This issue of *Family Matters* contains a diverse array of articles about the family in Australia. David de Vaus writes on marriage and mental health; Boyd Hunter and Matthew Gray on the labour supply of Indigenous Australians; Michael Gilding on the challenges for families in the new Millennium; Bob Birrell and colleagues on regional variation in concentration of sole parents; and Bruce Smyth reviews methodological issues involved in researching post-separation parent–child contact.

Issues to do with work and family, fertility, the labour force participation of women, and issues of maternity benefits and maternity leave, continue to be in the news on a daily basis. Our last issue of *Family Matters* (no. 61, Autumn 2002) was timely with its concentration on “Work and family life: Our workplaces, families and futures”. We continue this emphasis with a review by Susan Fooks of recent materials available on the Institute’s *Australian Family & Society Abstracts* database on the subject of “Fertility and public policy”.

This issue also contains the Institute’s Research Plan 2002–2005. This plan will guide our activities over the next triennium and I recommend it to you. It is intended to be a “living document” and responsive to emerging research and policy issues. We have sought to ensure that the Institute’s research continues to be at the forefront of thinking on the family in Australia, and with this plan the Institute is seeking to make a positive contribution to policy development and informed debate on issues of critical and far-reaching concern for all families. At the same time, the Institute is always interested to receive further comment on its planned activities, and to receive suggestions for areas of possible research on emerging issues of concern.

Readers will also see in this edition our announcement for the 8th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, to be held from 12–14 February 2003 at the Melbourne Exhibition Centre, Southbank. We welcome submissions for papers on any aspect of family research and policy. The conference will provide a valuable opportunity for those interested or involved in family research, family policy, or providing services to families in Australia.

I am pleased to announce that Associate Professor David de Vaus has joined our team at the Institute, as Senior Research Advisor. We are sharing his time with La Trobe University where he is with the Sociology Department. David has a long-standing interest in family research and research techniques generally, and we are delighted that he has been able to join the Institute.

As a final note, we are all very sad at the passing of Ann Henderson, the Presiding Member of the Institute’s Board of Management, on 4 June 2002, after a courageous battle with cancer.

The Institute was indeed fortunate when Ann was appointed to its Board in July 2000. She made a valuable contribution, bringing to the task a wealth of experience, practical ideas, and positive and forward-looking leadership. Ann always maintained a keen interest and close involvement in the activities of the Institute. She very much liked catching up with staff, and particularly enjoyed chatting with individual members during informal lunches on days when Board meetings were held. In turn, Ann was well liked and highly regarded by staff, and greatly respected by everyone involved with the Institute.

Ann had an active and fulfilling life. Professionally, she is most well known for her role in Victorian politics. She won the seat of Geelong in 1992, and was the Minister for Housing and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in the Victorian government between 1996 and 1999. Among her many other activities over the years was her role as Executive Officer of the Geelong Art Gallery Foundation, and Executive Officer of the Geelong branch of the National Trust of Australia. She also served the community as Mayor of the City of Newtown.

The State Funeral held for Ann at St Mary of the Angels Church in Geelong on 12 June 2002 was attended by David Stanton, Director of the Institute. The very moving ceremony was both a fitting tribute to Ann’s public contribution as well as a loving farewell from her family and friends. The singing by the Sacred Heart College Choir was especially beautiful.

Central to Ann’s life was her family, and she was a proud and loving mother and devoted grandmother. We send to her family our sincere condolences. She will be missed.
The Australian Institute of Family Studies invites submissions from people interested in presenting papers, symposia or workshops at the Eighth Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, to be held at the Melbourne Exhibition Centre on Southbank from Wednesday 12 February to Friday 14 February 2003.

Steps forward for families: Research, practice and policy

The Australian Institute of Family Studies conference will provide a valuable forum for those interested or involved in family research, family policy, or providing services to families in Australia. It will feature the presentation and discussion of findings of the Institute’s own studies, along with work from a wide range of researchers, government bodies, service providers and community organisations.

Themes and content
Submissions are invited on any aspect of family research and policy, including family trends, family life and relationships, children, economics, support programs and family law. The Institute welcome papers exploring: research methodologies and problems (especially longitudinal work); theory relating to family, gender and sexuality; comparative research; policy and program evaluation; and historical scholarship.

Presenters are asked to note the following topic areas, and to consider the three conference sub-themes: Children and Parenting; Family and Marriage; and Families and Society. There will also be an open stream for papers which do not fit the sub-themes.

Themes and content

- Co-parenting after divorce
- Children’s voices: being heard in post-separation arrangements
- Emerging issues in family law
- Family and society

Work and family
- Income support policy
- Fertility
- Social capital and civil society
- Family values
- Policy implications of an ageing population
- Social and demographic trends affecting families
- Family, community, crime and safety
- Stronger families and communities
- Family violence

Submission guidelines and conditions

Key dates
- Call for papers is open until Wednesday 2 October 2002
- Acceptance of proposals will be advised between 22–26 October 2002
- The deadline for early-bird registration is 13 December 2002

Methods of presentation
When submitting your abstract, please nominate your preferred session type – individual papers, symposia or workshops.

Individual paper submissions are invited for papers reporting original research findings, work in progress, methodological issues, and reporting/evaluating family service programs. Papers will be grouped into themes and presented in concurrent sessions. Twenty minutes, plus ten minutes for discussion, will be allocated for each individual paper. Three papers will be presented in the course of each one-and-a-half-hour session.

Symposia submissions should propose a set of closely related papers on a particular topic, the content of each paper, and the names of a convener and a discussant. Each symposium, of one-and-a-half-hours duration, will consist of at least two papers followed by a discussant.

Workshop submissions should outline the topic, target audience, knowledge/experience requirements of participants, structure of the proposed session, and any limitations on the number of participants. Each workshop will be of one-and-a-half-hours duration.

Evaluation criteria
Submissions, be they for papers, symposia or workshops will be reviewed by a panel of assessors. Selections will be made on the basis of the following criteria:
- a clear application to the conference themes;
- appropriate methodology and presentation of data;
- clarity of discussion;
- demonstration of innovation, quality and originality.

Submission guidelines
Abstract submission is via the Internet www.aifs.gov.au

For proposals with more than one author, only one person should submit the abstract online, and this person will be the contact for all correspondence concerning the abstract with the Conference Office.

Proposals accepted for presentation will be published in the Conference Handbook and online exactly as submitted, and should thus be checked for accuracy prior to submission.

Further information
If you do not have access to the Internet, please contact the Institute on phone +61 3 9214 7888 and we will send you an application form.

If you would like to present a paper and are uncertain about how it might relate to the conference, please email or phone:
Ann Sanson (anns@aifs.gov.au), David de Vaus (david@d.aifs.gov.au), or Catherine Rosenbrock (cathr@aifs.gov.au), at the Australian Institute of Family Studies (phone: +61 3 9214 7888).
There is a growing consensus that it is the technological revolution that is driving the transformation of society and culture—not least the family. Designer babies, cyber sex and virtual communities are all new expressions that highlight the role of new technologies in the changing character of family and personal relationships.

In the 1970s and 1980s nobody was quite sure what was happening to the family. The statistical trends were clear enough: less marriage, more de facto relationships, more divorce, fewer children, more children born outside marriage and so on. But social scientists struggled to make sense of the underlying dynamic that underpinned these trends.

Some social scientists decided that there was no underlying dynamic—and what’s more, perhaps no such thing as “the family”. They deconstructed the family and found that there was nothing there. The American feminist Judith Stacey put this view most eloquently:

“We are living, I believe, through a transitional and contested period of family history, a period after the modern family order, but before what we cannot foretell. Precisely because it is not possible to characterise with a single term the competing sets of family cultures that coexist at present, I identify this family regime as postmodern. The postmodern family is not a new model of family life, not the next stage of an orderly progression of family history, but the stage when the belief in a logical progression of stages breaks down.” (Stacey 1990: 18)

During the 1990s, though, there emerged a growing consensus that the dramatic changes in the family were one aspect of a much bigger set of changes that was occurring across western societies, and in many other parts of the world also. The most common way of talking about this bigger set of changes was in terms of “the Information Age”. Alternatively, some social scientists emphasised the broader sweep of technological innovation, through concepts such as “the third industrial revolution”, “the knowledge economy” and “the weightless economy”. The bottom line was the idea that it was the technological revolution that was driving the transformation of society and culture—not least the family.

Manuel Castells, a Spanish-born sociologist at the University of California, was the most prominent theorist of the Information Age. Castells spoke of “a technological revolution, centered around information technologies” reshaping “at an accelerated pace” the foundations of society. In this context, he described “the crisis of the patriarchal family”. As he put it:

“Thus, gender relationships have become, in much of the world, a contested domain, rather than a sphere of cultural reproduction. A fundamental redefinition of relationships between women, men and children has followed, and thus, of family, sexuality and personality.” (Castells 2000: 2-3)

Similarly, the leading British sociologist Anthony Giddens emphasised the effects of the “world-wide communications revolution”, the “new knowledge economy” and globalisation. In this context many social institutions “appear the same as they used to be from the outside, and carry the same names, but inside have become quite different”. Giddens described such institutions as “shell institutions”. Marriage and the family were shell institutions—one overwhelmingly economic in their character; now based on emotional communication or intimacy. Moreover, this was a global shift:
“There are few countries in the world where there isn’t intense discussion about sexual equality, the regulation of sexuality, and the future of the family. And where there isn’t open debate, this is mostly because it is actively repressed by authoritarian governments or fundamentalist groups.” (Giddens 1999: online)

Left-leaning social scientists were not alone in making a connection between the Information Age and the transformation of the family. The conservative American political scientist Francis Fukuyama explained the dramatic changes in the family – the “Great Disruption”, as he described it – in terms of “the information society”. In his words:

“The changing nature of work tended to substitute mental for physical labour, thereby propelling millions of women into the workplace and undermining the traditional understandings on which the family had been based. Innovations in medical technology like the birth control pill and increasing longevity diminished the role of reproduction and family in people’s lives. And the culture of intensive individualism, which in the marketplace and laboratory leads to innovation and growth, spilled over into the realm of social norms, where it corroded virtually all forms of authority and weakened the bonds holding families, neighbourhoods, and nations together.” (Fukuyama 1999: 5-6)

This article is about the relationship between technological change (the “Third Industrial Revolution”) and the transformation of the family. In particular it considers three new expressions that highlight the connection between new technologies and family – “designer babies”, “cyber sex” and “virtual communities”. It explores what these expressions tell us about changing family forms, and how families might change in the future.

**Technological determinism**

Before anything else, a cautionary note. In this type of exercise, it is easy to fall into technological determinism, placing too much weight on technological events and not enough on social relationships.

Consider, for example, Fukuyama’s account of the Great Disruption. Fukuyama drew attention to two aspects of technological innovation: first, the birth control pill, allowing women more control over their fertility; and second, labour-saving technology, enhancing the importance of skill at the expense of physical exertion. In turn, Fukuyama argued that women were the winners from technological innovation, whereas blue-collar men were the losers.

Yet the birth control revolution long pre-dated the birth control pill. It was driven by the changing relationship of children to the family economy. That is, prolonged education meant that children became more expensive, which meant that parents had fewer children (Ruzicka and Caldwell 1977: ch. 1). Moreover, the revolution was achieved for the most part through long-standing birth control technologies (Gilding 1991: 65-73). In Australia the birth rate fell below replacement level during the 1930s Depression – 30 years before the pill.

Fukuyama’s claims about the impact of labour-saving technology are also questionable. After all, women provided a large measure of back-breaking
labour in agricultural and industrial societies. In the early twentieth century, for example, a Royal Commission on Female Employment in New South Wales did its best to push the view that women should be excluded from factory work because of its physical demands. The Commissioners, though, were frustrated and embarrassed by the young female factory workers who appeared as witnesses and insisted that they preferred factory work because it was less physically demanding than domestic service (Ryan and Conlon: 72-5).

The general point here is that the relationship between technology and culture is a complicated one. It is easy to attribute too much to new technologies. In any case, new technologies (such as the birth control pill) are themselves the outcomes of social and political processes. That is, the restriction of fertility in the wake of prolonged education created the demand for new contraceptive technologies.

**Timing**

According to Castells, there were four main reasons for the dramatic changes in the family. First, there was “the transformation of the economy, and of the labour market, in close association with the opening of educational opportunities to women” (Castells 1997: 136). The growth of the “informational economy” favoured the employment of women, not least on account of their relational skills. In turn, women’s employment undermined men’s economic control of the family.

Second, “the technological transformation in biology, pharmacology, and medicine” promoted “growing control over child bearing, and over the reproduction of the human species” (Castells 1997: 136). The possibilities of in vitro fertilisation, sperm banks, surrogate mothers and genetically engineered babies opened up a “whole new area of social experimentation”. Above all, parenting no longer necessarily implied socialisation, severing the “fundamental relationship between biology and society in the reproduction of the human species” (Castells 1997: 241).

Third, the development of the feminist movement further undermined “patriarchalism”, as Castells calls it. Feminism was one of a myriad of social movements from the 1970s onwards, characteristic of the network society. Social movements such as feminism were themselves the outcome of the Information Age, as identity depended less upon civil society (which was shrinking) and more upon communal resistance (increasingly the basis of identity).

Finally, there was the “rapid diffusion of ideas in a globalised culture, and in an interrelated world, where people and experience travel and mingle, quickly weaving a hyperquilt of women’s voices throughout most of the planet” (Castells 1997: 137). In March 2002, for example, there was an international controversy about a woman who had been sentenced to death by stoning in Nigeria for adultery. Globalised communication placed the decision-making processes of regional and national authorities under international scrutiny, eventually resulting in the woman’s release.

One problem with Castells’ line of argument is timing. The dawn of the Information Age occurred in Silicon Valley during the 1970s. Only then, Castells (2000: 39) observed, “did new information technologies diffuse widely, accelerating their synergistic development and converging into a new paradigm”. Yet some of the most dramatic changes in the Australian family occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In particular, this was the time when the divorce rate spiralled, after which it stabilised during the 1980s and 1990s.

So how is it possible that the cultural effects of the Information Age occurred at the very dawn of the technological revolution in the relative technological backwater of Australia? After all, Australia is still a laggard in the New Economy thirty years on.

The bottom line is that the dramatic changes in the family were anchored in the “Second Industrial Revolution”, no less than the Information Age itself. By the same token, the Information Age did not put a stop on these changes. On the contrary, as Castells observed, women’s workforce participation continued to increase; social experimentation around birth and socialisation proliferated; and patriarchal privilege struggled to maintain its legitimacy.

In close connection, a new vocabulary of family and communal relationships – such as “designer babies”, “cyber sex” and “virtual communities” – emerged. The new vocabulary suggested new possibilities and choices. It warrants closer scrutiny.

**Designer babies**

One hundred years ago the most controversial aspect of family change was the declining birth rate. In the 1900s a Royal Commission on the Decline of the Birth-Rate described birth control as a “threat to the future of the family”. Yet by the 1950s birth control was routine. Indeed, it was even described as “family planning”.

Birth control suggested the possibility of selective breeding among human beings. In 1885 Francis Galton, a cousin of Charles Darwin, coined the word “eugenics” to describe the science of selective breeding among humans. From the 1900s eugenics became increasingly influential across western societies. More than this, it was instrumental in creating a more tolerant attitude towards birth control. The first birth control clinic in New South Wales, for example, was established by the Racial Hygiene Association, a eugenics organisation (Gilding 1991: 78).

During this era some countries adopted coercive eugenics policies. Many states in the United States passed laws providing for compulsory sterilisation of the “feeble-minded”. More than 100,000 Americans were sterilised under these laws (Ridley 2000b: 35). The Nazi regime in Germany went furthest of all. Its mass sterilisations and death camps...
ultimately discredited eugenics and made it a dirty word.

Fifty years later we are again practising a sort of eugenics – not in the coercive sense, but at the level of individual practices and choices. More specifically, individuals and couples are taking a more calculative approach to the genetic material of their offspring. In turn, they are making choices about coupling, conception and abortion, with significant effects on the make-up of the human population.

In the United States, for example, the Committee for the Prevention of Jewish Genetic Disease organizes the routine testing of school children’s blood. A hotline allows prospective couples to find out whether they are carriers of the same genetic mutations. As a result, cystic fibrosis has been almost eliminated from the Jewish population in the United States (Ridley 2000a: 191).

Similarly, medical screening procedures such as amniocentesis are now widespread in western societies. They are especially widespread for older mothers who are more likely to give birth to babies with genetic mutations, notably Down syndrome. The proportion of babies with Down syndrome born to older mothers has fallen dramatically in the past decade. This is because older mothers are often choosing to abort the foetus rather than proceed with the pregnancy (Ridley 2000a: 286-287).

The scope for calculative choice in designing our babies is growing at breathtaking speed. Genetic engineering of plants and animals is now routine, but it is still controversial (Commoner 2002: 39-47). Only the genetic engineering of human beings is now forbidden, but some commentators have no doubt that it would work. The science writer Matt Ridley, for example, provides a simple example: “the gene on chromosome 4 that is associated with Huntington’s disease, a terrible mental affliction of middle age”.

“You could go into the gene in a fertilised egg, find the crucial phrase ‘CAG’ – which, in affected people, is repeated more than 39 times in the middle of the gene – and remove about half of the repeats. It would not be easy, but it could probably be done. The result would be a healthy person with no risk of Huntington’s, and no risk of passing it on to her children.” (Ridley 2000b: 35)

It is difficult to imagine that genetic engineering along these lines will not occur. After all, it seems a lot less intrusive than genetic screening followed by abortion, which is currently available. And if this type of procedure becomes routine, then it is a series of short steps to cosmetic genetic engineering – say, to prevent dwarfism, or remove a facial disfigurement, or program for blond hair and blue eyes.

And if genetic engineering for appearance became commonplace, then it is not difficult to imagine engineering for performance. For example, there is a gene on chromosome 17 called the ACE gene. This gene comes in two varieties, long and short. They are equally common in the population. On average, people who inherit two long ACE genes make better athletes than people with two short genes. According to Ridley, it would not be so difficult to engineer an embryo with two long genes (Ridley 2000b: 35).

And if genetic engineering for performance occurred, then it is no less difficult to imagine engineering for behaviour. Yet the further we travel down this pathway, the more uncertain the effect of genetic inheritance becomes. More to the point, social influences such as family environment and social class become more important in mediating the effects of our genes. Even so, there will be experimentation anyway.

It is possible that “designer babies” will become so ubiquitous that the expression itself will become irrelevant – a bit like the expression “small families” in the course of the twentieth century.

Cybersex

One hundred years ago birth control unleashed fears not only about the future of the family, but also the future of sexuality. This was because birth control meant a separation between sex and reproduction. For example, the Royal Commission on the Decline of the Birth-Rate quoted the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, who complained that birth control turned marriage into “a mere sexual compact” (cited in Gilding 2001: 8).

In the course of the twentieth century the worst fears of the Archbishop of Sydney were probably more than realised. There occurred what has been described as a “sexualisation” of marriage, whereby sexuality became more important in marital relations (Game and Pringle 1979: 74-81). An Australian survey in the 1980s, for example, found that most Australians thought that sexual pleasure was more important to a happy marriage than success as a breadwinner or performance of household duties (Evans and Kelley 1990: 9).

More than this: sexuality itself became increasingly detached from marriage. This was reflected in the growth of de facto relationships and ex-nuptial births. And it was exemplified in growing social acceptance and legal recognition of homosexuality. As Anthony Giddens observed, this was “the logical outcome of the severance of sexuality from reproduction” (Giddens 1999).
Giddens described the new sexuality as “plastic sexuality”. Plastic sexuality was “decentred sexuality, freed from the needs of reproduction” (Giddens 1992: 2), “something to be discovered, moulded, altered” (Giddens 1999). It was intrinsic to what Giddens called “the pure relationship”, the emergent social ideal for coupldom in western societies. The pure relationship was based upon intimacy, equality and voluntary commitment, unencumbered by kin and community obligations.

