groups of immigrants – namely, women from non-English-speaking countries, recently arrived immigrants, refugees, and humanitarian entrants. The higher levels of superannuation for the Australian-born compared with the overseas-born may be related to the different occupational patterns of both groups, with the Australian-born more likely to be employed in occupations which have a longer history of superannuation benefits.

The employment status of family members is a key factor in family resources and the capacity to provide assistance. Respondents born in non-English-speaking countries were less likely to be couples where both were working and more likely to be couples where neither partner was working than respondents in other cultural groups. This is reflected in the relatively lower incomes of immigrants from non-English-speaking countries compared with incomes of immigrants from English-speaking countries, and respondents born in Australia.

Family values and attitudes towards support

Attitudes and values held by family members constitute a key element in whether and what type of assistance is provided. Three key questions throw light on these attitudes: 'Who would you confide in?'; 'Who would you turn to if you became ill?'; 'Who would you turn to in an emergency?' (Table 2). While responses to these questions may reveal something about the attitudes held by family members, they also importantly reveal the actual sources of support available to family members.

• *'Who would you confide in?'*
The majority of all respondents indicated they would most likely confide in their partners, followed by friends, their parents/parents-in-law, their brothers/sisters, and then their sons and daughters. A somewhat different pattern is evident for those born in a non-English-speaking country. While this group would also be most likely to confide in their partners, they then would select their brothers/sisters, friends, parents, and sons/daughters. Interestingly, confiding across the generations is limited, despite the evidence (to be presented later) of considerable intergenerational support from parents to adult children. The higher ranking of siblings than friends among respondents born in non-English-speaking countries, compared with the total group, may testify to the importance of extended family interactions among the non-English-speaking overseas-born. These data also strikingly reveal that respondents would, in all cases, prefer to confide in women than in men.

• *'Who would you turn to if you became ill?'*
The question of who respondents would turn to if they became ill produced responses across the board in the following order: partners, parents/parents-in-law, brothers/sisters, sons/daughters, and friends. While friends were good to interact with and confide in, when it came to assistance during illness, family members were most often turned to. This pattern was even more strongly evident among respondents from non-English-speaking countries. For example, although fewer non-English-speaking than English-speaking respondents would turn to their parents and siblings for help, more would turn to their children for help. This probably represents an added burden on these adult children. Again, females were more likely to be turned to for support than males, perhaps reflecting the perceived nurturing role of women relatives.

• *'Who would you turn to in an emergency?'*
When confronted with an emergency, all respondents would turn, in the following

Table 1. Proportion of respondents in each comparison group

Comparison Groups	Number of cases	Per cent of cases
Born overseas, in a non-English-speaking country	382	13.9
Born overseas, in an English-speaking country	295	10.8
Born in Australia, at least one parent born overseas	437	15.9
Born in Australia, both parents born in Australia	1626	59.3
Total	**2740**	**100.0**

Source: Australian Life Course Study 1996–97, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Table 2. **Multiple response items showing proportion of respondents who would turn to family members, by type of support**

Who do you turn to?	Born overseas, non-English-speaking country	Born overseas, English-speaking country	Born Australia, parent(s) overseas	Born Australia, parents born Australia	Total %
Who do you confide in?					
No-one	7.9	7.1	9.4	6.5	7.2
Partner	52.5	61.0	50.3	58.2	56.5
Mother/step-mother	12.6	15.3	16.5	13.2	13.9
Father/step-father	4.7	5.4	3.9	4.8	4.7
Mother-in-law	1.6	2.0	2.3	2.2	2.1
Father-in-law	0.9	0.7	0.2	0.4	0.4
Brother/Brother-in-law	8.8	3.7	5.3	4.7	5.2
Sister/Sister-in-law	17.6	8.8	17.4	13.6	14.2
Son	6.6	6.1	3.7	5.2	5.2
Daughter	12.9	10.5	7.1	10.2	10.0
Female friend	16.4	25.1	24.5	25.5	24.2
Male friend	11.0	10.5	13.5	10.5	11.0
Who would you turn to if you became ill?					
No-one	4.1	3.4	2.3	1.9	2.4
Partner	55.2	62.5	56.8	59.7	59.0
Mother/step-mother	26.0	22.2	37.5	30.1	30.0
Father/step-father	13.2	10.9	16.6	13.7	13.8
Mother-in-law	6.0	4.8	5.3	5.1	5.2
Father-in-law	4.1	2.7	2.5	2.1	2.5
Brother/Brother-in-law	12.2	7.8	10.6	8.3	9.1
Sister/Sister-in-law	21.6	16.0	19.3	21.3	20.5
Son	12.9	12.6	9.2	12.1	11.8
Daughter	17.6	16.4	13.8	16.9	16.4
Female friend	8.5	11.6	10.1	12.6	11.6
Male friend	5.3	5.5	5.5	4.9	5.1
Who would you turn to in an emergency?					
No-one	3.1	1.7	2.7	1.8	2.1
Partner	55.3	62.9	53.1	59.0	58.0
Mother/step-mother	14.1	13.9	24.7	21.8	20.5
Father/step-father	10.0	8.5	16.2	13.5	13.0
Mother-in-law	3.4	4.4	3.9	4.1	4.0
Father-in-law	3.1	3.1	2.3	3.0	2.9
Brother/Brother-in-law	15.9	6.1	8.9	8.7	9.3
Sister/Sister-in-law	14.1	7.8	16.0	12.8	12.9
Son	14.4	12.2	7.6	9.1	9.8
Daughter	12.8	12.6	8.0	10.9	10.8
Female friend	11.9	16.3	16.2	14.4	14.6
Male friend	12.8	9.9	10.8	8.0	9.2

