

# Action research, families and communities

Eighth Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference



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The 8th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, with the theme *Steps Forward for Families: Research, Practice and Policy*, was held in Melbourne on 12–14 February 2003. Two sessions highlighted the work of the Stronger Families Learning Exchange (SFLEX) and its support of community development projects funded under the Stronger Families Fund. Two other sessions at the conference explored the interaction between family life and community life.

A SFLEX symposium at the recent Australian Institute of Family Studies conference outlined how the Commonwealth's vision of research support for a range of community development projects located across the nation is in the process of being translated by the research team into broader learnings that can inform policy. Gai Stern, from FaCS in Canberra, outlined the Commonwealth's vision and Colleen Turner from the SFLEX team described how support is delivered on the ground. Leah Anderson, from the Connecting Families project, Wagga Wagga NSW, presented a case study that demonstrated how the relationship between funders (FaCS), research support (SFLEX) and a funded project had

developed, and the benefits that have resulted at the local (project and community) level.

The specifics of providing action research support were further outlined by Dr Kelley Johnson (SFLEX Team leader) and Lisa Natoli via the presentation of a workshop on action research processes. This session provided the audience with an opportunity to hear of the research team's experiences in working with a range of projects, at times within a government bureaucratic context, and to workshop issues of research practice.

A series of papers looked at aspects of family life contributing to community participation and trust – and how this link occurs. Jody Hughes and Wendy Stone from the Australian Institute of Family Studies, examined aspects of family life that lead to community-level social capital. This paper has been developed as part of ongoing work at the Institute on the issue of social capital. Further information on the project is available at: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/research/progC.html>. Roger Patulny from the Social Policy Research Centre (UNSW) focused on the development of social trust, and Philip Hughes from Edith Cowan University explored the family characteristics of families with strong community links.

A second series of papers explored community relationships and what these mean for family life and community wellbeing. These papers showcased not only a range of methodologies, but also a range of research, practice and policy approaches to understanding community strengths in the context of disadvantaged communities. They included an application of grounded inquiry to understanding inclusion, exclusion and power relationships in a rural community presented by Di Cox from La Trobe University; an analysis of social capital and linking ties in various types of disadvantaged communities by Karen Healy and Anne Hampshire, University of Sydney and the Benevolent Society; and an overview of an on-site project exploring the ways in which technology can enhance existing community ties in high density urban environments, which was presented by Denise Meredyth and Scott Ewing from Swinburne Institute for Social Research.

**Papers presented at the conference can be viewed and/or downloaded from the Institute's website at <http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/afrc8/papers.html>**

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