The Internet facilitates new ways of forming relationships – and having sex. Cyber sex, or netsex as it is sometimes called, is sex in cyber space. An Internet list of “Frequently Answered Questions” describes cyber sex as people typing messages with erotic content to each other, “sometimes with one hand on the keyset, sometimes with two”. Sherry Turkle, an American psychologist, observes:

“Many people who engage in netsex say that they are constantly surprised by how emotionally and physically powerful it can be. They insist that it demonstrates the truth of the adage that 90 per cent of sex takes place in the mind. This is certainly not a new idea, but netsex has made it commonplace among teenage boys, a social group not usually known for its sophistication about such matters.” (Turkle 1996: 21)

Relationships forged on the web, including cyber sex, have at least four distinctive characteristics. First, they transcend geographical distance. More than this, relationships formed on the web transcend distance through high-speed, low-cost interactive communication. People can have cyber sex with next door neighbours, or with people on the other side of the planet.

Second, cyber relationships are forged on the basis of common interests, rather than common locality. These common interests can become very specialised. They may also lead to the formation of “real life” networks and relationships. One of the most infamous bulletin boards on the Internet, for example, is a site where people with a common interest in bondage, discipline and sadomasochism meet in cyberspace. They also meet in real life (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 1995).

Third, relationships forged in cyberspace are disembodied. Disembodiment means that symbolic exchanges become more important at the expense of physical markers. In turn, there is more scope for fantasy, deception and experimentation. In this context it becomes possible to explore different identities and sexualities. The most well-known form of deception (or experimentation, depending upon your point of view) is men pretending to be women, and women pretending to be men.

Finally, cyber relationships – for a variety of reasons, including disembodiment - tend to be relatively disinhibited. Disinhibited behaviour on the web includes what is known as “flaming”, or destructive behaviour. It also includes heightened self-disclosure, with people revealing more important, risky and personal behaviour online (Parks and Floyd 1986: 88; Walther 1996: 17-23).

Following this line of inquiry, some social scientists have described relationships formed through cyberspace as “hyperpersonal” (Walther 1996: 5). In the words of the psychologist Patricia Wallace:

“You may reveal more about yourself to [online friends than real life ones], feel more attracted to them, and express more emotions – even when all you have is a keyboard. At the keyboard you can concentrate only on yourself, your words, and the feelings you want to convey. You don’t have to worry about how you look, or those extra pounds you meant to shed ... online you can reallocate your energies to the message.” (Wallace 1999: 151)

Another American psychologist, Joan Ullman, has observed that the unexpurgated email in New York’s first Internet-related sexual assault case provided “a prism for viewing the new havoc in relationships playing out on-line”:

“The most important facets include blurring of male and female identities, cocktails of fact and fantasy, sharp disjunctions and free associations in thoughts, and the fluid assumption of new personas, all aided and abetted by hyperfast communication in the absence of verbal and visual cues to behaviour. If the cybersex trial tells us anything, it is that in the free-wheeling interplay of these elements, which it encourages, cyberculture has turned yesterday’s pathology into today’s ordinary sex chat.” (Ullman 1998)

Cyber sex is a new form of “plastic sexuality”. Like homosexuality, it is decentred sex, cut loose from reproduction. It also exemplifies the “pure relationship”, in the sense that it is grounded in interpersonal intimacy, unencumbered by kin and community relationships (Clark 1998).

Some historians argue that sexual mores swing like a pendulum, back and forth between permissiveness and repression (Stone 1977). Yet the emergence of plastic sexuality seems qualitatively different from earlier shifts in sexual mores. More likely, it seems that there will be further elaborations of plastic sexuality in the new millennium.

**Virtual communities**

Birth control was one controversy one hundred years ago. Another controversy was the living quarters of the working class and poor. This controversy was precipitated by the outbreak of bubonic plague in inner-city Sydney. As a city health officer reflected in his official report, the “poorer classes” needed better housing “not the less for their own health, but as a policy of insurance for that of the whole community” (cited in Gilding 1991: 42-43).

During the next two decades there emerged an outspoken town planning movement, which blamed high-density inner-city neighbourhoods for dysfunctional community relationships. More specifically, they blamed the “slums” for drunkenness, crime, larrikinism, immorality, birth control, infant mortality, industrial inefficiency and political subversion. The solution rested in low-density “garden suburbs”, where people became more family-centred (Gilding 1991: 42-46).
Public transport made low-density suburbs possible. Before rail and tram networks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, people needed to be within walking distance of where they worked – and for that matter, within walking distance of those people with whom they wanted regular contact (Spearritt 1978: 141). This often meant the intertwining of residential, work and kinship relationships. Public transport meant that people were able to follow the rail and tram lines into the suburbs. Public roads and private cars meant that they were able to move out further still. In turn, there was increasing separation of residential, work and kinship relationships.

Since the 1960s sociologists have mapped the patterns of community involvement in the Australian suburbs. Lyn Richards’ description of a new Melbourne housing estate in the 1980s is typical:

“...the strongest message is that neighbour relations normally are not close. Those who have close relations find them elsewhere, those who know their near neighbours know them very little.” (Richards 1990: 215)

In this context, community ties in contemporary Australia are not generally grounded in neighbourhood. What we have instead are “personal communities”, facilitated by cars and phones. These communities consist of multiple social networks, involving narrow and specialised relationships – say, school friends, or tennis friends, or work friends, or the relatives. By implication, people have to actively maintain their networks, rather than rely upon the goodwill of a single community (Gilding 1997: ch. 4).

Faxes, mobile telephones, electronic mail, the Internet and hand-held computers further extend the scope for personal communities. Local neighbourhoods become even less important as the basis for personal communities. It is now possible to forge disembodied communities on the basis of extraordinary narrow interests. Consider, for example, the Diving Dentists Society, which unites dentists interested in scuba or other forms of diving. Or the Ginger Alden “Lady Superstar” Fan Club, consisting of fans of Elvis Presley’s last girlfriend (Frank and Cook 1996: 51).

Consider another example, arising from an innovative piece of research called “Reach for the Clouds”, at Swinburne University of Technology (Meredith, Hopkins and Ewing 2002). The project is a practical experiment in building a networked community at Atherton Gardens, a high-rise public housing estate in inner-city Melbourne. The estate had its origins in “slum clearance” during the 1960s. It houses low-income families, many of them recent immigrants.

At the inception of the project, the agencies sponsoring Reach for the Clouds were mainly interested in whether providing residents with networked PCs would facilitate local community and exchange – ironically, the type of relationships that slum clearance was once intended to wipe out. But the preliminary findings of Reach for the Clouds show that residents are mostly interested in using their PCs to email family and friends overseas, in the countries from whence they have come.

Some commentators lament the decline of local communities. But as the Canadian sociologists Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia (1994: 78) argue: “It is not that people’s communities are disintegrating, but rather that they are in flux.” Networked PCs facilitate personal communities unrestrained by physical distance – including existing networks of family and friends (as is the case with Atherton Gardens), and new relationships with total strangers sharing specialised and sometimes esoteric interests (as is the case with the Diving Dentists).

There is even scope for optimism. The American sociologist Mark Granovetter (1973) has documented “the strength of weak ties” – that is, the way in which loose networks can have dramatic effects (for example, in getting a job or identifying a business opportunity). Networked PCs lower the costs in building and maintaining weak ties. They also have the capacity to facilitate strong links, as observed in the discussion of cyber sex above. In Wellman and Gulia’s (1994: 176) words: “Thus even the Net might accelerate the trend to moving community interaction out of public spaces, it may also integrate society and foster social trust.”

**New millennium families**

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries new expressions were coined and old ones were re-fashioned to describe the changing structure and contours of family life and sexuality. Old words with a new meaning included “housewife”, “breadwinner” and “motherhood”. New expressions included “homosexual”, “teenager”, “the small family”, “the nuclear family” and “broken families” (Gilding 1991).

Expressions such as “designer babies”, “cyber sex” and “virtual communities” also reflect new experiences of family and sexuality. The common thread in these expressions is that they all contain a reference to new technologies in communications and the biosciences.

There is a sense in which designer babies, cyber sex and virtual communities are simply the extension of long established trends. Eugenics, after all, pre-dated designer babies by more than one hundred
years. More permissive norms around sexuality paved the way for cyber sex. Trains and trams undercut local communities with overlapping social relationships long before the virtual communities of cyberspace. From this perspective, we can regard the technologies themselves as the outcome of cultural patterns and preferences.

By the same token, the new technologies dramatically extended the scale and scope of family change. Biotechnology made the old-style eugenics seem hopelessly crude. Cyber sex was the ultimate expression of plastic sexuality and the pure relationship. The Internet took over from the car and the telephone, pushing the boundaries of personal relationships to the edges of the planet. We are now able to choose our offspring, our sexual partners and our communities in ways that were once inconceivable. This is why it became necessary to invent new expressions. It is also why social scientists such as Castells, Giddens and Fukuyama drew attention to the effects of new technologies in the Information Age.

The sociologist Judith Stacey has described gay and lesbian families as “the pioneer outpost of the postmodern family condition, confronting most directly its features of improvisation, ambiguity, diversity, contradiction, self-reflection and flux”. More to the point, she observed “how unambiguously the substance of their relationships takes precedence over their form, their emotional and social commitments over genetic claims” (Stacey 1996: 142-143). The same could be said of designer babies, cyber sex and virtual communities. Above all, they are manifestations of “the families we choose” – right down to parents and their babies, the biological core of family relationships.

In one hundred years I imagine that social scientists (if that is what they are called then) will look back on our own times and find the seeds of their own family structures and relationships in expressions such as designer babies, cyber sex and virtual communities. The only qualification here is that these expressions may well be anachronisms by then. Not least, the phenomena to which they refer may be so routine as to make the expressions irrelevant.

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According to the 2001 Australian Census, some 21.4 per cent of families with children aged 0–14 years were headed by a lone parent (male and female). The comparable figure in 1996 was 19.4 per cent, and in 1986 it was 14.6 per cent (Birrell and Rapson 1998: 43). Australia is not unique in this trend. The proportion of families headed by lone parents is even higher in the United Kingdom and the United States. Nevertheless, the rising share of Australian families in which one parent (mainly female) has to shoulder most of the tasks of parenting, often under trying financial circumstances, is of concern.

The theory that changes in family values have made a major contribution to the growth of lone parenthood is widely held by conservative and feminist researchers alike. The argument is that economic developments and a greater acceptance of feminist values have encouraged the movement of women into the labour market and, in the process, disrupted previous arrangements in which women were expected to play the “housewife/mother” role and

Research shows that there are higher concentrations of lone-parent families in Australia’s regional centres than in its major cities. But is this a result of a decline in “traditional” family values? Or a product of migration into these centres? Or is it a consequence of the higher incidence of socio-economic disadvantage in these centres relative to metropolitan areas?
men the “breadwinner” role. The combination of these changes, along with the determination of women to pursue their work interests, is thought to have led to increasing conflict between men and women about family roles. This has in turn resulted in greater levels of relationship breakdown and a higher incidence of lone-parent families (Garfinkel and McLanahan 1986).

The Australian experience suggests that this explanation for the rise in lone parenthood is only part of the story. If correct, it would be expected that communities where liberal family views prevail, and which also offer the greatest opportunities for women to participate in the workforce, would show higher lone-parent rates than the communities at the opposite end of this spectrum.

However, research shows that there are higher concentrations of lone-parent families in Australia’s regional centres than in the major metropolises (Birrell and Rapson 2001). This does not fit well with the argument that the rise of lone parenthood is connected with the alleged decline in “traditional” family values – for the simple reason that that this “decline” has clearly progressed further in metropolitan areas.

Women in regional Australia tend to have lower levels of education and are less likely to be in paid work than their city counterparts (ABS 1996). Thus Sydney, rather than the bush, should have higher levels of lone parenthood. Yet, as Table 1 shows, the proportion of families with dependent children headed by a lone parent is higher in centres outside Sydney and Melbourne than within them.

Table 1 indicates that the more rural parts of the non-metropolitan areas show quite low lone-parent rates, as do the metropolitan centres. The highest rates of lone-parent families are in regional centres, including those located on the New South Wales and Queensland coast. In Queensland for example, the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast (both 22 per cent) have much higher concentrations of lone-parent families than Brisbane (18 per cent). Similarly, in Sydney, 16 per cent of families with children aged 0–14 were headed by lone mothers, well below the rural centres of New South Wales (21 per cent).

Perhaps the family ethos in regional Australia is not as centred on traditional values as imagined, particularly in the regional centres where lone-parent concentrations are the highest. An alternative hypothesis is that the high concentrations of lone-parent families in regional centres are due to in-movement of lone parents from elsewhere, particularly the major metropolises. It would be fair to say that this hypothesis has gained considerable credence in popular accounts of lone parenthood, particularly in relation to sunbelt coastal locations. But there is academic support as well.

This article examines patterns of geographic mobility in order to assess whether migration is likely to be the major cause for high lone-parent concentrations in regional areas, or whether such concentrations are largely a consequence of “home grown” factors.

**Migration from metropolitan to regional areas**

The basis for the migration hypothesis is that many lone mothers are marginalised economically. The lack of a partner with whom they can share work and child care responsibilities means they are...
highly dependent on welfare. Also, studies of the marital status of lone parents indicate that a growing proportion have never married (Birrell and Rapson 1998: 45); this group is the least likely to have access to resources such as ownership of the family home.

In a context of increasing metropolitan housing and living costs, it has often been argued that lone parents, like others on the employment margins, would have a strong incentive to move to more affordable and perhaps more "lifestyle-friendly" locations. This was a prominent theme in the "counter-urbanisation" literature of the 1970s and 1980s (Flood 1992; Hugo 1996). Although this theme was much less influential among scholars in the 1990s, there is a continuing flow of anecdotal reports about the alleged movement of lone parents and other welfare-dependent people out of the metropolises.

There are obvious grounds for scepticism about the migration hypothesis. In particular, it might be expected that lone parents’ decisions about residence will be heavily influenced by the existence of family and friendship networks. Nevertheless, such scepticism does not seem to have inhibited speculation about the movement of lone parents from metropolitan to regional areas.

In order to explore the issue, an analysis of the movement of families with dependent children between 1991 and 1996 was undertaken, the main focus of which was female-headed lone-parent families. The objective was to determine how much of the growth of lone-mother concentrations was attributable to migration.

This analysis was based on a customised 1996 census matrix which detailed the movements of such families to and from selected areas of high and low concentrations of lone parents. The data are based on family status as of 1996; no information was available about their family status in 1991. The selected areas were chosen from locations across Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria, with particular emphasis on regional locations.

The research has nothing to say about the growth of lone-parent concentrations in the years before 1991. Thus it may be the case that migration before 1991 to places like the Gold Coast contributed to the high concentrations of lone parents resident in that location by 1991. It may also be the case that some of the intact families migrating to the area prior to 1991 may have been vulnerable to family breakdown after 1991.

However, the research still constitutes a powerful test of the migration hypothesis, because during the 1991–1996 period there was a sharp increase in the proportion of families headed by lone mothers across Australia, from 13.6 per cent to 17.3 per cent (ABS, CDATA96). As Table 3 shows, there was even more marked growth in many of the regional areas selected for study. If little of this growth in the regional areas was attributable to net migration over the period it would constitute a robust (if not conclusive) refutation of the migration hypothesis.

It was expected that to the extent migration did account for an increase in lone-parent concentrations relative to all families with dependent children between 1991 and 1996, it would be a consequence of two possible pathways. The first was where lone parents were being attracted to a growth area like the Gold Coast at a greater rate than couple families. A second possible route might be in more depressed areas marked by low or declining population growth, such as the La Trobe Valley in Victoria. In such locations, lone parents may be less likely to leave the area than couple families because of the greater reliance of the former on the availability of cheap housing. In other words, they may be trapped in these locations.

An assessment of these possibilities required an analysis of the relative contribution of movement in and out of the selected locations over the 1991–1996 period of both lone-parent and couple families. This analysis provided counts of net movements for both lone-parent and couple families over the five-year period by location. The proportion of lone parents in each location as of 1996 that would have existed without the impact of net movement over the 1991–1996 period was then compared with the actual proportion of lone-parent families in 1996.

Table 2 provides an example for the Sunshine Coast. Over the 1991–1996 period there was a net movement into the area of 1265 lone mothers and 3943 couples. The effect of this net migration was to add 0.7 per cent to the concentration of lone-parent families resident in the Sunshine Coast as of 1996. This outcome was largely a consequence of a higher rate of in-movement of lone parents than of couples.

Table 3 shows the concentrations of lone mothers in 1991 and 1996 and a column showing the results of similar calculations to Table 2 for a range of selected locations. In the case of the Sunshine Coast, it shows that between 1991 and 1996 the percentage of families who were headed by a lone mother rose from 16.0 per cent to 21.6 per cent, or by 5.6 percentage points. Thus the 0.7 contribution of net migration constituted only 12.5 per cent of this increase in the proportion of families with lone mothers in this location.

Table 3 shows that there are two clear patterns. One applies to all the large and small towns listed, and the second to the other rural areas. In the former, migration does contribute to the observed growth in lone-mother concentrations, but only to a minor degree. The primary reason (not shown in
The analysis provides qualified support for the migration hypothesis in that migration did contribute to some of the growth in lone-parent concentrations in areas like the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast which are often thought to be magnets for such families. However, in these places, as well as the other large and small regional centres examined, the migration contribution was quite small relative to the overall growth in the proportion of families headed by lone parents. Thus other, “home grown” factors are likely to be involved.

Where do lone parents who move come from?

One final point before exploring these “home grown” factors concerns the contribution of metropolitan sources to the net migration gains of lone parents shown for regional centres. Table 4 describes the scale of the net inflow of lone mothers into the other metropolitan areas, large and small regional centres in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, and the sources of these net inflows. It shows that the other rural/remote areas of these states are more important contributors than are the metropolitan capitals. For example, while the large rural centres of Victoria only gained 188 lone mothers from Melbourne, they gained 388 from other rural areas of the state. They also lost 15 lone mothers from the Sunshine Coast experience shown in Table 2, but evident from the Sunshine Coast experience shown in Table 2) is that there was a higher rate of in-migration of lone-parent families than couple families to the locations listed. However, with the exception of Toowoomba, the net migration factor accounted for 7 to 38 per cent of the increase in lone-mother concentrations in the regional centres listed. In Toowoomba’s case there was also a relatively high net inward movement of lone parents. But unlike most of the other regional centres, there was an actual net loss of couple families from Toowoomba over the 1991–1996 period, thus generating an unusually strong migration effect (Birrell and Rapson 2001: 50).

In the case of the second pattern, which applied to the other rural areas, the effect of migration was to reduce lone-mother concentrations. In most of these areas there were net losses of lone-mother families, presumably reflecting the difficulties lone mothers found in accessing appropriate housing and family services in areas often remote from these needs. On the other hand, most of these other rural areas experienced at least small net gains of couple families (Birell and Rapson 2001: 51). Thus the concentrations of lone mothers were lower than they would have been in the absence of migration over the 1991–1996 period.

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Table 4

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mothers to the other metropolitan areas of Victoria (Geelong).

These findings for the 1991–1996 period also confirm previous findings derived from the 1991 Census (Wulff and Bell 1997) which showed that the net outflows of lone parents from Australia's metropolitan centres were relatively small.

**“Home grown” explanations**

If migration is not an important factor in the explanation of high lone-mother concentrations in regional centres, what does explain the phenomena?

It seems that the dominant explanation – more liberalised family values and changing gender roles – is also unlikely to be the key, given the allegedly more conservative nature of regional Australia, and the lower attachment of women to the labour market (relative to the metropolitan centres).

There is little doubt that the institution of marriage is under pressure on account of these changes, as well as from the spread of individualist values which justify the ending of relationships that do not meet the parties’ expectations. However, in considering spatial variations in the incidence of family breakdown, there is a crucial intermediary variable. This is the extent of socio-economic disadvantage. The “home grown” hypothesis is that the lower the employment opportunities and income levels of a locality, the more difficult it will be for couples to handle contemporary partnership stresses.

There are two routes to lone parenthood. One is where a woman decides to have a child despite not being married or in a stable de facto relationship. The other is the breakdown of an established relationship.

In the case of the former, in locations with few job opportunities, women would have less incentive to stay on in school or post-school training. In these circumstances the attractions of partnering and child-rearing would look relatively better than they would were the location to be full of employment opportunities. Men, for their part, assuming that their job prospects were also poor, would not be in a strong position to take on the fatherhood or household/provider role. In such circumstances, there exists (in theory) a potent mix of willingness to take on the housewife/mother role, yet men relatively poorly placed to reciprocate.