Note: Statement was only asked in the main Life Course questionnaire, thus 63 non-English-speaking respondents are missing from the 'Born overseas, non-English-speaking country' group in this table.
Items are multiple response, percentages refer to percentage of respondents; not all items are presented.
Source: Australian Life Course Study 1996–97, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Table 3. Proportion of each group who 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with statements of family responsibility

Statements of family responsibility	Born overseas, non-English-speaking country	Born overseas, English-speaking country	Born Australia, parent(s) overseas	Born Australia, parents born Australia	Total %
Parents should help adult children financially if they need it	79.1	76.6	74.4	71.5	73.4
Parents should let their adult children live with them if they need to	83.8	76.2	79.2	77.6	78.4
Parents and adult children should stay in touch on a regular basis	97.8	98.3	98.2	98.3	98.2
Adult children should help their parents financially if they need it	86.6	84.1	86.0	80.1	82.3*
Children should let ageing parents live with them if they need to	77.8	60.9	68.1	63.2	65.5*
It is not the responsibility of adult children to take care of their elderly parents	21.9	29.9	20.7	25.3	24.7
I would rather use outside services than have help from family and friends	34.9	24.6	24.7	32.8	30.8*

Note: Attitudes toward family responsibility statements were only asked in the main Life Course questionnaire, thus 63 non-English-speaking respondents are missing from the 'Born overseas, non-English-speaking country' group in this table.
Attitudes across groups were mostly not statistically significant at P < 0.05 level. An asterisk (*) is used to denote those items for which statistically significant differences in attitudes were found.
Source: Australian Life Course Study 1996–97, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

order, to their partners, parents, siblings, children, and friends. Respondents from non-English-speaking countries differed from this pattern in one important respect: they would be least likely to turn to their parents in an emergency. The likely explanation is that their parents may not be living in Australia or, if so, may lack the resources to provide assistance to their children. The pattern of turning to female rather than male relatives is again in evidence.

Attitudes towards family responsibility revealed a generally consistent pattern across each of the comparison groups, with almost all respondents (98.2 per cent) agreeing that parents and children should stay in touch on a regular basis (Table 3).

A majority also agreed with various forms of reciprocal assistance: adult children should help their parents financially if they need it (82.3 per cent); parents should let their adult children live with them if they need to (78.3 per cent); and parents should help adult children financially if they need it (73.4 per cent). In the area of children letting ageing parents live with them, respondents born in non-English-speaking countries more strongly endorsed family responsibility than did other respondents.

It should be noted that these are statements of values and that actual behaviour may not accord with these for a number of reasons, including resources, location, views of others in the household and conflict in relationships.

Family Proximity, Contact and Exchanges

This section examines the key issues of proximity, contact, and family exchanges of respondents with their adult children and with their parents/parents-in-law. What emerges is a general picture of an in-between generation with a range of responsibilities and interactions with both preceding and succeeding generations.

Proximity, contact and exchanges with adult children

Over one-third of all respondents (36.4 per cent) had adult children who were living independently. There was a high level of geographic proximity and frequency of contact between respondents and adult children across all cultural groups; analysis also shows that there are statistically significant differences between groups as well (Table 4).

