

Our reviewers discuss two very different books about how the lives of individuals and families unfold. One looks at the lives of families with specific disadvantage and the support that is needed to meet their needs. The other explores the role of families in people's life choices.

Family homelessness



SARAH WISE

*A Long Way From Home
Family Homelessness in the
Current Welfare Context*
by Terry Bartholemew
Deakin University Press,
1999, 170 pp.

A Long Way From Home explores the extent of family homelessness in Victoria and the plight of families who are unable to find housing assistance within the welfare system. The book originated in the frustration of service providers at the lack of accommodation options available for the increasing numbers of families presenting with housing needs. As a result of a chronic shortage of emergency housing arrangements in Victoria, privately owned hotels, motels, boarding houses and caravan parks are being used by welfare agencies as a form of 'last resort' emergency accommodation.

Concerned that the current welfare response is actually contributing to families' disaffiliation rather than alleviating the problem, a study was commissioned by the Salvation Army Crossroads Network to explore the extent and ramifications of homelessness among family groups in Victoria. It was undertaken with the specific aims of increasing understanding of the problem of family homelessness in the wider community, and stimulating government action and the formulation of more responsive public policy. *A Long Way From Home* is essentially a report of that study, authored by the principle researcher Terry Bartholemew.

The book begins with a critical discussion of many of the definitional, counting and categorisation problems current in the area of homelessness, and engages the reader in a detailed examination of the meaning of homelessness, the problem of family homelessness in Australia (both in terms of the extent of the problem), and the factors that are believed to carry forward the process of residential instability.

The author is forthright about the disjuncture between official homeless statistics and other measures of prevalence. Based on evidence from current research, he suggests that homelessness statistics underestimate actual prevalence by at least 50 per cent. To illustrate the point, he includes statistics compiled by service agencies, peak bodies and government authorities on the number of families in need of stable, long-term accommodation, including families using the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP). The data highlight large increases in the number of homeless families seeking assistance over the past five years, with families presenting for accommodation services between 1993 and 1997 increasing over 400 per cent within some state-wide welfare agencies.

The author next addresses the cause of residential instability, outlining both the explanatory model that informed the research, and competing theories. In a meaningful and scholarly analysis of the issues involved, he challenges the previously accepted belief that traits of the homeless themselves (such as mental illness, family conflict, alcoholism, drug use and poor health) contribute to their circumstances, arguing instead that the major cause of family homelessness is the lack of affordable housing suitable for families on low incomes together with financial difficulty and poverty.

In perhaps the most provocative section of the book, the increasing problem of family homelessness is put in the context of the policies of the government today. The author argues that government preference for the provision of subsidies to those experiencing poverty and residential instability, and increased reliance on private markets and privatisation in preference to the provision of 'bricks and mortar' assistance in the public sector, has produced a shortage of low income/public housing units. According to Bartholemew, current economic policies are creating a situation of increasing financial hardship and unemployment among the disadvantaged, thereby widening the gap between those who are able to compete for housing and those who cannot. He also claims that, in addition to government policies, the current welfare response of relying on emergency or transitional accommodation to address the housing shortage is exacerbating problems of economic hardship and social isolation for the families involved.

Bartholemew challenges the belief of the government that economic policies have 'created a more stable and secure environment for families' (Commonwealth of Australia 1999a:3) by showing evidence of the rise in the number of families seeking accommodation-related assistance. However, he does not indicate whether broader components of the government's social policy agenda – which emphasise early intervention and

prevention rather than welfare provision once problems have occurred – could meaningfully address the problem (Newman 1999; Commonwealth of Australia 1999b; DFCS 1999). Although this is not an omission as such, and while it does not detract from the book's central points, a critical examination of these directions may have brought implications of this book even closer to government's current interests, with potentially wider ramifications for policy and service provision.

The research project, which is the centrepiece of the book, explores for the first time in Australia the experience of residents of privately owned hotels. Families' perceptions of their experiences, their progression through the relevant period of residential instability, and the ramifications of hotel accommodation, as well as the characteristics of families, were investigated during 30 in-depth interviews with families residing in private hotels in inner-city Melbourne.

The study indicates that along the pathway to homelessness is a series of moves, usually prompted by unsuitable accommodation arrangements and the desire to 'find something better'. However, these moves create greater financial hardship for families, and isolate them further from networks of social support. The shortage of suitable housing options for low income families prolongs the period of residential instability, contributing to a

The patterns that shape our lives



MARK McPHERSON

***A Circle Unbroken*
*The Hidden Emotional Patterns That Shape Our Lives***

Hugh Crago

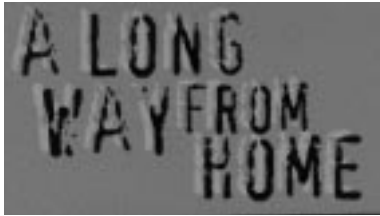
Allen & Unwin, 1999, 214pp, \$24.95pb.