This predicament is likely to be most severe for men with limited post-school training, and especially those whose employment prospects have deteriorated as a consequence of the structural changes currently transforming Australia’s economy. This is a phenomenon evident elsewhere (for the United States, see Oppenheimer 1994). From the point of view of the mother, the option of staying single and on welfare support package may seem preferable to partnering a man who cannot provide sufficient financial support for the family.

supported by evidence showing that, other things being equal, the lower a married male’s income is, the more likely he is to be divorced or separated (Birrell and Rapson 1998: 22).

**Socio-economic disadvantage and lone parenthood**

Table 5 provides data designed to begin an indirect testing of these ideas. It details the family characteristics of women in three areas of Sydney, the New South Wales coastal centre of Hastings, and the large inland regional centres in New South Wales where the proportion of lone-parent families with children aged less than 15 are relatively high. Campbelltown, Blacktown-Penrith and Gosford-Wyong are all relatively poor outer urban areas of Sydney. The rest of Sydney, which is, in aggregate,

| Table 4 Net flows of female lone parents by state and type of area, 1991-1996 |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| **NSW & ACT**   | **Victoria**    | **Queensland**  |
| Metropolitan area of state | | | |
| Intrastate | Other metropolitan | -656 | -119 | -271 |
| Large rural centres | -238 | -188 | 63 |
| Small rural centres | -418 | -109 | 38 |
| Other rural/remote | -280 | -196 | 353 |
| Intrastate total | -1,592 | -612 | 183 |
| Interstate total | -1,602 | -955 | 1,848 |
| Total net flow | -3,194 | -1,567 | 2,031 |
| **Other metropolitan areas of state** | | | |
| Intrastate | Metropolitan | 656 | 119 | 271 |
| Large rural centres | 45 | 15 | 79 |
| Small rural centres | -13 | 34 | 58 |
| Other rural/remote | 229 | 86 | 400 |
| Intrastate total | 917 | 254 | 808 |
| Interstate total | -379 | 12 | 1,951 |
| Total net flow | 538 | 266 | 2,759 |
| **Large rural centres of state** | | | |
| Intrastate | Metropolitan | 238 | 188 | -63 |
| Other metropolitan | -45 | -15 | -79 |
| Large rural centres | -39 | 55 | 19 |
| Other rural/remote | 485 | 388 | 639 |
| Intrastate total | 639 | 616 | 516 |
| Interstate total | -202 | -140 | 541 |
| Total net flow | 437 | 476 | 1,057 |
| **Small rural centres of state** | | | |
| Intrastate | Metropolitan | 418 | 109 | -38 |
| Other metropolitan | 13 | -34 | -58 |
| Large rural centres | 39 | -55 | -19 |
| Other rural/remote | 360 | 251 | 174 |
| Intrastate total | 830 | 271 | 59 |
| Interstate total | -238 | -143 | 226 |
| Total net flow | 592 | 128 | 285 |
| **Other rural/remote areas of state** | | | |
| Intrastate | Metropolitan | 280 | 196 | -353 |
| Other metropolitan | -229 | -86 | -400 |
| Large rural centres | -485 | -388 | -639 |
| Small rural centres | -360 | -251 | -174 |
| Intrastate total | -794 | -529 | -1,566 |
| Interstate total | -533 | -290 | 120 |
| Total net flow | -1,327 | -819 | -1,446 |

Large rural centres have populations of 25,000+, small rural centres 10,000+. Metropolitan refers to Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Other metropolitan includes Newcastle, Wollongong, ACT/Goulburn, Geelong, Gold Coast, Sunshine Coast and Townsville.

relatively affluent, provides a comparison. The rest of Sydney was chosen for this purpose because an exploration of the impact of socio-economic disadvantage required a comparison with an area of low lone-parent concentrations. There are very few such locations in the large and small towns of regional Australia.

In all of the areas included in Table 5 that show high lone-parent concentrations, there is a high proportion of women who by age 25–29 have had a child. Some 60 per cent of women aged 25–29 living in Campbelltown fall into this category (with similar levels in the other high lone-parent concentration areas) compared with just 30 per cent in the rest of Sydney. This in itself would not lead to high lone-parent concentrations, except for the fact that a higher percentage of mothers are lone parents in these areas compared with in the rest of Sydney. In the case of 25–29 year old women who had borne a child, 28 per cent of those living in Campbelltown were lone parents compared with 17 per cent in the rest of Sydney. These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that young women living in areas with relatively few educational and local job options are more likely to be mothers than those living in areas like the rest of Sydney where the economic circumstances are better. And they are more vulnerable to relationship breakdown than mothers elsewhere in Sydney.

Table 5 also indicates that a higher proportion of the single mothers aged 25–29 living in Campbelltown (and the other high concentration areas) had never married than was the case for single mothers living in the rest of Sydney. As suggested above, these outcomes are likely to be linked to the relatively poor financial circumstances of their male partners.

One way to test this idea is to explore the labour market situation of the men in the locations in question. Unemployment levels among young men (aged 15–24) are relatively high in Campbelltown, Blacktown and Penrith, and Gosford and Wyong in Sydney, and among young people and young adults in the regional areas where lone-parent concentrations were high (Birrell and Rapson 2001: Table 6.4). For example, the unemployment rate for males aged 20–24 in the rest of Sydney in 1996 was 11 per cent compared with 15 per cent in Campbelltown and 30 per cent in Hastings, and 25 per cent in the small coastal towns of New South Wales.

The crucial role of early school leaving

Data on the ages women left school were also used to test the relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and lone-mother concentrations.

The hypothesis was that in locations where there were limited job prospects for youth, young females would be most likely to leave school early. The result would be that they had less investment in education and fewer incentives to stay in the workforce than young women located in more prosperous areas. They would therefore have much less to lose in terms of employment rewards and more interest in taking on a partnering and associated motherhood role. But having taken on this role they could well find themselves vulnerable to relationship breakdown if, as seems likely given the data shown in Table 5, the young men available for partnering in their locality were also up against difficult economic conditions.

This thesis was tested via a study of the situation in Victoria, using the same geographical classification of the regional areas cited earlier but with rural centres of 5000–10,000 people also identified separately. Women were divided into two groups, those who left school before age 17 and those who left school at a
later age. It was assumed that women who left school prior to age 17 would be motivated, at least in part, by an awareness (relative to those who left school at age 17 or older) that there would be little financial pay-off from further schooling. The expectation was that the early school leavers would have greater interest in motherhood yet, if they lived in disadvantaged areas, be more likely subsequently to become lone parents.

These expectations were confirmed (Figures 1 and 2). Women in regional Victorian locations were much more likely to leave school early than their counterparts in Melbourne (Figure 1). Very high proportions of these early school leavers who were aged 25–34 in 1996 (nearly 20 per cent in large and small regional centres) were lone parents. By contrast, less than 10 per cent of those who left school at age 17 or above were lone parents (Figure 2).

This contrast applies to all the locations listed. However, it is notable that the early school leavers living in Melbourne were less likely to become lone parents than early school leavers living in the Victorian regional centres. The combination of higher percentages of early school leaving and a greater propensity for early school leavers to become lone parents in regional centres provides much of the explanation for the higher lone-parent concentrations in regional Victorian centres.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this study will help remove some commonly held misapprehensions about the lone-parent issue. The relatively high lone-parent concentrations in regional Australia centres as of 1996 cannot be explained by migration from the so-called sinful cities. There was relatively little movement of lone parents from the cities to these regional centres over the 1991–1996 period. Migration movements did explain a small proportion of the growth in lone-parent concentrations in regional centres over the period 1991–1996, but most of this migration effect derived from migration from non-metropolitan sources.

Although metropolitan Australia is usually associated with images of breakdown in conventional family norms, the incidence of relationship breakdown leading to lone-parent situations is actually higher in regional Australian centres.

The Census data examined in this study indicates that the explanation for this growing disparity was associated with “home grown” factors in the regional centres. These appear to be linked to the relative socio-economic disadvantage of young men and women living in regional Australia.

References


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he recent public debate over the impact of welfare dependency on Indigenous communities highlights the need for economic independence – for example, Indigenous leader Noel Pearson and others point to the need for a widespread Indigenous involvement with the “real economy”. However, the extent to which this can be easily achieved is circumscribed by circumstances that affect the willingness of Indigenous people to search for work and participate in the labour market. This paper seeks to identify the extent to which family and social factors either enhance or detract from Indigenous economic participation.

The headline statistics on labour market status generally focus on three categories: employment, unemployment and not-in-the labour force. Conventionally, anyone who is working one hour a week or more for pay, or who works in their own business, or who is on leave from a paid job, is categorised as “employed”. “Unemployed” is defined to include people who want to work, are available to start work, and are actively looking for work, but who are not employed. The remainder of the labour force are those “not-in-the-labour force”.

Of people “not-in-the labour force”, a key distinction is between those who want to work and those who do not. People who want a job but are not actively looking for work are often called “discouraged workers”, or alternatively, the “hidden unemployed” or “marginally attached”.

Indigenous people have lower employment rates and higher rates of unemployment and not participating in the labour force than Australians as a whole, and they are far more likely than other Australians to be discouraged workers (Taylor and Hunter 1998). It is thus important that the factors which lead to Indigenous people becoming discouraged workers are understood.

This article reports on the results of analysis of data from the 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (NATSIS) which, with its unprecedented range of labour market, socio-economic and cultural data, provides a unique opportunity to examine the processes underlying Indigenous labour force status. (For more information on NATSIS see boxed inset 1.)

Definitional issues

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defines “discouraged workers” as people who want a job and are available for work but who have given up actively searching for work because they believe they cannot find it (Hussmanns, Mehran and Verma 1990). The reason for a person not continuing to seek work may relate to the levels of labour demand. Or the reason may relate to personal factors, such as the belief that the qualifications required for employment are lacking, or that employers want younger employees. The ILO recognises that, while its own official definition attempts to exclude personal reasons, it may be difficult to draw a clear distinction as respondents may find it difficult to separate their personal circumstances from the level of labour demand they face.

In this article, “discouraged workers” are defined as those who want to work but are not actively looking for work. The Australian Bureau of Statistics definition also specifies that a discouraged worker must be available to start work within the next four weeks. Unfortunately, the publicly available NATSIS data do not contain direct information on the availability for work of discouraged workers.

Determinants of labour force status

According to standard economic theory, labour force status is determined in a two-stage process. In the first stage individuals decide whether or not they wish to supply their labour to the market. In the second stage a combination of factors determines whether or not individuals are employed, including labour demand conditions, incentives to search for work, and willingness to accept any job offers.
The decision to supply labour to the market will depend on a range of factors including the social and economic conditions facing individuals and their families, the level of unemployment benefits, macro-economic conditions, and the level of labour demand in the local labour market. Within this framework, individuals will become discouraged workers if they want to work but, because the costs of searching for work combined with the perceived poor chances of finding work, they do not search for work. (See Blundell, Ham and Meghir 1998 for a detailed discussion.)

Economic theory and the existing empirical literature have emphasised the role of the business cycle in determining aggregate labour demand, and therefore the costs and benefits of searching for work. Local labour market conditions will also affect the level of labour demand, and so have a role in explaining the labour market dynamics of discouraged workers. Personal characteristics will be important, especially if they affect the demand for an individual’s labour.

The probability of a person becoming a discouraged worker will also be affected by other factors that influence their wellbeing when not participating in the labour force and the costs of job search. The costs of searching for employment may be quite considerable as they include both the time involved, and the monetary and psychological costs of the failure to find employment. Family factors, such as household composition, child care responsibilities, and difficulties with child care, are also likely to play an important role.

Any analysis of Indigenous labour force status needs to take account of Indigenous-specific cultural-social factors, the behaviour of potential employers, and the interaction between labour supply and demand factors. An important institutional feature of the Indigenous labour market is the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme, which at the time of the 1996 Census accounted for around 25 per cent of Indigenous employment. Under the scheme, communities receive a grant of a similar size to their collective unemployment benefit entitlement to undertake community-defined work. The benefit recipients are then expected to work part-time for their entitlements.

**Indigenous attachment to the labour force**

The comparison of Indigenous and total Australian statistics for labour force attachment reveals both similarities and differences (Table 1). Given that Indigenous Australians comprise such a small component of the Australian population, the last two columns of the table can be taken to indicate the situation for non-Indigenous Australians.

Indigenous Australians have much lower employment rates than other Australians. According to the NATSIS data, in 1994, 45 per cent of Indigenous males aged 15 plus were employed, which is substantially lower than the 67 per cent of all Australian males (Table 1). When CDEP employment is excluded, the employment rate of Indigenous males fell to 32.1 per cent (ABS 1995: 51). The employment rate of Indigenous females was 27.1 per cent compared with 49 per cent for all Australian females.

**1. The NATSIS 1994 data**

The sample design for the 1994 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey data was a multi-stage stratified random sample based on Census Collection Districts. The survey covered a total of 4,205 households, which yielded 15,726 Indigenous respondents, 3,076 non-Indigenous people living in the same household as an Indigenous person, and 158 prisoners (ABS 1996). Not all respondents are used in the analysis in this paper: first, only people aged 15 and over are included; second, non-Indigenous respondents are excluded because only a small portion of the necessary data is collected from them; and third, because prisoners can not be employed, the analysis excludes this group. For the regression analysis, respondents were also excluded if they did not have valid data for all explanatory factors. With these restrictions, the number of respondents used in the estimates in this paper is 7,159.
The relatively low employment rates of Indigenous Australians does not appear to impinge upon their desire to work. Indeed, if the potential labour force is defined as those who either work or report wanting to work, then Indigenous Australians are more motivated to work than other Australians. For example, only 16.2 per cent of Indigenous males indicated they did not want to work as compared with 21.4 per cent of non-Indigenous males.¹

It is clear from Table 1 that the rate of discouraged workers is much higher among the Indigenous population than the Australian population as a whole. Indigenous males are almost four times more likely than other males to want work but to be not actively looking for work (15.8 compared with 4.2 per cent). While females are generally more likely than males to be discouraged from looking for work, Indigenous females are almost three times more likely than other females to be discouraged workers (29.3 compared with 10.0 per cent). Of the respondents who are reported actively looking for work, almost all were also available to start work immediately.

**Reasons for not looking for work**

The high rates of discouraged workers among the Indigenous population, and the distinct gender patterns observed above, highlight the importance of analysing the reasons for not looking for work amongst people who report wanting to work (see Table 2). The figures in the Table are presented separately by broad age group (15–24 years, 25–44 years, more than 45 years) and gender.

Among females, the main reasons why discouraged workers do not look for work are child care and other family responsibilities (46.8 per cent), followed by studying (21.7 per cent). Demand side factors, including that there were no jobs at all and

### Table 1: Labour force status and attachment to the labour force by Indigenous status and sex, 1994

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Total Australian</th>
<th>Indigenous</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male %</td>
<td>Female %</td>
<td>Male %</td>
<td>Female %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>67.0</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not employed</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>51.0</td>
<td>54.9</td>
<td>72.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not want to work (not-in-the-labour-force)</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>35.5</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>31.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Want to work</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>41.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dismissed workers (not actively looking for work)</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actively looking for work</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginally attached (not available to start working last week)</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed (available to start working last week)</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>92.900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilian population aged 15 and over</td>
<td>7,096,700</td>
<td>8,996,700</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2: Main reason why person is not looking for work by age group and sex, 1994 NATSIS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>15-24</th>
<th>25-44</th>
<th>45-64</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Females %</td>
<td>Males %</td>
<td>Females %</td>
<td>Males %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child care and other family responsibilities</td>
<td>33.1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>62.8</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No jobs at all</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No jobs in local area or line of work</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying/returning to studies</td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>24.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare payments/pension may be affected</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No reason</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of “discouraged” workers aged 15 years and over</td>
<td>6,281</td>
<td>4,094</td>
<td>8,436</td>
<td>2,576</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Discouraged workers are defined for the purposes of this table as those people who want work, but are not actively looking for it. The sample size for males aged 45 to 64 years is too small to allow accurate estimates and therefore excluded from this table.

of consumer durables, by common histories and accumulation, by overlapping ownership and use. Persistence production, food purchases and capital as being characterised by cooperative efforts for sub-sistence production. Linked households are reported in close proximity, to larger groupings consisting of a number of households. Linked households are reported as being characterised by cooperative efforts for subsistence production, food purchases and capital accumulation, by overlapping ownership and use of consumer durables, by common histories and residential proximity. Patterns of marriage and shared child care arrangements further reinforce the economic linkages across households."

While there is not a great deal of evidence on the use of child care amongst the Indigenous population, it has been found that many families prefer to make use of informal arrangements with family and friends when the need arises.

Modelling labour force status

The relative importance of various factors underlying labour force status can be estimated using statistical techniques (see Hunter and Gray 2001 for a detailed description of the multinomial logit regression analysis). Five labour force categories are considered in the statistical modelling. These are: CDEP scheme employment; non-CDEP employment; unemployment; discouraged worker; and not-in-the-labour-force (excluding discouraged workers).

Empirical studies of Indigenous labour force status have identified many factors associated with the various labour force states. Details of the variables included in the estimation are presented in accompanying boxed inset 2. The determinants of labour force status are estimated separately for males and females. The results indicate that a number of factors are important determinants of labour force status. The following discussion provides an overview of those results with a focus on the role of family, cultural and social environmental factors. A detailed discussion of all results can be found in Hunter and Gray (2001). The relative importance of the explanatory variables is illustrated using marginal effects. The marginal

Concerns about the effect of paid employment on welfare payments do not feature strongly for any group examined, with the possible exception of older males (20.6 per cent). This observation is somewhat surprising given the high replacement rates (that is, the ratio of welfare payments to expected wages) for most Indigenous people (Daly and Hunter 1999). One explanation might be that the wages and working hours are so low that they do not affect welfare entitlements and hence the incentives to look for work.

The prevalence of child care and other family responsibilities as the main reason given by Indigenous females for not looking for work is a little higher than reported by all females who are discouraged workers. According to data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 1994, 39.8 per cent of female discouraged workers reported child care and other family responsibilities as the main reason for not looking for work (ABS various years).

While there is not a great deal of evidence on the use of child care amongst the Indigenous population, it has been found that many Indigenous families prefer to make use of informal arrangements with family and friends when the need arises (ABS 2001). Much anthropological research has highlighted the interlinked nature of many Indigenous households and the use of shared child care arrangements (Finlayson 1991; Smith 2000).

Smith and Daly (1991:2) write: "They [households] vary in size from small kindred groups living in close proximity, to larger groupings consisting of a number of households. Linked households are reported as being characterised by cooperative efforts for subsistence production, food purchases and capital accumulation, by overlapping ownership and use of consumer durables, by common histories and
effect for an explanatory variable shows the effect of a change in the explanatory variable on the probability of being in each labour force state. Marginal effects must be interpreted relative to a hypothetical reference person. The hypothetical reference person is intended to characterise a representative member of the Indigenous population and hence was chosen using sample information on the most likely outcome for each explanatory variable. The marginal effects for selected family, cultural and social environmental factors are presented in Table 3.

There are clear age effects, with Indigenous youth being much less likely than older Indigenous groups to be in non-CDEP employment and more likely to be unemployed. Males are much more likely to be discouraged workers than are prime age males. Older males and females tend to be concentrated in the not-in-the-labour-force category. That is, they are less likely to want to work than their respective prime age populations.

Increases in educational attainment are associated with higher non-CDEP employment rates for both males and females. Corresponding decreases in

### 2. Factors underlying Indigenous labour force status

Empirical studies of Indigenous labour force status have identified many factors associated with the various labour force states. These include age, marital status, number of dependents, educational attainment, and geography. Also found to be important are social environmental and cultural factors such as whether a person voted in a recent election, whether they have a long-term health condition, whether they were taken from their natural parents in youth, and whether they have been arrested in the five years prior to the survey (Daly 1995; Borland and Hunter 2000).

Thus the analysis incorporates several social, environmental and cultural factors related to the employment status of Indigenous people, including whether a person voted in a recent election, whether they have a long-term health condition, whether they were taken from their natural parents in youth, and whether they had been arrested in the previous five years.

Several variables that attempt to capture the role of Indigenous culture, and the substitution between traditional lifestyles and market work are included. Variables include whether a respondent has engaged in hunter-gatherer activities or speaks an Indigenous language.