Almost two-thirds of all respondents who had independent adult children living elsewhere lived within 30 minutes of their children; about one-third had adult children living elsewhere in Australia. Respondents born in non-English-speaking countries were more likely than other respondents to have their children living nearby, and were also more likely to have their children living overseas. Those born in non-English-speaking countries were more likely than other respondents to have frequent contact with their adult children, with over one-third speaking with their adult children daily.

While proximity and contact may be no guarantee of support, there is strong evidence that respondents provide substantial support (financial, emotional and practical) to their adult children (Table 5). In all cases, this is greater than the support received by respondents from their adult children.

Overseas-born respondents from non-English-speaking countries received significantly more financial support from their adult children and conversely were able to provide less financial support to their children. Overseas-born respondents from non-English-speaking countries provided less practical support to their adult children but received more practical support from their adult children than did Australian-born respondents, and this is likely to be related to a relative lack of resources. No such differences across cultural groups emerged in terms of emotional support.

Proximity, contact and exchanges with parents

Of the 83 per cent of respondents who had one or more of their parents/parents-in-law still living, around one-third lived in close proximity (within 30 minutes) to them; almost as many had parents/parents-in-law living elsewhere in Australia (Table 6). Respondents from non-English-speaking countries were more likely than those from other groups to have their mother living with them.

Understandably, overseas-born respondents were more likely than Australian-born to have parents living overseas. Despite communications technology and two-way visits to maintain family contacts, families with parents living overseas (and in some parts of Australia) lacked the ongoing contact and support experienced by families with parents living in close proximity. The data show that how often respondents spoke with their mother or father largely reflected their geographical proximity to their parents. The data also show the greater degree of communication respondents have with their mother than their father.

Patterns of bidirectional exchanges between respondents and their parents

Table 4. Proximity and frequency of contact respondents have with their adult child(ren) living independently

Proximity and contact with adult child(ren)	Born overseas, non-English-speaking country	Born overseas, English-speaking country	Born Australia, parent(s) overseas	Born Australia, parents born Australia	Total %
Geographic proximity to respondent of adult child(ren)*					
Any within 30 minutes	69.2	60.5	60.9	61.3	62.3
Elsewhere in Australia	24.8	33.3	39.1	37.7	35.6
Overseas	6.0	6.1	-	1.0	2.1
How often respondent speaks with adult child(ren)					
Every day	34.6	20.4	20.0	29.8	28.3
Few times per week	33.8	40.7	43.6	39.1	39.1
Once per week	19.5	17.7	24.5	21.5	21.1
Less often	12.0	21.2	11.8	9.6	11.5

*All items show statistically significant differences at the P < 0.05 level.
Source: Australian Life Course Study 1996–97, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

were also examined (Table 7). As noted above, more than two-thirds of respondents provided financial support to their adult children (Table 5). However, less than one-half of all respondents provided financial support to their parents (Table 7). Respondents born overseas in a non-English-speaking country were more likely than other respondents to provide financial support to their parents. Given that almost 50 per cent of their parents were living overseas, this financial assistance would most likely take the form of remittances sent overseas. Those born in a non-English-speaking country received the least financial support from their parents, probably for the same reason.

Respondents reported providing uniformly high levels of practical and emotional support and advice to their parents but receiving less in return. Given the locations of many of their parents, it is to be expected that the overseas-born respondents were less likely than those born in Australian to engage in exchanges of practical and emotional support and advice with their parents.

Women, including those from non-English-speaking backgrounds, were more likely than men to take part in the exchange of both practical and emotional support and advice with their parents. This accords with the pattern already established of the greater involvement of women in intergenerational exchanges with both their children and parents.

Summary

The context for this paper is the cultural diversity brought about by immigration policy changes and changes to family policies in the direction of greater family self-reliance.

The introduction of cost-recovery for migration services and the elimination of services to some categories of migrants are placing greater onus on immigrant families to meet their needs from their own resources. When this is coupled with a reduction in family reunion numbers, assistance from extended family becomes less available.

Family policies are predicated on the expectation that families will assume increasing responsibility for meeting their own needs and have less reliance on state provision. To what extent can extended families, especially those from non-English-speaking backgrounds, provide support to their members?