Once in a while from among the books classified in the self help/psychology category comes a book that offers hope for change in an individual's life, but not in the rhetoric of improved and better lives so often promised by books in this category. The tone of Hugh Crago's *A Circle Unbroken* is 'well – yes, maybe'. While offering hope for change, his book offers an understanding about how each person develops the character and personality that defines him or her. This understanding is not necessarily joyful or uplifting. Long-held patterns of behaviour and beliefs are challenged; a different and new understanding can result in pain and sadness at the sense of loss for what has been, and for what may never be in an individual's life.

Hugh Crago is a lecturer and psychotherapist and has worked in Australia and the United States. He is co-editor of the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* and Director of Academic Programs at the Jansen Newman Institute, a clinic and therapist training facility in Sydney.

Crago asserts that the capacity to change is limited because of the interaction between nature (genetic heritage) and nurture (environmental forces). It is at this point that family comes into the picture – a family is the source of an individual's genetic heritage and an individual's first environment.

His assumption is that most of us are curious about how we become who we are. 'Is personality



downward spiral of poverty and social deprivation that precipitates episodes of accommodation crisis.

These findings add credence to the author's contention that the principal cause of homelessness among family groups is the shortage of suitable housing options for low income families. The pro-

file of families also indicate that those presenting for housing assistance are a more diverse group than is suggested in much of the homeless literature.

A Long Way From Home also reports families' personal experiences of

private hotel accommodation, highlighting the terrible circumstances of those forced to rely on this type of sub-standard accommodation. Families report that hotel accommodation increases financial difficulty, causes social isolation, and produces many other adverse outcomes related to the conditions of the accommodation, including health problems, psychological difficulties and a host of developmental deficits for the children involved. Threats to personal safety, and a general

deterioration in the domestic environment are also incurred. The many negative results of hotel accommodation are understood to lessen families' chances of securing long-term housing, precipitating dependency upon emergency accommodation and homeless services.

The research also sought the perspectives of outreach and referral workers in the field about issues raised by families in their interviews. The perceptions of workers about emergent trends in family homelessness accord with data presented earlier in the report about increasing numbers of homeless families seeking accommodation assistance, and increasing numbers of families residing in sub-standard emergency accommodation. The problems of hotel accommodation identified by workers reflect key issues detailed by the families themselves.

Through the conduct of careful research, an excellent review of the homeless literature, and an incisive interpretation of the implications for practice and policy, Terry Bartholemew has translated the knowledge advanced through this project into practical recommendations for action which have the potential to improve the welfare of a growing

“in the genes”? Does our childhood dictate the future course of our lives? Can parents make or break their children? Can we change? Do we have choice? He then takes us on a journey, beginning at birth and finishing at death (the circle unbroken? – ashes to ashes, dust to dust). Along the way we visit childhood, adolescence, adulthood and the later years.

To illustrate the potential interaction between genetic heritage and environment, the author draws on examples and anecdotes from his family, his professional experience as a psychotherapist, and from the published biographies of some famous individuals including Elvis Presley, Sigmund Freud, Gustav Mahler, the American general George Smith Patton, and Australian academic and author Jill Ker Conway.

Crago's approach to the nature versus nurture debate is to accept that both 'are important in determining the future of individuals'. To a lay reader like myself, the genius of the book is the attempt to take up the space between genetic heritage and environmental forces. This is achieved in a style that is accessible by the use of anecdotes, research findings and the incorporation of different strands of psychological thought.

In the chapter on nature and nurture in infancy, the author writes that an infant is born with genetically based temperamental traits (nature), and that 'more often than not, environment tends to reinforce genetic heritage, rather than modify or undermine it' (nurture). These temperamental traits are neither good nor bad; right nor wrong. The infant will learn from its environment what is good or bad and right or wrong. Temperamental traits are broad brush in kind and form the basis of later personality development. Among the temperamental traits identified are activity level,

sociability, sensitivity, reactivity to change in the environment, and persistence.

The chapter incorporates research findings on temperamental traits into the discussion on the potentialities of temperament – how different temperamental traits may moderate each other and later personality development. The author writes that it is possible to be 'born shy' but that shyness can be handled successfully by individuals in a myriad of ways. He offers the example of Jill Ker Conway, based on what she has written in her book *The Road from Coorain*, as a shy child (the temperamental trait of low sociability), whose shyness is offset by the trait of persistence. This balancing of shyness with persistence has allowed Ker Conway to have a highly successful academic and administrative career.