A variable capturing whether a respondent undertakes voluntary work is included. One hypothesis is that voluntary work augments social capital, which, in turn, can increase an individual’s employment prospects.

Another set of variables measure the characteristics of other household members and whether a family has access to child care. The household is used as the basis for these factors because the immediate family may not be the sole social influence on people living in large Indigenous households.

Living with people who constructively engage with the wider society may provide “positive” role models to younger members of the household. Alternatively, “negative” role models may lead Indigenous people to reject the possibility of participating in the labour market. Several household level variables are used to measure the influence of such peer group effects. The first captures whether anyone else in the house is employed, while a second measures whether anyone else is unemployed. Another variable measures whether another household member has been arrested. The final household variable indicates whether the average level of schooling of other householders is greater than Year 10.

Access to child care, which has obvious implications for labour supply, is proxied by a variable that indicates whether a respondent’s house is within ten kilometres of the nearest preschool.

All due care was taken to ensure that these household-based variables are not related to labour force status by definition or through some behavioural mechanism (that is, they are not “endogenous”). For example, the social environmental variables are all constructed in terms of the characteristics of other household members and, therefore, exclude the characteristics of the person being analysed.
children in a family has a small positive effect, or no effect, on the probability of a male participating in the labour market, but has a large negative effect on female participation.

The presence of one child under 12 years of age reduces female participation rates by 12.1 percentage points, while the presence of more children reduces participation rates by more than 22 percentage points compared to Indigenous women without children. The reduction is due to an increase in the probability of being in the not-in-the-labour-force category as well as an increase in the probability of being a discouraged worker, particularly in families with two or more children. While access to a preschool was controlled for in the regression framework, it appears that family responsibilities remains a major factor behind the large numbers of discouraged females.

Marriage is associated with an increase in labour market participation (non-CDEP employment, CDEP employment and unemployment combined) among males. In contrast, it is associated with a fall in labour market participation among females of over 10 percentage points. These changes in labour supply arise from two very different sources. The increase in male participation rates arises primarily from a large increase in non-CDEP employment and reductions in the not-in-the-labour-force category and unemployment rates. In contrast, married females are less likely to participate because of a fall in the unemployment rates relative to unmarried females. Employment prospects are also worse if a female is married.

For females, sole parenthood results in a substantially lower probability of participation in the labour force, mostly as a result of a substitution between being unemployed and the discouraged worker and, more importantly, the not-in-the-labour-force categories, but also some fall in the probability of employment. Male sole parents are much less likely than female sole parents to be unemployed largely because of an increased probability of being in employment (either CDEP or non-CDEP). They are also significantly more likely to be a discouraged worker.

Living in a “racially mixed” family is associated with substantially better employment prospects outside the CDEP scheme. Indeed, CDEP employment has a negative association with this variable, presumably because “intermarriage” rates are highest in large urban areas where the opportunities for CDEP employment are very low. There is a small net increase (3.8–4.6 percentage points) in participation rates associated with living in a mixed family.

Being taken from one’s natural family does not have any direct influence on labour supply for either males or females. However, as Borland and Hunter (2000) point out, it has a substantial influence on arrest and, therefore, is likely to affect labour market participation through this avenue.

Cultural factors and social environmental influences on labour supply are particularly interesting because they are rarely, if ever, examined in the detail presented here. Engaging in hunting and gathering activities appears to be a substitute for market-based activities, especially for females.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Non-CDEP scheme employed</th>
<th>CDEP scheme employed</th>
<th>Unemployed</th>
<th>Discouraged workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arrested</td>
<td>20.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One child under 12*</td>
<td>-4.2</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two to three children</td>
<td>-5.7</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four or more children*</td>
<td>-13.5</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>-8.8</td>
<td>-1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sole parents*</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>-16.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed family</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>-7.5</td>
<td>-6.3</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taken from natural family</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>-1.1</td>
<td>-6.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter-gatherer*</td>
<td>-7.4</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous language</td>
<td>-7.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>-1.7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary work</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
<td>-5.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others employed</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>-14.7</td>
<td>-0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others unemployed</td>
<td>-15.4</td>
<td>-6.2</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>-0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others arrested</td>
<td>-7.6</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others to Year 10</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
<td>-5.8</td>
<td>-0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close to preschool</td>
<td>-3.1</td>
<td>-2.4</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>-2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Non-CDEP scheme employed</th>
<th>CDEP scheme employed</th>
<th>Unemployed</th>
<th>Discouraged workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arrested</td>
<td>-13.1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One child under 12</td>
<td>-8.5</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>-3.8</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two to three children</td>
<td>-16.3</td>
<td>-0.9</td>
<td>-5.3</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four or more children</td>
<td>-20.5</td>
<td>-1.2</td>
<td>-4.9</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>-3.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>-7.7</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sole parents</td>
<td>-4.8</td>
<td>-1.6</td>
<td>-8.0</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed family</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>-3.9</td>
<td>-1.0</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taken from natural family*</td>
<td>-2.0</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>-1.7</td>
<td>-0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter-gatherer</td>
<td>-2.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>-5.7</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous language</td>
<td>-2.3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>-1.6</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary work</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>-0.7</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>-1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others employed</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>-5.6</td>
<td>-3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others unemployed</td>
<td>-8.4</td>
<td>-3.6</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>-1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others arrested</td>
<td>-4.5</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>-0.5</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others to Year 10*</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>-1.1</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>-2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close to preschool</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>-0.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>-7.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: The marginal effects indicate the change in the probability of being in each labour force state resulting from a change in the respective explanatory variables. Since the reference person is still in one of the labour force states, the marginal effects must sum to zero in each row. Readers are referred to Hunter and Gray (1999) for details of the reference person, full estimation results and standard errors. An asterisk denotes that there was no significant coefficient for any of the labour force states at the conventional levels.
Females engaged in hunter-gatherer activities are 8.3 percentage points less likely to participate in the labour market than those who do not, almost entirely through the increase in the not-in-the-labour-force category. This resulted from a 2.6 percentage point decline in the probability of non-CDEP employment and a 5.7 percentage point decline in unemployment.

Males engaged in hunter-gatherer activities are 7.4 percentage points less likely to be in non-CDEP employment, but slightly more likely to be in CDEP employment, to be unemployed and in the not-in-the-labour-force category. Speaking an Indigenous language has some effect on the attachment to the labour force as revealed by the significantly reduced probability of being a discouraged worker, and a consequent increase in the chance of being in the not-in-the-labour-force category. Speaking an Indigenous language is associated with a small reduction in the labour market participation of males. The source of this reduction in the probability of supplying labour is a significant fall in the prospects of non-CDEP employment and a smaller fall in the probability of being unemployed.

Participating in voluntary work is associated with an increased labour supply for both males and females, but not with any substantial change in the proportion of discouraged workers. This increased labour supply results in better prospects of non-CDEP employment. This may indicate that voluntary work could be associated with improved attachment to the community, helps build work-related skills, and could even be helpful in developing useful employment contacts. Voluntary work is not a substitute for participating in the mainstream labour market; rather it appears to complement it.

The social environment is a particularly important determinant of labour supply. The presence of other employed adults in a household increases labour supply and reduces unemployment. Among males, if other people in the household are employed, the chance of unemployment falls by 14.7 percentage points. This is counterbalanced by a larger increase in the probability of employment. The net effect on labour supply is to increase the participation rates for the reference males and females by 5.9 and 13.0 percentage points, respectively.

In contrast, unemployment among other adults in a household is associated with a lower probability of supplying labour, higher unemployment probabilities and lower employment probabilities, both in non-CDEP and CDEP employment. Males in such households are 13.5 percentage points more likely to be unemployed and 21.6 percentage points less likely to be employed.

The effects of the social environment for females are similar. The effects on labour supply are very substantial for females, increasing the probability of being not-in-the-labour-force category by 12.7 per cent.

As indicated by other householders who have been arrested, the presence of poor adult role models is not substantially related to labour supply, but has some effect on employment prospects. The prospects of non-CDEP employment are reduced by 7.6 and 4.5 percentage points (for males and females respectively). Living in a household where the other adult residents have, on average, at least Year 10 level of education is associated with greater labour supply and more employment outside the CDEP scheme. It is also associated with significantly fewer female discouraged workers.

In general, the proportion of discouraged workers is not substantially affected by these social environmental variables. However, there are small but significant reductions in the number of discouraged workers when there are other adults in the house who are unemployed. The effect of living with other unemployed people on reducing labour supply is almost entirely through increases in the not-in-the-labour-force category. That is, many people in such households lose any desire to work as well as the impetus to actively look for work.

Finally, living in a household that is less than ten kilometres from the nearest preschool is not associated with large changes in male labour supply. However, for females, child care access is significantly associated with greater employment prospects outside the CDEP scheme and a reduction in the number of discouraged female workers. The net effect of access to child care/preschool is a small increase in participation rate of 4.2 percentage points.

**Conclusion**

The main contribution of the research described in this article is two-fold: first, it extends the range of factors examined in studies of Indigenous labour supply to include cultural and social environmental factors; and second, it focuses on what leads to Indigenous people becoming discouraged workers.

Indigenous-specific cultural factors are particularly important in determining labour force status. The variables that capture the access of an individual to traditional lifestyles, whether a respondent speaks an Indigenous language or engages in hunting and gathering, are associated with significant reductions in labour supply and declines in the desire to work in the mainstream labour market.

The role of voluntary work in increasing mainstream employment probabilities points to the importance of access to information about jobs and job search behaviour. Voluntary work may also complement participation in the mainstream labour market by cultivating a “culture of work”, hence increasing awareness of what it takes to secure and keep a job. This result appears to provide a validation for the inclusion of approved voluntary work under the auspices of the “mutual
obligation” policy that has been implemented for young unemployed since 1 July 1998.

Access to child care is also a significant factor, especially among females. Notwithstanding, providing access to child care only results in a small increase in labour supply, presumably because Indigenous females with children experience multiple disadvantages which discourages them from looking for work.

While cultural factors are important determinants of the standard definition of labour supply, they do not seem to be so important in underpinning the number of Indigenous discouraged workers. The exception to this observation is that females who speak an Indigenous language have a slightly lower probability of being a discouraged worker. However, such females are also less attached to the labour market as they are more likely to be entirely outside the labour force than others without access to traditional culture.

The analysis of Indigenous discouraged workers points to a role for demand-side factors, although it is difficult to separate out supply and demand-side factors. For example, educational attainment is widely believed to increase individual productivity, but it may also increase the desire to work by, among other things, increasing the opportunity costs of not working. Notwithstanding these analytical difficulties, the long-term policies which augment the demand for Indigenous workers, such as effective education and regional development policies, are likely to substantially improve Indigenous labour force status.

Of particular importance from the perspective of family policy is the high proportion of Indigenous female discouraged workers who report child care and other family responsibilities as the major reason they are not looking for work. While this result may be surprising given the extensive family networks and the high rates of informal care typical of Indigenous families, there is evidence that these networks are often not well suited to providing reliable and predictable child care which is required for paid employment.

Endnote

1. All figures are for 1994.

References


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Marriage and mental health

Does marriage improve the mental health of men at the expense of women? DAVID DE VAUS investigates whether this widespread belief is supported by data from the 1997 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing of Adults.

In 1972 Jessie Bernard coined the now famous phrase “his and her marriage”. By this she meant that a man experiences his marriage very differently from the way a woman experiences her marriage. Bernard argued that men do well out of marriage while women marry at considerable cost to themselves. She especially pointed to the way in which marriage advantaged the mental health of men and damaged that of women (Bernard 1976).

At much the same time as Bernard was writing, American sociologist Walter Gove (1972) reported on research from which he argued that: “In modern western societies women have higher rates of mental illness than men . . . This difference can be attributed to the role of married women . . . Married women have noticeably higher rates of mental illness than married men. In contrast . . . when single women are compared with single men, divorced women with divorced men, and widowed women with widowed men, these women do not have rates of mental illness that are higher than their male counterparts. In fact, if there is a difference within these marital categories, it is that women have lower rates of mental illness.”

It is not certain whether or not Bernard and Gove were correct about the effect of marriage on men and women in North America in the 1960s since their evidence is incomplete and can be interpreted in different ways (Fox 1980). Nevertheless, this view of the effect of marriage on men and women has been enormously influential and has become part of the “common knowledge” about marriage: men do well from marriage and women do poorly.

This view continues to be repeated today. Only recently Susan Maushart argued that: “Marriage makes life much, much better for men and only somewhat better for women – and with significant and telling exceptions. One of those exceptions is mental health . . . Marriage not only fails to protect the mental health of women, there is evidence that it is a direct risk factor for depression.”

Does Bernard’s description of marriage as an institution that promotes the mental health of men at the expense of women? DAVID DE VAUS investigates whether this widespread belief is supported by data from the 1997 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing of Adults.

MEASURES AND QUESTIONNAIRE

The measures used in this article are based on (World Health Organization 1992) definition of mental disorder that involves: “the existence of a clinically recognisable set of symptoms or behaviour associated in most cases with distress and with the interference with personal functions. Social deviance or conflict alone, without personal dysfunction, should not be included in mental disorder.”

The Australian Bureau of Statistics 1997 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing of Adults was careful to use the above standard definition of mental disorders and standard criteria for classifying people as suffering from a disorder. It asked about symptoms and related matters for the 12-month period prior to interview. Thus the results reported here indicate the incidence of disorders in a person’s recent past rather than over his or her lifetime.
The survey did not have well proven measures of psychotic disorders or personality disorders, so the analysis focuses on four main classes of mental disorders – mood, anxiety, drug and alcohol disorders. The survey used classification criteria from the two standard mental health classification systems: ICD-10 – the World Health Organisation Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders (World Health Organization 1992); and DSM-IV – the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (fourth edition) (American Psychiatric Association 1994).

The questionnaire used in the personal interview had an equally distinguished pedigree. The instrument used a modified version of the Composite International Diagnostic Interview (CIDI). This instrument was initially produced by the World Health Organisation and the United States Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Administration in the 1980s. CIDI has an excellent inter-rater reliability, good test-retest reliability, and validity (Andrews and Peters 1998). The instrument can be downloaded from www.who.int/msa/cidi/downloadCIDI.htm.

**Survey of adults’ mental health**

Fortunately we are in a position to provide some clear answers to these questions. In 1996 the Australian Bureau of Statistics conducted the National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing of Adults (ABS 1999), in which personal interviews were conducted with a random sample of 10,641 adult Australians. This survey is the largest study of mental health ever conducted in Australia and is one of the most comprehensive in the world.

Because the study is based on a probability sample, the results can be generalised to the Australian population and thus provide the first chance to gain an accurate picture of the prevalence of mental health disorders in Australia. The study asked about people’s marital status, their family structure and related matters, and so we no longer have to rely on the picture painted in North America in the 1960s. For the first time we can reliably assess whether there is any evidence to support the belief that contemporary Australian marriage damages the mental health of women and improves that of men.

It should be clear what is meant by mental health. Too many studies have confused the ideas of happiness or satisfaction with mental health (Glenn 1975). They are not the same thing. When Bernard writes of the mental health cost of marriage she correctly insists that mental health is about clinical disorders such as depression, anxiety disorders, phobic disorders, rather than happiness or life satisfaction.

As Weisman and Klerman (1977) argue, women are more likely than men to be depressed, regardless of whether they are married or not. Yet Tarvis (1992) and Gilligan (1982) argue that it is not certain whether this is because women really are more depressed or because of a gender bias in the way depression is measured. It may well be that depression measures are only sensitive to the way in which women express depression.
However, mental health is not merely about depression, as so many writers seem to assume. Depression is just one of many different types of mental disorders. When considering whether marriage leads to more mental disorders among women than men it is particularly important to ensure that a range of mental disorders is examined (Horwitz and White 1991; Horwitz, et al. 1996).

The ABS survey on mental health measured the incidence of the main forms of mental illness where it was anticipated that the prevalence would be at least one per cent of the population and where the interview method they used would be an appropriate way of detecting the disorder. It asked about symptoms and related matters for the 12-month period prior to interview. Thus the results reported here indicate the incidence of disorders in a person’s recent past rather than over his or her lifetime. (See accompanying box for detail of measures and questionnaire used in the survey.)

The survey enables us to look at the range of most common mental disorders – mood, anxiety, drug and alcohol disorders (Table 1) – and move away from the dependence on simple, one-dimensional measures of mental wellbeing or distress. In studies of male and female differences this is particularly important since it is possible that while women are more prone to some mental disorders, men may be more prone to others. If there are distinctive ways in which men and women display psychological distress it is important to be able to pick up symptoms in both men and women.

### Gender and mental disorders

Table 2 lists the rates of mental disorders of men and women based on symptoms within the previous 12 months. It reports disorders classified into one of four broad classes of disorder noted above, as well as also indicating whether a person suffered from any disorder in the four classes. The bottom row of the table indicates the difference between male and female rates of the disorder: negative figures in this row mean that women are more at risk than men of this type of disorder, and positive figures mean that men are more at risk.

The table reveals three important things about gender and the risk of mental disorders. First, there seem to be “female disorders” and “male disorders”. Women are more prone than men to mood and anxiety disorders while men are more prone to alcohol and drug disorders. Second, for each disorder the gender difference is statistically significant. Women are almost twice as likely as men to suffer mood and anxiety disorders while men are roughly twice as likely as women to suffer substance use disorders. Third, men and women are equally at risk of having a disorder. Although men and women have different types of disorders they are just as likely as each other to have at least one disorder – 16.6 per cent of men and 16 per cent of women had all the symptoms of at least one classified disorder within the 12 months prior to interview.

### Marital status and disorders

Table 3 shows that the risk of a person suffering a mental disorder differs substantially depending on their marital status. It shows several important ways in which the risk of suffering from a mental disorder is patterned by a person’s marital status.

First, married people are the least likely to suffer from any particular class of disorder or from any disorder overall. Second, divorced and separated adults are the most prone to mood and anxiety disorders. Third, never married adults are the most at risk of drug and alcohol disorders.

The relatively low risk of married people suffering from a mental disorder is not quite what we might have expected if Bernard’s, Gove’s and Maushart’s views about the damaging effect of marriage are correct. But they may still be right. The figures may reflect a huge benefit that men receive from marriage which cancels out the negative effect of marriage on the mental wellbeing of married women.

To test whether marriage benefits the mental health of men and women differently the impact of marriage must be examined separately for men and women.

### Gender, marriage and mental health

Before looking at the results it is worth listing the types of results that could be expected if Bernard’s picture of 1960s marriage applies to today’s Australian men and...
women. Bernard argues that: single women have better mental health than single men (that is, without marriage women do better than men); married women have worse mental health than married men (that is, marriage reverses the initial mental health advantage that women have without the destructive influence of marriage); married men have better mental health than single men (that is, men gain from being married); and married women have worse mental health than single women (that is, marriage leads to a deterioration in the mental health of women).

Gove (1972) further argues that gender-based differences in mental health are due to the differences caused by marriage. He therefore anticipates that: single men and women will display identical levels of mental disorders; and only among married men and women will there be differences between the mental health of men and women – with married women being at greater risk than married men.

Table 4 reports the survey findings for each disorder type (rows) separately for men and women. Each column allows a comparison of the rates of a particular disorder among men and women who have the same marital status. Thus the top right-hand figure of 3.6 means that 3.6 per cent of married males have a mood disorder. The figure of 6.5 indicate that 6.5 per cent of married females have a mood disorder. By comparing the male and female percentages within the one marital status (column) it can be seen whether men and women with the same marital status have the same risk of a particular mental disorder. The percentage difference row records the percentage difference in male and female risks of the disorder within each marital status. Negative figures mean that women are at greater risk than men, and positive figures mean the men are at greater risk.

Comparing figures across columns, within a row, allows us to see to what extent the risk of disorder differs according to a person’s marital status. Each row allows this comparison to be restricted to one sex at a time. Thus the top row shows the risk of mood disorders among males according to their marital status: 3.6 per cent of married males suffer from mood disorders, 9.6 per cent of divorced males suffer in this way, and 6.3 per cent of never married males have a mood disorder. The final figure (Cramer’s V) provides a way of telling whether the differences for males across marital status categories are large enough to be statistically significant.