People born overseas in a non-English-speaking country were more likely to be on pensions and benefits, more likely to have one or both partners unemployed, and more likely to have lower incomes than those born overseas in an English-speaking country, or in Australia. While these factors would reduce the capacity to provide financial assistance to family members, they would not preclude emotional support and other forms of material assistance. This suggests that those born in a non-English-speaking country may experience greater need and less capacity to offer financial assistance to their family members.

It is clear that the extended family is alive and well in Australia. This form of family was regarded by all groups as providing the major source of confidants and

Table 5. Exchanges of support respondents have with their adult child(ren) aged 18 and over living independently, showing gender of respondent

Type and direction of exchange	Born overseas, non-English-speaking country	Born overseas, English-speaking country	Born Australia, parent(s) overseas	Born Australia, parents born Australia	Total %
% provide financial support to adult children					
Men	70.1	64.9	75.0	76.3	73.5
Women	57.6	70.6	77.3	75.7	72.8*
Total	62.7	68.0	76.4	75.9	73.1*
% receive financial support from adult children					
Men	22.4	8.8	15.7	12.7	14.1
Women	36.4	26.5	34.7	24.6	27.5*
Total	30.7	18.4	27.0	20.5	22.6*
% provide emotional support and advice to adult children					
Men	87.7	79.3	86.5	88.6	86.8
Women	93.5	94.1	97.3	95.7	95.4
Total	91.0	87.3	92.9	93.2	92.2
% receive emotional support and advice from adult children					
Men	71.9	59.6	52.9	65.3	63.8
Women	85.7	80.9	85.3	83.5	83.7
Total	79.9	71.2	72.2	77.3	76.3
% provide practical support to adult children					
Men	73.7	71.9	88.5	81.8	80.1
Women	81.8	76.5	85.3	88.9	86.5*
Total	78.4	74.4	86.6	86.5	84.1*
% receive practical support from adult children					
Men	75.4	57.9	54.9	72.5	68.6*
Women	80.5	75.0	78.7	81.7	80.6
Total	78.4	67.2	69.0	78.6	76.1

Note: Results showing the provision and receipt of 'emotional support and advice' and 'practical support' include responses to the main Life Course questionnaire only, thus 63 non-English-speaking respondents are missing from these results in this table. Results showing flows of 'financial support' include all responses.
An asterisk (*) denotes items for which statistically significant differences at the P < 0.05 level were found.
Source: Australian Life Course Study 1996–97, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Table 6. Proximity and frequency of contact respondents have with their parents

Proximity and contact with parents	Born overseas, non-English-speaking country	Born overseas, English-speaking country	Born Australia, parent(s) overseas	Born Australia, parents born Australia	Total %
Geographic proximity of father to respondent *					
Live with me	3.1	3.8	1.8	2.2	2.4
Any within 30 minutes	15.6	17.9	32.7	36.9	32.0
30 minutes to 2 hours	17.2	16.7	20.9	20.4	19.7
Elsewhere in Australia	20.3	12.8	34.5	37.2	32.3
Overseas	43.8	48.7	10.0	3.4	13.6
Geographic proximity of mother to respondent *					
Live with me	6.6	2.0	4.5	2.8	3.4
Any within 30 minutes	23.5	28.4	42.5	47.2	41.5
30 minutes to 2 hours	9.6	9.5	19.0	17.4	15.8
Elsewhere in Australia	12.0	20.3	30.5	30.5	27.1
Overseas	48.2	39.9	3.5	2.1	12.2
How often respondent speaks with father					
Every day	8.7	5.9	6.3	13.2	10.9
Few times per week	4.3	11.8	25.0	12.1	12.2
Once per week	13.0	23.5	6.3	24.2	20.4
Fortnightly	13.0	5.9	18.8	16.5	15.0
Less often	60.9	52.9	43.8	34.1	41.5
How often respondent speaks with mother *					
Every day	14.7	5.9	7.5	13.7	12.3
Few times per week	7.4	14.7	20.0	19.5	16.6
Once per week	13.2	20.6	35.0	27.4	24.7
Fortnightly	8.8	11.8	15.0	9.5	10.2
Less often	55.9	47.1	22.5	30.0	36.1

Note: 'Mother' and 'Father' include parents-in-law.
An asterisk (*) denotes items for which statistically significant differences at the P < 0.05 level were found.
Source: Australian Life Course Study 1996–97, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

assistance in sickness and other emergencies. Positive attitudes towards a range of family responsibilities, especially between parents and children, were also strongly supported across all groups. Those born in a non-English-speaking country expressed even stronger support for the value of the extended family – unlike the Australian-born, they would choose to confide in their siblings before friends. In the two areas of helping parents financially and adult children letting ageing parents live with them, respondents born in non-English-speaking countries expressed significantly strong statements of family responsibility.