Environmental forces (nurture) contribute to an individual life not only rational, but less rational and unconscious motivations, behind the choices we make. Later in the book, Crago examines Ker Conway's decision to leave Australia for America. He identifies the environmental factors that influenced her decision and asks whether there may have been unconscious and more driving factors in this decision. Did she take her father's words – to get a real education and to get out of Australia – literally? Was another driving factor simply the impulse every young adult experiences – to spread the wings, to see the world. If so, what of this? Crago's conclusion about many choices in life is that it 'is not weird or tragic; it is not uncanny, but predictable; it is not necessarily either good nor bad; it is simply the way we are'.

A major part of the book is the author's attempt to weave the many strands of psychological theory, research findings and clinical practice into a meaningful whole. The book is written for a wide

number of families experiencing residential instability. In collaboration with the Family Research Project Advisory Committee, 38 recommendations are outlined which address policy, practice and research-related issues.

Recommendations are made for: the development of a National Affordable Housing Strategy that seeks to ensure an adequate supply of secure and affordable housing in Australia; strategies to achieve greater inter-sectoral working across the levels of government and between government departments; increased resources for public and community housing; and numerous other ventures to promote the retention and expansion of public and private rental stock, including proposed reforms to the private rental market. Increasing family support to families experiencing residential instability is also advocated, including inter-agency collaboration when working with homeless families. The recommendations also emphasise the importance of gathering accurate and purposeful data about homeless persons, and longitudinal research to develop new understanding of the homeless problem, the experience of homeless persons, and the effects of current responses.

readership and many of the complexities of psychological theory, debate and controversy are simplified. This approach, however, is atoned for by thoughtful notes at the end of the book for the reader to follow up references and publications. I deliberately used the word 'thoughtful' as the author has chosen not to provide a comprehensive reference list, but rather to limit references to 'original publications in which key theories were expounded' and more interesting books for further reading. These supplement a number of the themes taken up in the book – birth order, obsessive personalities, attachment theory, object relations theory, child–parent attractions, partner choice, ageing, dying, inner calendars, and death, to name a few. Overall, Crago successfully entwines the many tenets of psychological thought and research in a style that emanates warmth and generosity towards the quirks and foibles of human behaviour.

The book is ambitious and fresh in its intent as strands of psychological thought are woven into a framework in which the reader, seeking to understand why she or he has made certain choices, moves around the rooms of a house. The book celebrates the complexity of why we are like we are, why we choose what we choose, and how such decisions comprise a combination of genetic heritage and environmental forces – for example, choice of partner, career, how to parent children, and where to live. A strength of Crago's work is that, through his imagination, the reader is able to redefine childhood, adolescence, choice of partner, and behaviour in relationships. Whether the understanding achieved is welcome is another issue. As we mature our responses to such understanding undergoes change as we pass through the life cycle.

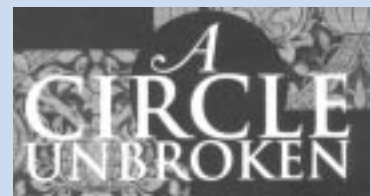
A Long Way From Home is essential reading for directors of social welfare agencies, social welfare workers, outreach workers, social researchers, teachers, and policy makers in the area of homelessness. It is also a valuable reference for ordinary citizens who wish to understand the issue of homelessness, and be better informed of the hardship experienced by increasing numbers of families in this country.

References

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The framework of the book is not presented as a unifying belief that one can follow as one might follow a therapeutic or spiritual path that gives the promise of an improved or better life. The strength of the framework is in the possible interconnections between the seemingly disparate strands of psychological ideas and research findings, rather than the height of the walls between such ideas and findings. It is as if there are no walls to the framework, rather like the timber frame of a house before the walls go on – one can step into the house though any part of the frame and wander in any direction. This is not to say the book lacks direction – far from it!



For me, Crago's book evoked both joy and sadness at loss, both affirmation and doubt, as well as giving some searing insights about past behaviour and decisions. Much of what he writes about – the life cycle, what informs the choices we make – are simultaneously reassuring and disturbing. In this book, I suspect that what one reader finds reassuring, another may find disturbing, possibly at times even painful.

However, at all times the book is thoughtfully written, imaginative and measured in its findings and affirming of individuality. If you have felt 'different' during your life, read this book because Crago celebrates individuality. His book has left me longing to understand and appreciate with greater depth my own families of origin.

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