Table 4 provides important information that has very clear implications for the picture of “his and her marriage” painted by Bernard and others. The simplest way of using this table is to deal with the predictions of Bernard and Gove one by one.

**Prediction 1: Single women have better mental health than single men**

As far as mood and anxiety disorders are concerned the prediction is clearly not true. Not married women (divorced/separated and never married) are more at risk of mood and anxiety disorders than not married men. Of divorced women, 14.9 per cent suffered from a mood disorder compared with 9.2 per cent of divorced men. Similarly, 22.3 per cent of divorced women compared with 13.1 per cent of divorced men suffered from an anxiety disorder. Among never married men and women a similar pattern prevails. This means that, at least as far as mood and anxiety disorders are concerned, single women are worse off than single men. Even before they marry (see figures for never married), women are at greater risk of these disorders.

Bernard’s argument appears correct regarding substance abuse. Single women have a much lower risk of these disorders than single men. Never married men are

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disorder</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Divorced/separated</th>
<th>Widowed</th>
<th>Never married</th>
<th>Cramer’s V</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mood</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>0.10***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>0.13***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% difference (M-F)</td>
<td>-3.0</td>
<td>-5.7</td>
<td>-1.3</td>
<td>-5.2*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>0.09***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>0.14***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% difference (M-F)</td>
<td>-5.4**</td>
<td>-9.2***</td>
<td>+0.6</td>
<td>-5.8***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>0.15***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>0.11***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% difference (M-F)</td>
<td>+0.8</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
<td>+0.5</td>
<td>+3.7***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>0.14***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>0.13***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% difference (M-F)</td>
<td>+4.7***</td>
<td>+7.4***</td>
<td>+0.4</td>
<td>+7.8***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>0.15***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>0.17***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% difference (M-F)</td>
<td>-0.6</td>
<td>-2.8</td>
<td>+1.4</td>
<td>+2.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3183</td>
<td>520</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>836</td>
<td>808</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3497</td>
<td>893</td>
<td>738</td>
<td>808</td>
<td>808</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05; ** p<.01; *** p<.001.  
almost twice as prone as never married women to drug disorders, and more than 70 per cent more likely to have an alcohol disorder. Divorced men are at more than 2.5 times the risk of alcohol disorders as divorced women.

The fact that women who are not married have lower rates of substance abuse than not married men, while consistent with Bernard, is insufficient to prove her point. Bernard’s point is that marriage reverses the mental health position of men and women — that where women do better before marriage (or out of marriage) they will do worse when married. But this does not happen. As far as substance disorders are concerned, married women continue to be less at risk compared with married men (and compared with single women for that matter).

When the risk of having any disorder is considered, single men and women are at equal risk. About a quarter of divorced men and divorced women had suffered from at least one disorder in the previous 12 months. Among the never married, 26.1 per cent of men and 22.4 per cent of women had suffered a disorder. The differences between the rates of these men and women were not statistically significant.

**Prediction 2: Married women have worse mental health than married men**

The pattern for married women and married men is exactly the same as for not married men and women. That is, married women are more at risk of mood and anxiety disorders than are comparable men. Married men are more prone than married women to substance disorders. Overall, when all the disorders are examined married men and married women had the same risk of disorders – men and women simply had different types of disorders.

The finding that the gender pattern in mental disorders is identical for single men and women as for married men and women is important. It means that marriage itself is almost certainly not responsible for the different male and female rates of disorder. Regardless of whether they are married or not, men and women have different risks and types of disorders.

**Prediction 3: Married men have better mental health than single men**

True. On every measure of mental wellbeing married men did better than the divorced, separated and never married men. Widowed males have lower rates of disorders than married men, but when age differences between widowed and married men are adjusted this difference disappears.

**Prediction 4: Married women have worse mental health than unmarried women**

Not true. With the exception of widows, married women have the best mental health of all the women. When age differences are adjusted married women have better mental health than widows as well. The better mental health of married men compared with single men needs to be viewed in the light of this finding that married women also have better mental health than single women.

**Prediction 5 (Gove): Men and women who are not married have identical levels of mental disorders**

Since Gove argued that marriage is responsible for male and female differences in mental health, then single men and women should have identical rates of mental disorder. We have already seen that as far as specific disorders are concerned this is not true. However, Gove is correct when the risk of any disorder is considered. Within each marital status men and women have the same risk of having at least one disorder.

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**Table 5**  
Risk of disorder for selected categories of men and women (per cent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mood %</th>
<th>Anxiety %</th>
<th>Drug %</th>
<th>Alcohol %</th>
<th>Any %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Married full-time mothers</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Married working mothers</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Married working fathers</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Married working women, childless</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Married full-time housewives, childless</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>18.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Single working mothers</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Single not working mothers</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Single working women, childless</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Single, not working man, childless</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>36.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing of Adults, ABS 1997. These figures have been extracted from a number of complex multivariate cross-tabulations which contain a great deal of detail and useful information. They are available from David de Vaus’ web site: www.social-research.org

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**Table 6**  
Any disorder by marital, parental and employment status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Any disorder</th>
<th>1 Single</th>
<th>2 Couple</th>
<th>3 Single</th>
<th>4 Couple</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No children</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>27.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>281</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

sig eta=.05; eta=.10; eta=.05; eta=.02; * p<.05; ** p<.01; *** p<.001;

Note: Excludes widowed and those over 60 years of age.
The support for prediction five means nothing unless prediction six is also true. However, prediction six does not hold up. While married men and women have different rates of specific disorders they are at the same risk of having at least one disorder. The pattern of gender differences for specific disorders and for any disorder is the same between single men and women as between married men and women. There is nothing distinctive about the gender differences in mental disorders among married people.

**Discussion**

Even though people continue to repeat Bernard's and Gove's argument, it should come as no surprise that their portrayal does not apply 30 years later. In those 30 years there has been a marriage revolution. Marriage rates have declined, there is less pressure to marry, it is much easier to end a damaging relationship, fertility has sharply declined, women can more readily control their fertility, childlessness has increased, and the participation of women in the (part-time) workforce has steadily increased.

What is surprising is the tenacity with which so many people uncritically apply Bernard's thesis about the mental health costs and benefits of marriage to the contemporary situation.

Part of Bernard's argument was that marriage damaged women because of the role of full-time housewife that so often accompanied 1960s marriages. She wrote in *The Future of Marriage* (1972: 63) that: “Wives are driven mad, not by men but by the anachronistic way in which marriage is structured today – or rather the life style which accompanies marriage today and which demands that all wives will be housewives. In truth, being a housewife makes women sick.”

Further, Bernard (1972: 61-62) writes: “It is being relegated to the role of housewife rather than marriage itself which contributes heavily to the poor mental and emotional health of married women . . . The comparison shows that wives that are rescued from the isolation of the household by outside employment show up very well.”

Since fewer married women are now full-time housewives, it is not surprising that we do not see the same gendered effect of marriage as previously may have been the case.

Both Gove and Bernard also argue that looking after children adds to the mental health cost of marriage for women. Bernard (1972: 62) writes that “marriage typically eliminates much of her way of life . . . and children deliver the coup de grace”.

If Bernard was right about the damaging effect of being a full-time housewife and mother we should still be able to detect this today among married women that fit Bernard's 1960s profile – married full-time housewives with children. Table 5 indicates the risks of each type of mental disorder for married full-time mothers (row 1) and provides selected comparisons for people with different profiles.

Do “wives who are rescued from the isolation of the household by outside employment show up very well” as Bernard states? Are women who are “rescued” from motherhood at less risk than those who are mothers?

Not really. Although there is some evidence that is consistent with Bernard's view (for example, the married full-time mother is more at risk of anxiety disorders than the married working mother) the weight of the evidence does not fit her picture of the at risk married full-time mother. The married full-time mother is no more at risk of mood, drug or alcohol disorders than the married working mother or the childless full-time housewife – children do not seem to add to the risk of mental disorders for married housewives. The married full-time mother is at less risk of mental disorders than lone mothers, both working and not working – marriage reduces the risk of mental disorders compared to lone mothers.

Also the married full-time mother is at much less risk than the single working woman who has no children; workforce participation and the absence of children and marriage is associated with considerably greater risk of mood, anxiety and substance use disorders among women. The married full-time mother is at much less risk of suffering from any disorder compared with any of the not married groups.

**Gender, marriage, employment and parenthood**

The comparisons above look at the way in which four different factors – gender, marriage, working and parenthood – affect the risk of suffering from a disorder. How important is each of these factors in mental disorders? Is gender important? Does marriage combined with being female increase the risk of disorders? How important is working? Does working have a positive effect on mental health as Bernard supposes? How much difference do children make?

Table 6 examines the role of these four factors in the risk of having suffered from at least one mental disorder in the previous 12 months. This somewhat complex table is worth examining closely. Since working, marriage, being a parent, and gender are all interrelated, it can be difficult to work out which factors are really contributing to the risk of mental health. For example, is the risk of a disorder for full-time married mothers due to being female? Is it because she is not working? Is it because she is caring for children? Or is it because she is married? The table allows us to isolate the overall importance of each of these four factors separate from the other factors.

The table tells a clear story. The percentages are quite similar within any particular column. The percentages in column 1 are for people who are neither working nor married. The risks of a mental disorder for these people are relatively high – especially when compared with the other columns. Notice though, that among these people who are neither married nor working, the risk of a mental disorder is much the same regardless of whether they are male or female or whether or not they have children (percentage within the column).

Column 4 indicates the disorder risk of the married employed people. These risk figures are all relatively low. When people are both married and employed they have the lowest risk of a mental disorder. Again, the risk figures in this column are the same down the column.
This means that among the employed married people, gender and parenthood do not affect the disorder risk. If you are employed and married the risk of having a mental disorder is the same regardless of whether you are a man or a woman, a parent or not.

The two middle columns provide a similar picture. Column 3 shows that the disorder risk of single working people is higher than for the married working married people, but lower than for the not working people – particularly for those not working and single. The risk figures are much the same down this column – again indicating the unimportance of gender and parenthood for disorder risk.

Column 2 shows that the risk factors for the married but not working people are similar to the other columns. However in this column the percentages differ more from one another and the significance figure at the bottom means that these differences are statistically significant. The noticeable figure in this column is the very high risk percentage for married fathers without a job. – 27.8 per cent of whom suffer from a disorder, especially anxiety disorders. Were it not for this high figure we would say that, for the married not working people, gender and parenthood is irrelevant to the risk of mental disorders for these adults.

Another way to read this table is to follow the rows across the table. The first row shows the mental disorder risks for men without children. Each cell of the row indicates the risks for these men under different conditions. His risks are greatest when he is single and not employed, and least when he is married and working.

Each row shows the risks for different groups of men and women: childless men, childless women, fathers and mothers. For each group the risk of mental disorders is linked to whether or not they are working and whether or not they are married.

Taken overall, Table 6 shows that gender, on its own, contributes nothing to the risk of a mental disorder (although it does affect the type of disorder to which people are prone). Parenthood contributes nothing to the risk of a mental disorder, but whether or not a person works is important – workforce participation reduces the risk of mental disorders, and does so equally for men and women, parents and non-parents. The table shows that marital status is linked to the risk of a mental disorder, with married people being at less risk than single people.

Two of the various interesting specific figures shown in Table 6 are relevant to the thrust of this paper. First, the women who were at least risk of a mental disorder were married, working and had children in the household. The next least at risk women were the married full-time mothers. Second, the people most at risk were men without marriage, children or job. They were closely followed by other unmarried men and women without jobs.

### Marriage and mental health

Does marriage “drive women crazy”? Do the kids make mothers crazy? It does not appear so. Children do not seem to affect the mental health of either mothers or fathers. Marriage seems to have the same mental health effect on both men and women and that is in the direction of protecting them against mental disorders. Having a job makes a big difference. A job is especially important for the mental wellbeing of married men, but also benefits the mental health of women.

Bernard may have been right when she wrote about the mental health cost of marriage for women in 1960s North American marriages, although the evidence in this paper about the relative mental health of married full-time mothers raises doubt about whether her claims were correct even then.

However, the results from this contemporary survey of mental health and wellbeing in Australia are unequivocal about the general situation in contemporary Australian families. When a range of types of mental disorders are considered, marriage reduces the risk of mental disorders for both men and women. Although married men and women risk different types of disorders, this has nothing to do with them being married. Regardless of whether they are married or not, women are more at risk than men of mood and anxiety disorders, and men are more at risk than women of drug and alcohol disorders. Married men and women face the same risk of a mental disorder, and children do not increase this risk for either mothers or fathers.

### Notes

1. Single, in this article, includes separated, divorced, widowed and never married.
2. Married includes both legal and de facto marriages.

### References


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The Australian Institute of Family Studies is the key centre for family research in Australia. In planning its research program, the Institute seeks to make a positive contribution to policy development and debate on issues of critical and far-reaching concern for families in Australia.

The research plan, published here, outlines how the Institute will structure and develop its research activities over the forthcoming triennium. In doing so, the plan builds on the initiatives taken as a result of the 1999–2001 Research Plan, particularly in terms of the core structure of the Institute’s research activities and interests.

The plan was shaped and refined as a result of consultation during 2001 and early 2002. In the Spring/Summer 2001 edition of Family Matters, the Institute outlined its future research directions, and invited comment. The responses received as a result of this and the Institute’s extensive consultation with its stakeholders – including public servants, academics, collaborative partners, and other research agencies – shaped the content of the plan and helped identify the key questions that the Institute’s research should be addressing over the next three years. A draft was submitted to the Institute’s Board of Management in May 2002, and was subsequently approved.

The Institute is always interested to receive further comment on its planned activities and to receive suggestions for further areas of research on emerging issues of concern to the family.

The plan provides a general framework for envisaged research activities over the next three years, while building in the flexibility required to allow the Institute to remain responsive to changing policy and scientific environments. This will allow the Institute to identify new opportunities for pursuing its strategic directions and fulfilling its vision and objectives.

Future Institute research will continue to take into account both the processes that occur within the family and the interaction of the family with the broader social, economic, political and cultural environment.
Statutory duties of the Institute

The Australian Institute of Family Studies is a statutory authority established in 1980 under the Family Law Act (1975) which defines the functions of the Institute as:

(a) to promote, by the conduct, encouragement and coordination of research and other appropriate means, the identification of, and development of understanding of, the factors affecting marital and family stability in Australia, with the object of promoting the protection of the family as the natural and fundamental group unit in society; and

(b) to advise and assist the Minister in relation to the making of grants, and with the approval of the Minister to make grants, out of moneys available under appropriations made by the Parliament, for purposes related to the functions of the Institute and the supervising of the employment of grants so made.

The Institute’s research plan is framed around the fulfillment of these statutory obligations.

Principles underlying the Institute’s research activities

Three sets of principles will underlie how research at the Institute is conducted, how research projects will be developed, and the selection of new research topics.

The research conducted will:
- be founded on an understanding of the latest theoretical and methodological advances in the area;
- produce outcomes which will inform family policies and other policies likely to impact directly on family wellbeing; and
- provide opportunities for Institute leadership in family research as well as collaboration with government departments, other leading research organisations, and individual researchers.

The process of development of a new research project will:
- involve discussion with a comprehensive range of stakeholders across policy, service-delivery and research communities; and
- be considered in the context of resource availability, and other research activities and developments in the Institute.

Selected topics for research will:
- be consistent with the Institute’s charter and overall strategic plan;
- be of critical and far-reaching concern for families in Australia today and in the foreseeable future;
- be current or emerging policy issues, and amenable to change through policy initiatives; and
- together aim for coherence and an overall balance across the areas of family functioning of concern to the Institute.

The Institute will undertake quality assurance through seeking external review of project proposals by those with expertise in the relevant domains from both a policy and a research perspective.
Categories of Institute research

It is anticipated that the Institute’s research on different aspects of family functioning will continue to be accomplished in one of four different ways.

**Core research** is funded by Parliamentary appropriation and planned and undertaken by Institute staff. Proposals for core projects will be developed through a process of extensive consultation with key stakeholders. As part of the annual budgetary process, proposals for new and continuing projects will be developed by each research stream and evaluated in terms of their “fit” with the research plan and with the staffing and financial capacity of the Institute.

**Contracted research** is funded by government departments or other organisations, and undertaken by the Institute working alone or in partnership with other agencies. The established Institute practice of augmenting its core research with contract work will continue into the future. Contract research should fit closely with overall strategic and research objectives. It is acknowledged that at times opportunities for contract research present themselves that justify a delay in other (core) research. But in general, such work will only be undertaken if it can be fitted into existing plans and timeframes.

**Collaborative research** may include collaborative ventures with the Department of Family and Community Services, other Commonwealth and State Government departments and agencies, and Australian universities or other leading research organisations. Such collaborative ventures can include projects initiated by the Institute with the support of external funding.

**Commissioned research** is work undertaken for the Institute by other research organisations.

Characteristics of Institute research

Institute studies will remain diverse in nature, exploiting the complementary strengths of smaller scale in-depth studies, large scale surveys, and secondary data sources, and adopting short- and long-term perspectives.

**Longitudinal and cross-sectional studies**
There will be a continuing need for longitudinal data to enable the Institute to monitor social trends over time, to identify emerging problems and policy issues, and to track family trajectories, pathways, stability and change. Cross-sectional (once-off) projects will also continue to be needed, to address issues of immediate relevance, and to enable the Institute to respond quickly when a swift answer to a specific policy question is needed.

**Policy relevant research**
Policy relevance will remain a key criterion for Institute research, and research driven solely by intellectual curiosity (“pure” research) will continue to be regarded as outside its brief. However, not all research will necessarily inform current policy in an immediate and obvious way, since the attempt will also be made to anticipate future policy issues, and to address questions which cut across single policy areas.
Theoretical grounding
While the Institute will not conduct purely theoretical research, a solid theoretical grounding to research is critical for advancing knowledge and providing the evidence base for policy. All core research projects will be theoretically informed and conceptually rigorous, underpinned by clear hypotheses and/or by an explicit theoretical rationale.

Primary and secondary data
The Institute has an important role in both analysing existing data sets and collecting new (primary) data. Selection of the appropriate type of data for a particular study will be informed by the research questions involved, the availability of existing data sets to address those questions, and pragmatic considerations such as cost and time.

Quantitative and qualitative methods
While quantitative methods are likely to remain best suited to most Institute research endeavours, the Institute will continue to employ both qualitative and quantitative methodologies as appropriate.

Interdisciplinary approach
The complexity of family research issues increasingly requires the contribution of a range of disciplinary perspectives and competencies. Many of these are represented among the Institute researchers, and we can expect that collaboration and cross-fertilisation across program areas will be a strong feature of future research. In addition, the Institute will continue actively to pursue collaborative research opportunities with other researchers outside the Institute where there is complementarity in research strengths.

Liaison with other research organisations
The Institute will not only seek and welcome collaborations with other research organisations, but will attempt to complement the research carried out in those organisations, exploiting the Institute’s own unique skills and expertise. Overlap or duplication of work being undertaken elsewhere will be avoided through frequent communication and close coordination. Seeking input on this document is part of this process of communication.

Three broad research themes
This research plan seeks to address three broad and overlapping thematic areas where research will need to inform policy and practice. These areas are diversity, change, and the interactions of the family with broader social institutions.

Diversity
Diversity is a dominant characteristic of Australian families in the 21st century. It represents both a key strength of our society, and a challenge to policy. Important research questions revolve around diversity of family forms, of socio-economic and geographic variability, and of cultural background.
Family forms
Given the changes in family structure over recent decades, family research cannot focus solely on the traditional “nuclear” family. The functioning and needs of lone parents and their children, and of “blended” families, stepfamilies, and “second families” formed through separation, divorce and repartnering, will need continuing investigation. Further, families in some cultural groups (for example, Indigenous families) can be extended and intergenerational. At the same time, a number of “new” family types are emerging, such as same-sex couples with children, and families formed through reproductive technologies. The ways in which these families can support the needs of their members, particularly children, and the optimal ways in which communities and governments can assist them in this task, will continue to be important research foci.

Socio-economic and geographic variability
Australia’s population distribution – with large, relatively dense cities, as well as extensive rural and remote areas with low population density – pose particular challenges for policies aimed at supporting all families. There are also significant variations in the economic and employment status of families. The Institute should ensure it gathers research data on the wellbeing of families across this wide spectrum of societal situations. A key question for the Institute is how strong communities characterised by both diversity and cohesiveness come to be formed and sustained.