Regarding the geographic proximity of family members, their frequency of contact, and levels of available support, provided and received by respondents, a great deal of commonality across groups was discerned. There was a considerable level of geographic proximity and frequency of contact between parents and their adult children across all groups. There was also a considerable flow of support (financial, emotional and practical) from parents to adult children, which in all cases exceeded the support received by parents from their adult children.

Some distinctive patterns, according to birthplace, were also apparent. Parents born in a non-English-speaking country were more likely to have their children living nearby and also more likely to have their children living overseas. Parents from a non-English-speaking country received more financial support from their adult children but were able to provide their adult children with less financial assistance.

About one-third of the respondents had their parents living in close proximity. However, intergenerational transfers were in favour of the younger rather than the older generations. Less than one-half of the respondents provided financial support to their parents, while two-thirds provided such support to their adult children. The pattern for those born in a non-English-speaking country differed significantly. Many had parents living overseas but they were also more likely than other groups to have a parent, usually their mother, living with them; these respondents were also the most likely to help their parents financially and least likely to receive such help.

A major finding of this study is the key role played by all women, including those from non-English-speaking backgrounds, in the various interactions and exchanges across the extended family. In terms of values, women were the preferred confidants and providers of assistance in times of need. In practice, respondents were more likely to communicate with their mothers than their fathers. Women were involved in more emotional transactions and exchanges of practical support with their adult children than were their male counterparts. Women were also more likely than men to provide and receive emotional support and practical assistance from their parents. While factors such as male employment and greater longevity of women may partly account for this gender differentiation, the pivotal role women play raises questions about the role of men, both as fathers and sons, in families.

Changing migration policies and family policies would seem to reflect the notion of family independence and self-reliance. This is accompanied by the popular view that immigrant families are cohesive units which provide a great deal of interaction and support for their family members.

The evidence presented here challenges this stereotype. First, there is much similarity in attitudes, values and experiences across families of all cultural groups. Second, immigrant families from English-speaking countries approximate Australian-born families on most measures and do not present a clearly distinctive pattern in terms of family exchanges. Third, families from non-English-speaking backgrounds certainly hold values which favour close interaction and mutual assistance and, where possible, translate this into practice within their extended families; however, a lack of resources and the likelihood of family members living overseas too often prevent them from realising these values.

Table 7. Exchanges of support respondents have with their parents, showing gender of respondent

Type and direction of exchange	Born overseas, non-English-speaking country	Born overseas, English-speaking country	Born Australia, parent(s) overseas	Born Australia, parents born Australia	Total %
% provide financial support to parents					
Men	53.5	48.1	47.8	41.1	44.8*
Women	44.6	33.6	51.4	40.3	42.0*
Total	48.7	40.1	49.9	40.7	43.2*
% receive financial support from parents					
Men	34.8	34.0	43.3	34.7	36.0
Women	32.5	42.7	50.5	45.4	44.4*
Total	33.6	38.8	47.5	40.9	40.8*
% provide emotional support and advice to parents					
Men	72.9	70.8	76.4	74.0	73.9
Women	86.5	75.6	86.7	87.3	85.9*
Total	79.8	73.4	82.4	81.7	80.7*
% receive emotional support and advice from parents					
Men	60.2	50.0	66.2	59.0	59.4
Women	66.2	64.9	72.0	74.6	72.3*
Total	63.2	58.2	69.6	68.1	66.7*
% provide practical support to parents					
Men	60.5	58.5	84.7	76.0	73.5*
Women	70.7	60.3	83.5	82.9	79.4*
Total	65.6	59.5	84.0	80.0	76.8*
% receive practical support from parents					
Men	49.6	32.1	61.1	56.6	53.7*
Women	56.4	47.3	72.9	63.8	62.9*
Total	53.1	40.5	68.0	60.8	58.9*

Note: Results showing the provision and receipt of 'emotional support and advice' and 'practical support' include responses to the main Life Course questionnaire only, thus 63 non-English speaking respondents are missing from these results in this table. Results showing flows of 'financial support' include all responses.
'Parents' includes parents-in-law.
An asterisk (*) denotes items for which statistically significant differences at the $P < 0.05$ level were found.
Source: Australian Life Course Study 1996–97, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

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