Cultural diversity
Increasing cultural diversity among Australian families suggests that the evidence base for ensuring that their needs during and after settlement are met will need to expand. Growing awareness of the particular problems facing Indigenous families also suggests a critical need for research in these areas.

Change
The nature of family changes and transitions such as relationship formation, the birth of first and later children, family separation, family re-formation, and children leaving home has potential short- and long-term impact on the lives of family members, and those affecting children are of particular concern. There is increasing recognition of the critical importance of the early years of a child’s life for their later development, indicating that research which can inform the development of optimal supports and services for families with young children is of key importance.

The declining birth rate, older parents, and increasing numbers of couples with no children, are major social phenomena whose consequences for children, for parents, for family life and for society need unpacking. Further, our understanding of why women end up having fewer children than they earlier intended is incomplete. In the context of an ageing population, this issue has enormous policy implications.

From a societal perspective, two of the many changes confronting us are the rapid expansion in information technology which is increasingly pervading family life, and the developments in medical technologies, specifically those relating to reproduction.

New information technologies can change the way that families interact with one another and with the world. They have positive potential for both education and service delivery for parents, but may also have deleterious consequences for family functioning. Monitoring and understanding how families adopt and adapt to these technologies will be an important issue for the future.
Assisted reproduction technologies are being used for an increasing number of births, creating new possibilities such as delayed child-bearing and more diverse family forms. It will be important for research to examine the longer-term impacts of such technologies for family functioning, couple relationships and children’s wellbeing, as well as for fertility trends.

More broadly, families continue to need to engage with changes in the economy, the community and the policy environment. The nature and impact of changes at all these levels will continue to be a critical focus for family research.

**Family interactions with broader social institutions**

Families exist within communities and societies. How families interact, through formal and informal mechanisms, with these broader social groups has significant bearing on the functioning of individual family members as well as the family as a whole. Understanding the factors involved in such interactions has become an increasingly important focus for research and policy development.

The interaction of families with their work environments is one obvious focus here. As patterns of work change, impacts on the family need to be monitored and understood. As it becomes the norm for parents to combine parenting and paid work, there need to be structures and supports within the workplace and broader community to allow parents to manage their multiple roles, and to optimise the quality of family life and children’s development. Research on arrangements such as family-friendly work practices and the best ways to provide flexible high quality child care, will remain high on the research agenda. At the same time, it is recognised that parents should have the choice of staying at home with their young children, and the efficacy of measures that are aimed at enabling parents to make this choice will need to be examined.

Families’ interaction with the legal system is another clear focus for the Institute. The Institute has a history of contributing to informed debate on family law issues. Evaluations of the effectiveness of current practice and future initiatives will continue to be needed to inform policy.

There is also increasing interest in the capacity of communities to enhance the wellbeing and resilience of their members. Understanding of the necessary characteristics of such communities and the processes by which they support families is still sketchy. For example, we know little about the nature of families’ involvement in both government and non-government provided services, across different communities. Understanding how family functioning is affected by factors included within the broad rubric of social capital, including social cohesion, social networks, social inclusion and social exclusion, can be enhanced both through theoretically driven research and through evaluation of interventions.
Core Research

Core Institute research is organised into three streams:
- Children and Parenting Program
- Family and Marriage Program
- Family and Society Program

As noted above, it is anticipated that many of the Institute’s research projects will benefit from cross-fertilisation across program areas, and that at times the same issue will be examined from different perspectives by more than one program area.

Another continuing core responsibility of the Institute is to monitor and disseminate information on trends across all aspects of family functioning and wellbeing.

Children and Parenting Program

Core concerns

Families play the crucial role in the development and socialisation of children. Above all else, family experiences shape the next generation of Australians. They do not do this alone, of course, for child care, schools, the local neighbourhood, and the mass media also influence the ways young people think and behave. However, the family is still the primary agency in rearing children.

The early environments and experiences of a child have long-term impacts on their development, and evidence is accumulating of the value of early interventions to prevent the development of later problems. In a rapidly changing society, it is important to understand the challenges that face parents in their task of nurturing and educating their children, and how supports offered through services and programs can best support them in doing so. There are also a myriad of determinants of relationships between children and parents, and important differences between children will affect the type of parenting that best supports individual child needs, and how parenting ultimately affects the course of their development.

Ongoing research

Multiple and changeable child care

This new longitudinal study examines child care contexts that may pose risks for child development. Managed by a consortium comprising the Institute, Macquarie and Charles Sturt Universities, and the New South Wales Office of Childcare, and funded through the ARC Linkage Grant scheme, the study is examining the effects of multiple and changeable care arrangements on children’s development up to school age.

Child care in cultural context

This ongoing study focuses on how child care services affect the development of children from diverse cultural backgrounds. Home and child care are two primary settings for child development, and continuities and discontinuities across these environments affect the potential of each setting to support child development. Little is known about the impact on children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds of child care that reflects the culture and values of the home, and child care that reflects the dominant Australian
cultural values and practices. Understanding parent preferences and children’s responses to these types of care is likely to have implications for both the provision of child care and the wellbeing of the children concerned.

**Australian Temperament Project**

Effective policy development for children and families operates within an evidence-based framework. To obtain an accurate picture of the changes in child behaviour and adjustment, and to be able to draw valid conclusions about antecedent-consequent relationships, longitudinal research designs are required. The Australian Temperament Project is a large longitudinal study of children’s development that began in 1983 with the enrolment of a representative sample of over 2000 infants and their families from rural and urban Victoria. The study investigates pathways to psychosocial adjustment across childhood and adolescence, and the influence of personal, familial and environmental factors. Since early in 2000, the Institute has housed this ongoing research project, and is in collaboration with researchers from the University of Melbourne and the Royal Children's Hospital in developing it. Currently the project is focusing on a broad range of outcomes among young adult participants, including a collaboration with Crime Prevention Victoria to study pathways to antisocial and criminal behaviour.

**New research**

**Development in diverse families**

This new Institute study should enhance understanding about how the structural properties of families (such as the number of parents present in a household, parents’ marital status, and parents’ sexual orientation) and the nature and quality of relationships within the family system influence children’s adjustment. A large sample of families with primary school aged children will take part in the study to allow assessment of the quality of relationships within the family, parenting practices, family functioning, and quality of parent and child adjustment. Information about family history and many factors outside of the home (such as support systems and work-related variables) will also be collected. Families with both biological parents present, as well as other family types (such as stepfamilies, single-parent families, and families headed by gay and lesbian parents) will be included in the study.

**Future areas for research**

**Child care**

Among the societal trends and issues that fall within the scope of research in the Children and Parenting Program, child care issues continue to be prominent, including the trend toward use of child care for very young children. Critical questions for research concern the capacity of child care services to provide accessible, affordable and quality services for infants. There is also the question of whether child care can take on an early intervention role, by investing in the learning and development of disadvantaged children and providing support to their parents, thereby reducing inequalities in developmental and social outcomes.

**Child wellbeing and family stress**

Poor children fare worse than children who are not poor on a range of health and wellbeing indicators, and the ill effects of poverty can be carried right across the life course. This highlights a need to research and evaluate the impact of family and community poverty on children’s outcomes. More information is also needed on the impact on parents and children of other sorts of stress, such as the pace of technological change and work stress, and how institutions and community-based support structures can provide a protective buffer to families in these contexts.
Parenting

The implications for parenting of current demographic trends requires ongoing study, to expand understanding of the range of care and child rearing responsibilities in different family types, and how they are fulfilled. Besides the family types under focus in the Institute’s Development in Diverse Families project, more knowledge is required on the issues facing families with adoptive or foster children, and families where fathers are the primary carers. Parents in the “sandwich generation” may need to juggle caring for elderly parents with care for their own children and grandchildren, and grandparents may increasingly be involved in providing care for children. How such changes in family responsibilities meet the needs of both the adults and the children involved requires research.

Given the many socio-demographic changes which have impacted on the parenting role, a large number of programs have been developed over the last decades to promote parental competence. At present, there is little coherent information about the range of programs or their relative effectiveness. Hence, there is a need for a national stocktake of parenting education programs and comprehensive evaluation of their capacity to enable parents to fulfil their roles more successfully.

There are also large gaps in our understanding of how technological advances, such as new forms of communication including the internet, and assisted reproductive technologies, including donor insemination and in vitro fertilisation, are changing family patterns of interaction and functioning, and children’s developmental outcomes.

Core concerns

In order to perform their various functions, families need to work out ways of living together, and adjusting to stress and change. Research in the Family and Marriage Program looks at how this is achieved. It focuses on family stability, family transitions, and family law. Transitions include patterns of leaving home, and couple and family formation, dissolution and re-formation. Particular attention is given to factors that help explain diverse pathways, the way these pathways are negotiated, and their impact on family members. Central to this work is the evaluation of the impact on families of the Family Law Act as it is amended from time to time. Trends are examined at societal, family, and individual levels.

Research which aims to strengthen and support marriage as an institution will always be central to the Institute’s work. A key task of the Family and Marriage Program is to examine factors contributing to the quality and stability of marriage and marriage-like relationships. The program examines relationships from various perspectives: strengthening relationships in their early stages, factors that contribute to the trajectories of relationship quality and stability, and lessons from long-lasting marriages.

Ongoing research

Family trends and transitions: The macro-level perspective

The Family and Marriage Program continues to analyse broad trends in patterns of leaving home, couple and family formation, family stability, and family dissolution and re-formation, along with associated values, attitudes and beliefs. Demand for such information is ongoing, given that such trends are often used as a barometer to assess the direction of society regarding standards of conduct and underlying values. Informed monitoring of such trends and analysis of their implications are important for proactive policy development. Current analyses are focusing on trends in establishing independence and partnerships, fertility, and relationship breakdown and re-formation.
New research

Fertility decision making

Like other developed countries, Australia is experiencing falling fertility rates in the context of increasing life expectancy, and thus an ageing of the population both in absolute and relative terms. Although outcomes of these trends remain controversial, they appear to involve a number of economic and social challenges.

There is much speculation about the relative importance of factors contributing to the fall in fertility since access to effective contraception became readily available. Considerable attention has been given to life course trends in society, financial and non-financial costs of having children, and beliefs, attitudes or values that may discourage childbearing.

The Fertility Decision Making Project is being undertaken in collaboration with the Office of the Status of Women to examine the nature and relative importance of factors contributing to decisions about having children, and to assess ways in which such factors interact to help shape fertility trajectories. This project will also provide insight into policy-relevant issues surrounding the development of couple relationships, each partner’s understanding of the meaning, quality and stability of the couple relationship, perceptions of work–family balance, and family-related attitudes and values.

Caring for children after separation

As part of the broad policy shift towards encouraging post-separation co-parenting, there is a need to ascertain the nature, amount and quality of contact that non-resident parents have with their children. Little is known about some of the most rudimentary components of parent–child contact, such as the distinction between “day only” contact versus “sleepovers”, and “holiday” versus “term-time” arrangements. Failure to make these distinctions can underestimate both the amount and quality of contact that is occurring.

The main aims of this new project under development will be: (a) to map the nature, amount, and quality of parent–child contact between non-resident parents and their children; and (b) to improve understanding of why a significant proportion of non-resident parents lose or do not maintain contact with their children. A set of second-order aims are: (c) to explore contact decision-making processes; (d) to identify the factors, issues, or trigger events that promote or impede contact; (e) to examine the inter-relation, if any, between contact and child support; and (f) to consider the economic implications of contact for both parents.

While the focus of the project is on mapping the detail of post-separation parenting patterns, the data will also serve as a benchmark on which to begin modelling the economic implications of contact for parents (both non-resident and resident). They will also act as an important source of information for a more comprehensive investigation into the impact of divorce on children and parents.

Future areas for research

Couple and family formation

A comprehensive understanding of relationship formation and fertility patterns requires longitudinal data. An extension of the Fertility Decision Making Project into a longitudinal study would enable assessment of stability or change in decision-making, and help distinguish between outcomes and their causes by revealing their temporal order. It may be valuable to assess “birth cohort effects” by comparing the fertility plans and considerations underlying these plans for samples born in different periods – for example, the 1980s and 1990s.
Given that cohabitation (de facto relationship) is an increasingly common choice of couples, it is important to understand the dynamics of decision making concerning marriage and cohabitation. Not much is known about how partners understand their cohabiting relationships (going steady?, a prelude to marriage?, a replacement for marriage?, no strings attached?), and how these interpretations change over time. Research needs to elucidate what leads some committed couples to marriage while others never consider it as an option, what factors differentiate cohabiting couples who stay together from those who separate, and whether these factors differ from those for married couples.

Remarriage rates, like first marriage rates, have declined over recent years. We need to know more about the extent to which this trend is due to a tendency for divorced people to cohabit, and about the stability of such relationships. Marriages following divorce are more likely to end in divorce than first marriages and remarriages following widowhood. Clearly there is a need to know more about the characteristics of post-divorce relationships and the factors or dynamics that contribute to their quality and duration.

**Relationship stability and wellbeing**

A further important area for future research would address the trajectories of marital and relationship quality over the course of a relationship. This would require a longitudinal study (such as an extension of the Fertility Decision-Making Project). Such a study would enable assessment of patterns of change in relationship satisfaction and factors that might moderate these patterns, including couple dynamics, the impact of families-of-origin, personal coping strategies, and psychological make-up.

Given that young people are staying in the education system longer, are less likely to find permanent employment, and hence stay in the family home longer, parents are having to adjust to the prolonged dependency of their children. We need to know more about the ways in which families are coping with these changes, as well as the impact of prolonged dependency on the young adults themselves – for example, their long-term aspirations and intentions, relationship formation and self-concept.

**Relationship dissolution and re-formation**

The Family Law Reform Act 1995, among other things, replaced the language of “guardianship”, “custody” and “access” with the less proprietorial “residence” and “contact”. The reforms emphasise that “parental responsibility” is ongoing despite changes in the parental relationship. Research on current attitudes to parental responsibility would inform many areas of family and child policy.

In Australia as elsewhere, it is not unusual for parents to repartner after divorce, and hence to acquire responsibilities for additional children. Such family situations pose a significant challenge to child support policy. Some have argued that these responsibilities can impose an excessive burden on non-resident parents in second families. Despite widespread interest in this issue, scant empirical data have been collected to unpack the complexities surrounding such multiple financial responsibilities.

**Family-related legal processes**

The Family Law Pathways Advisory Group recently released its report *Out of the Maze: Pathways to the Future for Families Experiencing Separation*. The report recommends various strategies to facilitate smoother pathways through the legal system to minimise conflict, and to help families to cope with changes in their lives and to meet new responsibilities and commitments. Research that enhances understanding of why disputes arise about post-separation parenting, and how people go about attempting to resolve them, will clearly be important areas of ongoing research. There will also be a continuing need to evaluate the effectiveness of family law reforms.
Core concerns

There is a recognition in the Family Law Act that the family is a “fundamental unit in society”. This means that the Institute must not only look inside families, to understand what makes them function, but must also look at the relation between the family and other social institutions. Changes in society have a direct impact on family life, just as changes in family life can have implications for other aspects of social organisation. To understand the contemporary family in Australia, we have to understand the changing relations between it and three sets of social institutions. Change in any one of these three areas will have impacts upon the way in which families operate.

Families contribute to, and are in turn affected by: the economy and market; the welfare system and interaction with government; and social life and the community.

The Family and Society Program, therefore, focuses broadly on the relation between family change and economic and social change.

Ongoing research

Families, social capital and citizenship

The Families, Social Capital and Citizenship project aims to examine levels of social capital associated with varying family circumstances and to assess the importance of social capital in shaping patterns of family engagement with the economy, polity and community. An overarching research question is to establish the importance of social capital to economic, political and community engagement. A conceptual and methodological framework for measuring social capital has been developed and a national survey of 1500 families undertaken. Key measures of social capital have been developed and tested using these survey data, which will be used to profile social capital in Australia, and then explore how social capital facilitates labour market activity, promotes civic and political life, and is distributed spatially.

Family and work decisions

The Family and Work Decisions project is a study of how families with dependent children decide whether or not to participate in the paid labour market. The project will focus on people’s knowledge and understanding of the income support system and the way in which it interacts with paid employment, and decisions about labour force participation, living arrangements, and family formation. The study will include partnered and lone mothers, with a particular focus on lone mothers, a group of great policy interest but about whom there are few large-scale survey data available. An important component of the study will be the importance of family-friendly work practices in decisions regarding labour force participation.

Impact of children on family labour supply

The Impact of Children on Family Labour Supply project will develop and empirically estimate models of family labour supply which combine information on financial incentives with information on non-financial determinants of the decision to participate in the labour market. Particular attention is paid to the impact of career breaks on the subsequent labour market outcomes of mothers. Labour market outcomes examined include the likelihood of being employed, hours worked if employed and hourly wage rates. Other outcomes such as job satisfaction are also considered. Empirical modelling of this type will allow new insights into many specific policy questions.
New research

Measuring social capital in Families First communities

The Institute has recently been contracted to expand on its social capital research by using a modified version of the social capital survey to benchmark the nature and distribution of social capital in three inner-west Sydney communities, and to explore how early interventions being conducted there as part of the “Families First” program (Department of Community Services, New South Wales) contribute to social capital. The project involves a series of community surveys and qualitative data collection. This community-based approach to measuring social capital provides an opportunity to link the ongoing work of the Families, Social Capital and Citizenship project with grounded service provision, and directly inform policy and service providers about the facilitation of social capital and community capacity.

Future areas for research

Ageing and inter-generational exchanges within families

The ageing of the Australian population has important implications for the provision of care for people in society, including: (a) the role of grandparents in providing child care; (b) the needs of and support for the growing elderly population; (c) financial and “in kind” support and transfers across generations; and (d) implications for the so called “sandwich generation” – that is, women, typically in their sixties, who have multiple caring responsibilities such as taking care of ageing parents, their spouse and own children, as well as grandchildren.

Research into family exchanges focuses on the giving and receiving of emotional, social, material and financial support. It considers the internal processes of family interaction, such as family cohesion and solidarity and how these impact on the interface between families and society – for example, in the spheres of welfare, health and child care services, and interaction with the labour force. This research area covers both sides of the private–public or citizen–state debate, as it considers present and future needs for formal services in the light of levels of informal (family) support available.

Social, material and geographic inequality

As well as focusing on the average Australian family, it is also critical to understand the specific circumstances and dynamics that lead to some Australian families experiencing short-term or prolonged spells of poverty or disadvantage.

Traditionally in Australia, studies of poverty have focused upon income inequalities or living standards. The recent focus upon social capital and community has highlighted the importance of social connections as a means of mediating poverty or preventing an intensification of marginalisation. A holistic view of poverty and inequality must take account of both economic and social poverty or disadvantage and how they are linked, including a focus on spatial clustering of inequalities. Such research would inform policy and service providers about the best means and transition points in which to intervene in family life.

Work and family

Another continuing focus for future research is the interaction of work and family life. For example, research could examine the “business case” for providing a work environment in which employees are able to better balance work and family. Key topics might include the effect of work-family balance in reducing worker turnover, and spill-overs between satisfaction with family life and productivity at work. The potential roles of government and business in facilitating a better balance, for example through maternity leave provisions, will also need research attention.
The Institute’s core research program is supplemented by contract research projects. Currently, the Institute is contracted to undertake a number of major, long-term research projects. These are: the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children; the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey; the National Child Protection Clearinghouse; and the Stronger Families Learning Exchange. These projects are all compatible with the vision and objectives of the Institute and are a valuable addition to its core research.

Longitudinal Study of Australian Children

The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services as part of the Government’s Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. The Institute, as the lead agency in a consortium of nine organisations, was awarded the contract to design and implement LSAC, which is expected to run until at least 2010. The study will follow two representative cohorts of Australian children (5000 infants and 5000 four-year-olds) over seven years. It will add to the understanding of early childhood development, inform social policy debate, and be used to identify opportunities for early intervention and prevention strategies in policy areas concerning children.

Using a collaborative and multi-disciplinary approach, LSAC will address a range of research questions about children’s development and wellbeing in the domains of education, health, family functioning, and child care, as well as including core measures concerning the child and family. Data from the study will be accessible to a wide range of researchers. The longitudinal nature of the study will enable researchers to determine critical periods for the provision of services and welfare support, and to identify the long-term consequences of policy innovations.

Day-to-day management of the study will be undertaken by a Project Operations Team comprising the Project Director, Design Manager and Survey Manager based at the Institute. A Consortium Advisory Group includes representatives from each consortium member (namely, the Australian Council for Educational Research, the TVW Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, Queensland University of Technology, Macquarie University, Charles Sturt University, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, the Australian National University’s National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health and Centre for Mental Health Research, and the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales) as well as some consultants.

The consortium brings together significant research and management expertise, and includes researchers from a wide range of disciplines, including child development, sociology, epidemiology, public health, family studies, psychology, paediatrics and child health, early childhood education, social policy research, and economics. This breadth of expertise ensures comprehensive coverage of influences on children’s development.
Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia

The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, is being conducted by a consortium including the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research at the University of Melbourne (the lead agency), the Institute, and the Australian Council for Educational Research. HILDA is being carried out in close collaboration with the Department and other key stakeholders from a range of disciplines, thereby ensuring the survey's policy-relevance and multi-disciplinary perspective. The Institute is represented in the Project Management Group and is responsible for the family dynamics module in each wave, while also sharing in the responsibility for the overall coordination of the survey design.

HILDA is a national household panel survey in which the sampling unit is the household, and all members of households selected in Wave 1 are being followed up over time, with children interviewed when they turn 15 years old. The sample is extended in subsequent waves to include new members of households containing an original sample member (for example, new children or a new partner living with an original sample member).

The survey is currently funded for four years and involves three waves. Wave 1 was conducted in the second half of 2001, with nearly 14,000 people from 7680 households providing the data. Subsequent waves will be conducted in the second half of 2002 and 2003. Wave 1 derived information on a wide range of issues, including: household structure, family background, marital history, family formation, education, employment history, current employment, job search, income, health and wellbeing, child care, and housing. Wave 2 also includes a “wealth” module.

National Child Protection Clearinghouse

The National Child Protection Clearinghouse (NCPC) is an informational, advisory and research unit focused on child abuse prevention, child protection and associated family violence. The Clearinghouse has been operating at the Institute since 1995, and is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services. It is currently funded until July 2003, with an expectation of continued funding beyond this date.

Overall, the Clearinghouse prioritises the development of research that has a primary and/or secondary prevention focus, impacts on the provision of child protection and family support services, and covers issues of national importance, and thus has implications for Commonwealth, State and Territory government departments and other service providers.

In addition, one research activity undertaken each year focuses on an area of particular interest to the Department of Family and Community Services. Broad research priorities are informed by discussions with the Australian Council for Children and Parenting.

Key research priorities for the Clearinghouse for the next three years will include:

- investigating issues affecting “at risk” client families’ access to support services – an extension of a current exploratory research project;
- monitoring the nature and trends in child abuse prevention activity across the nation – review and/or extension of the National Audit of Prevention Programs conducted in 2000;
- investigation of aspects of the operation of child protection and family support systems; and
- identification of best practice in prevention programs and program evaluation, child abuse prevention approaches for Indigenous and rural or remote communities, child abuse prevention approaches for culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and child abuse and the internet.
Stronger Families Learning Exchange

As part of the Government’s Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services has contracted the Institute to provide a “learning exchange” to support parents, families and communities in their role of caring for young children.

The Stronger Families Learning Exchange (SFLEX) is comprised of an Action Research Training and Support Team and the Stronger Families Clearinghouse – designed to provide the latest information on research and programs concerned with family wellbeing, primary prevention and early intervention. At present, the Learning Exchange is funded to provide services until mid-2004.

The Training and Support Team will provide ongoing training and support in action research evaluation to between 70 and 80 projects funded under the Stronger Families Fund of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy.

Using the action research approach, team members will work with funded projects to facilitate their work, providing training in areas of action research evaluation and assisting project teams to interpret information, assess their progress and to plan future actions.
As part of the broad policy shift towards encouraging post-separation co-parenting, there remains keen interest in ascertaining the nature, amount, and quality of contact that non-resident parents have with their children. This interest stems from several issues of pressing policy relevance.

First, in Australia, as elsewhere, the extent to which different parenting arrangements (for example, “sole care” versus “shared care”) impact on child and parent outcomes continues to be an issue of significant practical and policy import (Demo and Acock 1996; Reifman, Villa, Amans, Rethinam and Telesca 2001). Yet scant methodological attention has been paid to post-separation paternal involvement in the divorce outcomes literature.

Second, resident parents (mainly mothers) report that around one-third of non-resident parents (mainly fathers) have little or no contact with their children when parents live apart (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1998). While similar patterns have been reported in the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States, not much is known about why many non-resident parents lose or do not maintain contact with their children (Dudley 1991; Greif 1997).

Third, issues related to contact disputes, denial, and enforcement feature prominently on the policy and legislative agendas of many countries – such as Australia, Canada, and Hong Kong (Children Act Sub-Committee of the Lord Chancellor’s Advisory Board on Family Law 2002; Rhoades 2002). In its 1998 report on problems with the enforcement of child contact orders, the Family Law Council noted the reality and persistence of these problems, and the need to address them. It recommended a three-tiered approach – “preventative measures”, “remedial measures”, and “punitive action” – in dealing with contact order breaches (Family Law Council 1998). This recommendation was subsequently enacted as part of the Family Law Amendment Act, which came into effect in December 2000. However, the various family dynamics and psychosocial determinants that underpin contact disputes are still not well understood (Trinder 2001).
Fourth, there is ongoing lively debate in Australia and overseas about the links between parent–child contact and the payment of child support – the so-called “access–maintenance nexus” (Arditti 1992; Seltzer, McLanahan and Hanson 1998; Veum 1993). Central to this debate are important questions about the extent to which contact improves the quantum and regularity of child support payments, and the degree to which child support payments take account of the costs of contact for non-resident parents. An increasingly pervasive view is that child support legislation “ought” to foster and facilitate parent–child contact (Melli 1999). But this view is in marked contrast to what has been the prevailing ethos in Australia – that contact and child support should not be linked because such a link is unlikely to be in the best interests of children (Joint Select Committee 1994: 383). Part of the impetus for strengthening the nexus between contact and child support is an increasing emphasis on the need to recognise the costs of contact to non-resident parents who have ongoing and regular contact with their children (Family and Community Services 2000).

Of particular note with respect to this fourth issue is the background to the Child Support Legislation Amendment Bill (No 2), which was passed on 29 June 2001. Currently, non-resident parents who have their children for more than 30 per cent of nights per year (the “substantial access threshold”) pay a reduced amount of child support. The Amendment Bill proposed, among other things, to reduce child support payable by non-resident parents whose children stay with them for between 10 and 30 per cent of nights per year. Recognition that payers incur costs during contact was one of the key rationales for lowering the “shared care” threshold (Family and Community Services 2000). While this proposal was rejected last year by the Senate and subsequently removed prior to the Bill being passed, discussions on strengthening the nexus between contact and child support are likely to continue (Fehlberg and Smyth 2000).

In view of the apparent policy push towards strengthening the contact-child support nexus, it is perhaps surprising that little is known about the way that parent–child contact is structured in Australia, the associated financial costs of contact for non-resident parents, and the relationship between these costs and those incurred by resident parents in caring for children (see Henman and Mitchell 2001; Woods and Associates 1999).

Fifth, parallel to the policy shift towards encouraging co-parenting, there is some evidence – albeit piecemeal – of increased involvement (or interest) of non-resident parents in their children’s lives. For instance, drawing on interviews with legal professionals, in the context of the Family Law Reform Act 1995, Dewar and Parker (1999: 102) concluded that: “there is now a greater willingness to challenge the standard contact ‘package’ of alternate weekends and half school holidays, and to seek (and be granted) orders for longer weekend contact than previously (for example, Friday night to Monday morning), more midweek contact, and for contact with children at an earlier age than previously”.

More recently, drawing on data from a national random sample of divorced parents in Australia, Smyth, Sheehan and Fehlberg (2001) found that 41 per cent of non-resident fathers some five years after separation wanted to change children’s living arrangements – two thirds of these fathers wanted children to reside with them, while the remaining third wanted equal care of children.

But this and most other surveys of post-separation patterns of parenting have tended to be broad and shallow in their measurement of parent–child contact, giving primacy to frequency as the core dimension of contact. Consequently, it is hard to get a definitive picture of the “nuts and bolts” of contact – namely, when, what, where, and how such parenting occurs – and the extent to which quantitative and qualitative changes might be occurring.

This empirical gap stems from both conceptual and methodological issues.

Measuring contact

Three measurement issues warrant particular attention: disentangling the dimensions of contact; the economic implications of contact for both parents; and measuring the quality of contact.

The dimensions of contact

Parent–child contact can vary along many dimensions, including frequency, nature, quality, flexibility, regularity, and continuity (ongoing, start-stop, re-start). These dimensions can differ among siblings. Given this potential complexity, research into residence and contact needs to clearly describe and recognise both qualitative and quantitative differences in the many ways that parental sharing of time with children can occur (Melli 1999).

To date, however, little information has been collected on some of the most rudimentary components of parent–child contact, such as the distinction between “day only” contact versus “sleepovers”, and “holiday” versus “term-time” arrangements. Failure to make these distinctions can inaccurately convey both the amount and quality of contact that is actually occurring.

These distinctions are not just of academic interest: they also have financial implications. Different patterns
of parenting may require different levels of infrastructure and are therefore likely to involve different financial costs. For example, regular overnight stays would usually necessitate separate bedrooms for children (Woods and Associates 1999) while “day only” contact would not. The collection of more detailed contact information is thus a necessary prerequisite for any attempt to obtain reliable estimates of the financial costs of contact for non-resident parents in particular.

The above distinctions also have psychological implications. Different patterns of care may foster different child and parent outcomes.

On the one hand, overnight stays might encourage close emotional bonds between non-resident parents and their children. On the other hand, there is lively debate on the need to consider developmental issues and family dynamics regarding the appropriateness of sleepovers for very young children (compare Gould and Stahl 2001; Kelly and Lamb 2000; Lamb and Kelly 2001; Solomon and Biringen 2001; Warshak 2000).

Then again, an absence of overnight stays may indicate concerns about a child’s safety, a lack of self-confidence about parenting skills, possible emotional friction between the child and a new partner, or unwelcoming surroundings which, in the child’s view, might be cold, cramped or boring.

Thus, distinctions related to the structure of contact can act as markers for deeper contextual issues that need to be explored in terms of family dynamics.

**Financial costs of contact**

Parallel to the policy shift towards encouraging co-parenting, there has been increasing emphasis on the need to recognize the costs of contact for non-resident parents who have ongoing and regular contact with their children.

While there can be considerable costs involved in maintaining a residence that can accommodate overnight stays for children (Saunders et al. 1998; Woods and Associates 1999), little data are available in Australia or overseas on the monetary costs of contact (such as the cost of transport, food, leisure activities, energy and medicines) to non-resident parents, and the relationship between these costs and those incurred by resident parents in caring for children.

In reality, it seems likely that many of the costs of separately caring for children would not be shifted from resident parents to non-resident parents unless high levels of contact occur. This is because separation duplicates these costs and this, along with the inversion of economies of scale, means that the overall cost of children increases markedly if parents separate (Henman and Mitchell 2001).

In the United States, Melli (1999) has “guessedimated” that a reduction in the financial costs of caring for children by resident parents probably does not occur until near-equal time-sharing (that is, 40–50 per cent shared care). In Australia, we have little data to assess this issue despite its current relevance for child support policy. Ideally, a configural approach drawing on ‘couple data’ (that is, information from both parents from the same relationship) is needed so that the costs of caring for children under different post-separation timeshare arrangements can be estimated. But, as discussed below, obtaining couple data is problematic.

**Contact quality**

Without knowing the context of contact, and what activities non-resident parents and their children engage in (if and) when they are together, it is hard to assess the relationship between contact and child outcomes. Yet scant attention has been paid to measuring the quality of contact.

In recent years, “authoritative parenting” – encompassing warmth and involvement, the encouragement of psychological autonomy, and monitoring and boundary setting – has been shown to be an important dimension of relationship quality in both one and two parent families (Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Lamborn et al. 1991; Steinberg et al. 1994). Amato and Gilbreth (1999) point out that few studies in the divorce literature have measured authoritative parenting in its “full complexity” but a number of studies have nonetheless tapped particular parental behaviours that represent its various sub-dimensions.

Based on a meta-analytic review examining these and other studies, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) found that the quality of contact is more important than the amount of contact in terms of good post-divorce outcomes for children. Accordingly, they suggest that future research adopt more comprehensive and rationally based measures of contact quality instead of relying on simple measures of contact frequency. Thus far, however, this does not seem to have happened.
**The (thorny) issue of sampling**

A fundamental methodological issue for researching contact is that collecting information from both parents from the same relationship within the general population of separated parents is extremely difficult.

Couple data have several benefits over data obtained from independent samples of men and women. Without couple data, it is difficult to disentangle differential reporting by men and women from sample bias. Differential reporting is common to family research (Callan 1991). But where a study comprises different samples of men and women, it is hard to know to what extent any differences in perceptions are exaggerated by systematic differences between the samples. Independent samples of men and women may be prone to such differences because separated men and women who participate in surveys are likely to derive from different segments of the general population of separated parents (discussed below).

The quality of contact is more important than the amount of contact in terms of good post-divorce outcomes for children.

Putting aside the issue of “couple” versus “single” perspectives for a moment, family law research has been characterised by its use of small, ad-hoc, convenience samples. These samples can work well for in-depth, qualitative studies aimed at showing diversity, improving an understanding of certain processes, contextualising a phenomenon, or at generating hypotheses, but the findings typically lack generalisability. Since family law policies need to cover an array of situations, findings usually need to be broadly applicable. National random samples typically afford generalisability, but obtaining these samples can be difficult at the level of practicality and cost.

Obtaining representative samples of separated parents has plagued family law research in Australia (for example, Woods and Associates 1999; Funder 1986; Rhoades Gray-car and Harrison 2000) and overseas (for example, Maclean and Eekelaar 1997). Because relationship breakdown occurs behind closed doors, no list (“sampling frame”) exists containing the names of parents from different types of relationships who have separated. For this reason, there has generally been a reliance on data from population surveys and government agency records.

Survey data have several drawbacks. Because of the cost of screening out other groups, surveying a random sample of separated parents can be very expensive. In addition, population-based data typically focus on either resident parents or non-resident parents rather than former couples. This is because in survey research, random samples are assembled primarily through contact with one parent: the parent who responded to the survey. Involving the other parent usually requires the respondent parent to provide contact information for the other parent. However, where high conflict exists between former partners, the respondent parent may not know where their children’s other parent lives, or may not want the other parent to be contacted. This means that where information is sought from both parents, the sample is likely to be biased towards low-conflict parental relationships.

Data collected by government agencies (such as the Child Support Agency, the Family Court of Australia, and Centrelink) has its own strengths and weaknesses. These data often yield contact information for both parents from the same former relationship. Moreover, a random sample can usually be drawn from an agency’s database. However, by definition, such databases are selective of parents in certain situations (for example, those in receipt of government income support, or those who cannot reach agreement on their parenting arrangements) and do not represent separated parents from a broad range of circumstances – particularly those whose parenting and property arrangements have been settled privately. Thus data collected from respondents contacted through government agencies may not reflect the experience of most separated or divorced parents.

In short, a trade-off usually exists between attempting to draw a “representative” sample of separated or divorced parents, and obtaining information from both parents from the same relationship. This creates a “no-win” situation for researchers studying parent–child contact.

Longitudinal or panel studies, which make use of sophisticated techniques for tracking respondents, appear to be a useful way to obtain couple data from a representative sample. They can also map pre-separation levels of involvement between family members – thus providing unique insights into process-oriented issues, such as changing levels of involvement, negotiation processes around parent–child contact, causal relationships between factors, and the timing and reasons for any change in arrangements over time.

While two large-scale panel studies (the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey, and the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children) are currently underway in Australia, the annual rate of relationship breakdown by parents with children under the age of 18 means that it can take a substantial amount of time to build a sample comprising relatively large numbers of separated families.

So where does all of this leave researchers and policy makers who desire a better understanding of post-separation parent–child contact issues?
Moving policy forward

Regarding the issue of measurement, the complexity of post-separation parenting requires a series of questions that tackle the various dimensions of contact – particularly the nature and quality of contact. As with tapping any complex domain, the main issue here is that a comprehensive set of questions requires interview time, but most broad-brush studies cannot afford the time needed to address this degree of complexity. Clearly, a separate study of post-separation contact arrangements is needed to help inform family policy in Australia. Such a study is currently being developed by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. This study aims to map in detail the various dimensions of contact in order to systematically explore qualitative and quantitative differences in the ways that separated parents can share time with their children.

In terms of obtaining a representative sample comprising couple data, a short-term practical approach is needed until the Australian panel studies reach fruition. One approach would be to collect information from both a national random sample of separated parents and a sample drawn from a large administrative database: one sample could be used to identify and calibrate any sample biases in the other. This approach is also likely to yield couple data, which could then be used to calibrate the data from the independent groups of women and men.

To sum up: there is a clear need to develop more comprehensive measures of parent–child contact. These measures need to be able to tap the various dimensions of contact so that contact patterns can be determined with some precision, particularly regarding issues of shared contact so that contact patterns can be determined with any sample biases in the other. This approach is also likely to yield couple data, which could then be used to calibrate the data from the independent groups of women and men.

To sum up: there is a clear need to develop more comprehensive measures of parent–child contact. These measures need to be able to tap the various dimensions of contact so that contact patterns can be determined with some precision, particularly regarding issues of shared costs and shared parenting. Until these data are collected, policy related to parent–child contact is unlikely to be able to address the many challenges it currently faces.

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One of the most significant developments in family law in Australia in the last five years is one on which the statute books are (as yet) silent but which is nonetheless effecting a sea change in the way litigation in that jurisdiction is conducted. The rising tide of people appearing before the Family Court without legal representation poses a direct challenge to the notions of justice and due process that underpin our adversarial system.

The debate, reflected in numerous studies and articles, in emerging case law and professional guidelines, has shifted from calling for specific external solutions to the “problem”, such as increased legal aid funding, to a broader approach, including an analysis of the extent to which the system itself needs to change to ensure equal access to justice.

This article discusses the growth of self-representation, its impact on the family law system, and current and proposed initiatives to assist unrepresented parties navigate the litigation pathway.

**Extent of self-representation**

Increases in the numbers of self-represented litigants are occurring across the Australian justice sector. Of the superior courts, the Family Court has the greatest percentage, with a 1999 study showing 35 per cent of contested cases involved at least one party appearing without a lawyer (Smith 1999), a figure which varies across registries. This is compared to 28 per cent in the High Court and 17 per cent in the Federal Court (Farrar 2001).

Australian courts are not alone in struggling to find ways to accommodate the needs of this category of litigants. The situation in the United States is particularly dire. In 1990 an estimated 88 per cent of the parties in Arizona’s Domestic Relation Court were without legal counsel, with both parties appearing unrepresented in 52 per cent of cases (Farrar 2001: 4). While alarming, these figures do not include the hidden statistics of those with meritorious claims who decide not to pursue matters at all because of a lack of assistance, who abandon proceedings early on in the process for the same reason, or have them dismissed on technical grounds.

There have been a number of studies undertaken by the Family Court of Australia (Smith 1998; Dewar, Smith and Banks 2000), the Justice Research Centre (Hunter 1999), the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC 1996, 1997, 1999), and the Law and Justice Foundation of New South Wales (Hunter, Genovese, Chrzanowski and Morris 2002) that attempt to understand the causes and repercussions of this phenomenon.

This article draws in particular on the most recent report commissioned and published by the Family Court, conducted in conjunction with the Family Law Research Unit at Griffith University (Dewar, Smith and Banks 2000). The report, entitled *Litigants in Person in the Family Court of Australia*, involved a mix of qualitative and quantitative surveys involving questionnaires and in-depth interviews with judges and registrars (79 questionnaires completed, 17 interviews conducted) and litigants (49 interviews conducted), as well as observation of court proceedings in five registries. The study sought to profile those appearing in court without representation, their motivations for doing so, the effects they are having on the legal system, and how the court can best meet their needs.
**Effects of increased self-representation**

Before looking at the profile of litigants likely to represent themselves in family law matters, and the reasons underlying their decision to do so, it is important to understand the impact that large numbers of unrepresented parties in the Family Court has on all those involved in the litigation process – the parties themselves (including those who are represented), judges, registrars, other court staff, and practitioners appearing in the jurisdiction. The presence of unrepresented parties also has wider implications for the justice system as a whole, and brings with it both a public and a private cost.

**Impact on the parties**

While it may be difficult to generalise on the nature of the experience of appearing in person, there are some basic assumptions that Dewar and colleagues (2000) sought to test. The major concern is that in an adversarial system, which is based on the premise that two equally matched sides present their case to an impartial decision maker or umpire, the unrepresented litigant, without legal skills or experience, may be at risk of not getting a fair hearing.

Any lawyer will agree that there is much more to litigation than just understanding the law. To present a case effectively one should be able to identify the issues in dispute, assess the merits of the case, test the evidence, recognise and take advantage of settlement opportunities, and comply with procedural requirements and court etiquette. To do so in a rational manner with emotions in check is especially difficult when the witness you are cross-examining is your former spouse and the outcome of the case will determine the future of your children. Only 31 per cent of judges interviewed in the Family Court study thought that the unrepresented litigants in the sample cases participated in proceedings with competence; almost a third of the litigants interviewed said they were not confident at all in presenting their cases (Dewar et al. 2000: 55, 53).

Difficulty in navigating the litigation pathway increases the likelihood of unrepresented players achieving less favourable adjudicated outcomes, agreeing to a settlement that is not in their interests, or simply giving up. The converse risk is that if a judge is at pains to ensure a party without counsel is not disadvantaged by the process, the represented party may get a less favourable outcome than if both sides were represented. In the study conducted by Dewar and colleagues, judges felt that in 44 per cent of cases, the represented party was disadvantaged by the fact that the other party did not have a lawyer (Dewar et al. 2000: 56).

The stress, frustration and anger experienced by parties conducting their own case were evident in the responses of self-represented litigants. The resulting impact on their children is another hidden personal cost that is difficult to quantify. Frustration and disempowerment may leave the self-represented party feeling that the court is hostile to their interests, while represented parties may perceive bias in the assistance provided by the judge to their self-represented opponents. Both experiences may lead to increasing disenchantment with the legal system.

Self-representation often leads to more protracted and more frequent court appearances and greater delays, resulting in more days off work and increased legal fees for the represented party. If successful, the self-represented litigant is unable to recover costs other than out of pocket expenses. Conversely, a represented party is less likely to be able to recover their legal costs against a self-represented opponent. This removes incentives for parties to settle matters.

Notwithstanding the above, differences in personal capabilities, the relative complexity of matters in dispute, and the attitude of the judge, registrar and other court staff mean that the experience of appearing unrepresented may not be universally negative. For some litigants there are definite advantages to appearing without a lawyer – including a sense of having greater control over the case, and a feeling that they have been truly heard and seen, been given more leeway in court and, of course, saved on legal fees.

**Impact on the legal system**

Overall, matters involving unrepresented parties are in the system for a shorter time, given that they are more likely to be dismissed or abandoned (ALRC 1999: 377; Hunter et. al., 2002). But they are also less likely to settle and therefore more likely to go to hearing. Lawyers tend to modify these two extremes by helping to keep a matter in the system and increasing the chances of it resolving. Anecdotal reports in the Dewar et al. study strongly indicate that, while in the system, these cases place a greater demand on court resources at all stages of the process.

With this occurring against a backdrop of reduced staffing levels the end effect reported by court staff and judicial officers is a clogging of the court system resulting in greater delays and costs. With less court efficiency comes less trial certainty which results in an inability of lawyers to provide accurate advice on the anticipated cost of proceedings.

Decreased court efficiency also helps to make a stressful experience for court users even more so. Often it is the front counter staff that bear the brunt of the court users’ anger. However, increased stress was also clearly evident in the responses of judges and registrars who participated in the Dewar et al. study.

For judicial officers, adjudication in a matter involving unrepresented litigants often involves conflict between the competing duties of ensuring a fair trial and maintaining judicial impartiality. Judges in the Family Court have the added responsibility of making decisions that protect the interests of parties other than those appearing before them – that is, the children (when not separately represented). From the observation of court proceedings in the Dewar et al. study, it is evident that judges are employing different strategies in dealing with unrepresented litigants. Some judges treat unrepresented litigants in the same manner they treat legal practitioners appearing before them. Others will “lean over the bench” in varying degrees to assist unrepresented litigants to present their case. The end result is a lack of consistency that can have a direct bearing on the outcome of a case.

Testing the theory that “difficulty presenting your own case in court translates into actual disadvantage” is not easy. However, it is clear that in a common law system, poor quality evidence and argument put before a judge carries with it a greater likelihood of miscarriage of justice and therefore of more appeals.
Of the judicial officers interviewed, 63 per cent felt that the unrepresented parties in the sample were disad- vantaged by their lack of representation (Dewar et al. 2000: 55).

In the family jurisdiction there is also the danger that an inadequately presented case prevents a judge from the proper execution of his or her duties under the Family Law Act – that is, making an informed decision that is in the best interests of the child. Judges and registrars in the study believed that in over half of the cases involving unrepresented parties “the best interests of the child” would have been promoted if the parties had been represented (Dewar et al. 2000: 56). Such a trend cannot help but have an adverse effect on the development of case law.

The greater argument of course is that equal access to legal services is fundamental to the continued legitimacy of the legal system and to democracy as a whole (Dewar et al. 2000: ch.1).

**Demographic profile**

In the Dewar et al. (2000) study, there were slightly more male than female litigants appearing in person. A disproportionately high number of unrepresented litigants were from a low socio-economic group with over half not in paid work. The median net income of those who responded to this question was $15,000 – $20,000. Over half of those who responded had not been educated beyond Year 12 at school.

Three quarters of respondents were Australian born. One tenth spoke a language other than English at home – this is less than the national average of 16 per cent (ABS 2002) and may well reflect the impediments of running your own case in a foreign legal system and in a language other than your mother tongue.

There was negligible difference between the percentage of those who had initiated proceedings and those who were responding to an application. However, other studies (Hunter 1999; Hunter et al. 2002) suggest that self-represented litigants are more likely to be respondents than applicants, and this accords with anecdotal reports from the judges and registrars in the Dewar et al. study.

Litigants in Dewar’s sample were overwhelmingly concentrated in matters involving children. This can be explained by the fact that an inability to fund a lawyer is likely to mean that there are negligible assets and that the children may be the only “capital” in dispute. Clearly parents are more likely to pursue or defend litigation which impacts on the future contact with their children, notwithstanding the impediments. Furthermore, where parties have property worth litigating over, they have the option of securing the services of a lawyer on a speculative fee basis.

**Reasons for increase in self-representation**

Barring legal incapacity, there is no legal impediment to appearing without counsel – on the contrary, section 78 of the Judiciary Act (Cwth) 1903 establishes a right to appear personally in courts exercising federal jurisdiction.

It is evident from empirical research that the reasons for appearing unrepresented are varied and complex. Similarly, the picture presented is not simply one of full representation versus self-representation, but involves a number of patterns of partial representation. Some litigants may start proceedings with a lawyer and subsequently represent themselves. Others may initially appear unrepresented and retain a lawyer at a later stage of proceedings (Hunter et al. 2002).

For a minority of litigants interviewed by Dewar and colleagues, the decision to appear without a lawyer was a matter of choice. However, the majority indicated that it was simply a question of financial necessity. Three quarters of the litigants interviewed could not afford a private lawyer and/or had been denied legal aid (Dewar et al. 2000: 33). Thus, the prohibitive cost of legal fees is clearly a part of the picture but has been largely absent from the debate.

Dewar and colleagues explored the extent to which the increased numbers of unrepresented litigants could be said to have resulted from cuts in legal aid. Of 49 litigants interviewed, only 16 had applied for and been refused legal aid. Close to half of those were deemed ineligible on the grounds that their case lacked merit, according to the legal aid guidelines (a benchmark determined by the nature of the matter and its likelihood of success). None was refused legal aid on the basis that they had reached the monetary cap on grants on aid ($10,000 to parties and $15,000 to child representatives). The more restrictive merit test and the imposition of monetary caps on aid introduced into the guidelines in 1997 were the primary means of reducing legal aid spending in family law matters.

At first glance it would appear that only those refused aid on merit could be said to be affected by the 1997 cuts. However, as indicated by Dewar and colleagues, these figures cannot be said to be representative of the impact of reduced legal aid accessibility as they do not include the larger number of those who didn’t apply for aid at all due to direct advice and/or a perception that they would be ineligible. In addition, those who were granted aid received funding for discrete stages of litigation and were therefore unlikely to reach the $10,000 limit.

Litigants may appear unrepresented at specific stages along the litigation pathway as part of a strategic use of legal services in order to conserve funds. They may be unable to find a lawyer to accept their instructions because the case is deemed to lack merit. They may ignore the problem in the hope that it will go away and then find they have no time to arrange representation. Or they may be ignorant of other services available to assist in the resolution of family law disputes. The range of motivations for appearing without a lawyer is reflected in the range of patterns of partial and full self-representation evident from the study by Hunter et al. (2002).

The remaining one quarter of respondents in the Dewar sample who chose to represent themselves were motivated by a range of reasons. Many expressed an overriding distrust of lawyers. Some expressed the belief that they could do as good, if not better, a job on their own. The simplification of forms and procedures in the Family Court did not appear to be a significant motivating factor, with only one respondent stating that simplified procedures and other available assistance influenced the decision to appear unrepresented.

A strong belief in the merit of a case, notwithstanding advice to the contrary and a sense of moral
obligation to their children, may compel some litigants to pursue litigation without representation. Also included in these figures is an undefined percentage who could be deemed serial litigants – who pursue litigation to maintain negative contact with their former partners, or to express their disaffection with the system. This category will always retain a presence in the system.

**How is the challenge being met?**

As the American experience has shown, lawyer-dependent justice systems are faced with three choices in dealing with the challenge posed by unrepresented litigants. One is to ensure greater subsidised access to lawyers; a second is to transform all litigants into lawyers; and a third involves changing the system so that lawyers are not essential. To these should be added the option of reducing legal fees to make them more affordable to more people. With legal aid levels unlikely to be increased to achieve the first outcome, at least in the short term, the second being impractical, and the reduction of fees highly unlikely, the only real option is to modify the system to make it more accessible to non-lawyers. For the authors of the Dewar study the appropriate benchmark is to ensure that self-represented parties are provided with a “meaningful opportunity to be heard.”

The measures being taken by the courts, the legal profession and community agencies to assist litigants unable to secure representation are evidence of a system in flux and give some cause for optimism. However, as Dewar and colleagues found, there is little consistency regarding the availability of support provided either by external agencies or from within the court. It is clear from the study and from the recommendations of the Family Law Pathways Advisory Group (2000) that a more coordinated, and holistic approach is required.

**Courts**

The Family Court is tackling the problem on a number of fronts, and the support of the outgoing Chief Justice has ensured that the issue has been addressed nationally to date.

The court has recognised the importance of understanding the nature of the problem before proposing effective measures to address it, and has been proactive in research. In 2000 it announced the implementation of the Self-Represented Litigants Project, the goals of which are: “to develop a consistent national approach to providing services to litigants that are sensible, effective and understandable, and conscious of the requirements of self-represented litigants; to improve current court services in practices and procedures, protocols and pro formas; and in parallel with the previous objectives, to evolve deliveries that are clear, consistent and understandable to litigants of average ability.”

This project complements the pre-existing trend to make the court more user-friendly by simplifying forms, providing forms online, producing do-it-yourself kits, and refining case management initiatives.

The court is also becoming increasingly aware of the need to play more of an educative role beyond that of the information sessions currently being provided. Dewar and colleagues recommended, among other things, the provision of more customised information with more detailed material being made available at various stages of proceedings.

Individual registries have come up with their own solutions. Initiatives such as the Court Support Project at Dandenong (a model most closely resembling the self-help centres in the United States), and the Integrated Client Services project at Parramatta, both of which seek to work closely with other service providers in resourcing the unrepresented litigant, provide models for assistance that are in accord with the recommendations of the Pathways Advisory Group (2001). More generally, there is recognition of the need for the court to move from a culture of “form-checking” to a more client-focused approach. To that end, the training of court staff and the development of protocols for dealing with self-represented litigants was one of the recommendations of the Dewar et al. (2000) report.

There have been calls for increased funding to expand the duty lawyer services provided by the Court – that is, lawyers on call at the court to assist those without representation. It has also been argued that the court needs to be more flexible in its attitude to the use of other forms of non-legal representation and assistance by way of specialist para-legals and/or “McKenzie friends” – people without legal qualifications who may, with the consent of the court, assist the litigant from the body of the court, without necessarily speaking on the litigant’s behalf.

**Judges**

With the variance in judicial approaches to parties appearing unrepresented evident from the Dewar study, it is clear that greater guidance for judges is required to achieve greater consistency. The full court of the Family Court has gone part of the way in formulating a set of rules to ensure that unrepresented parties are afforded procedural fairness. However, the rules outlined in Johnson v Johnson (1997) FLC 92-764, and Re: Litigants in Person Guidelines (2000) 27 Fam LR 517, do little to resolve the inherent contradictions in distinctions between information provision and advice and are rather limited in their scope.

One recommendation arising from the Dewar et al. report was that the court develop clearly articulated policy to assist judges to move between the more interventionist role required for unrepresented parties and their more traditional role, as the case demands.

**Legal profession**

There is a strong tradition in the legal profession of provision of services on a pro bono or volunteer basis. Increased numbers of litigants appearing in court unrepresented has placed a greater demand on these services. Most of the free advice sessions (offered by community legal centres and citizen’s advice bureaus) are staffed by volunteer lawyers and practitioners present in the court on other business are often called upon to assist unrepresented parties. While some lawyers engage in cutting corners to run a legally aided matter within budget, others will continue to assist their clients to pursue a case in the Family Court even after legal aid funding has been withdrawn (Caruana 1998).

Legal practitioners have also needed to reconcile the ethical concerns of dealing with unrepresented parties.
When appearing opposite a person who is unrepresented, lawyers are faced with the conflict between their competing duties to their client and to the court. While the overriding duty of practitioners is to achieve the best possible outcome for their client, they are also obligated to a certain degree to assist the court in ensuring a fair hearing and, at the very least, not to take advantage of their non-legal trained opponents. They must also be mindful to ensure that the requirements of Johnson v Johnson are met by the court or risk an appeal on the grounds of non-compliance. Guidelines developed by the New South Wales Bar Association have gone further in developing detailed protocols for barristers, on issues ranging from negotiating with a self-represented litigant to how to speak to a judge to avoid a perception of familiarity and therefore bias.

Lawyers may also need to consider different ways of delivering legal services, including the notion of providing unbundled services – that is, accepting retainers for discrete portions of legal work rather than having carriage of a matter until resolution. As recommended in the Family Law Pathways report (2000), greater flexibility in legal aid funding arrangements would be necessary to allow this to happen.

Other services

A range of volunteer, government and community-based organisations also provide invaluable services to unrepresented litigants both in and outside the court. These include mediation agencies, which offer an alternative to litigation; self-help initiatives established by legal aid offices, including the workshops for unrepresented litigants run by Victoria Legal Aid; community legal centres that provide advice and support to people navigating the litigation maze; and organisations such as Court Network whose volunteer workers offer emotional and practical assistance on-site at a number of courts.

Summary

It appears that the presence of fully and partially unrepresented parties in the family law jurisdiction is a growing phenomenon which is unlikely to change in the short term. The unrepresented family law litigant is most likely to be poor, poorly educated and be involved in litigation concerning the care of their children. Three quarters appear without a lawyer because of financial necessity. Reduced accessibility to legal aid has contributed to the problem.

Large numbers of unrepresented parties have a predominately negative effect on the administration of justice in that jurisdiction, causing delays, increased costs, trial uncertainty, and increased stress for court staff and judicial officers. Unrepresented parties remain in the system for a shorter period but represent a greater drain on court resources.

Poorly presented evidence and argument carries with it the risk of a miscarriage of justice for the unrepresented party, and affects the judge’s ability to make a decision which is in the best interests of the child. Lack of representation also has a personal cost for the parties involved, including heightened stress, frustration, and feelings of disempowerment.

A number of initiatives to attempt to meet the needs of unrepresented parties have emerged in the Family Court, from case law, the legal profession, and a range of community-based and government agencies.

References


Endnotes

1 Although recent studies show a high number of litigants appearing in person in the Family Court, the lack of statistical data kept by the court on this point prior to 1997 meant that evidence of the growth in numbers was largely anecdotal. However, a recently released report by the Law and Justice Foundation of New South Wales found that while the majority of unrepresented litigants are partially, rather than fully unrepresented, there has been a consistent increase in fully unrepresented litigants between 1995 and 1999 (Hunter et al. 2002). The timing of the release of this report precluded comprehensive analysis and comment in this article. The extent to which this trend extends to the Federal Magistrate’s Service is not explored in this article and requires further study.

2 It should be noted however that the American figures include family violence applications, whereas the Australian figures do not. The issue is of such concern that a national conference on self-represented litigants was held in Arizona in 1999.

3 According to Foster (2002: 4), staff levels are down 30 per cent since 1990, with 200 fewer staff members than three years ago.

4 Note however that no comparison is drawn with the percentage of divorces amongst people from a non-English-speaking background as these figures were not to hand (ABS figures on marriage and divorce refer only to people who nominate a country other than Australia as their country of birth).

Catherine Caruana, a Family Lawyer, is a Senior Research Officer with the Family and Marriage Program at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.
AIFS AT INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

The Institute’s Director and a number of staff attended the 15th World Congress of Sociology, held by the International Sociological Association (ISA) at Queensland University, Griffith University and the Queensland University of Technology, in Brisbane in July 2002.

Among the 3000 or so Australian and international delegates were seven Institute researchers who presented papers in the streams of family law, welfare and social reform, work and family, and social capital and the community.

Pictured above at the ISA conference: Susan Ziehl (left) from Rhodes University, South Africa, presented a paper questioning the emergence of “new family forms”; John Eriksen, from the Norwegian Social Research Institute in Norway (and a visiting scholar at the Institute for six months in 1994) presented a paper at the Welfare State and Family session; and Christine Millward (right), from the Australian Institute of Family Studies, presented a paper on the effects of non-standard work hours on family life, at the session she convened on Work and Family Interactions. Christine represents the Institute on the ISA Family Research Committee.

FAMILY LAW WORKSHOP

Institute researchers Bruce Smyth and Ruth Weston accepted an invitation by the Socio-Legal Research Centre, School of Law at Griffith University in Queensland to participate in a meeting entitled “Workshop on families, law and social policy: Future research directions”, held on 11 July 2002. The purposes of the workshop relate to the recommendation in the Family Law Pathways Report that a comprehensive national research strategy be developed to monitor and evaluate the future family law system and target specific high priority issues. The day was divided into four sessions: legal processes and practices, children and post-separation parenting, financial aspects of separation, and a stakeholders’ forum in which research needs were discussed. A report on outcomes of the meeting is being prepared by the Socio-Legal Research Centre team.

A GERMAN PERSPECTIVE

Dr Karl-Franz Kaltenborn, from the Medical Centre for Methodology and Health Research, Institute of Medical Informatics, Philipps-University of Marburg, Germany, visited the Institute from 16 July to 15 August. During this time, Dr Kaltenborn presented a seminar to staff members and visitors in which he discussed the results of an in-depth, follow-up study he has undertaken on the perceptions of children and their divorced parents regarding parenting arrangements. This research highlighted the active role that children often play in the way parenting arrangements evolve after separation, and post-separation relationships between parents, step-parents and children. His visit also led to some lively discussions about various family-related policies and family trends in Germany and Australia.

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Readers are reminded that, while it is designed to be accessible to a broad readership, Family Matters is a fully refereed academic journal. It is recognised by the Department of Education Science and Training (DEST) for the purposes of Research Data Collection, and it is included in the Register of Refereed Journals.

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Letters should be about 300 words, and may be edited.

Karl-Franz Kaltenborn talks with another visitor to the Institute, Mavis Maclean (see p. 45)
AIFS REPORT DRAWS MEDIA ATTENTION

The release of the Institute’s latest publication, Why Marriages Last (Research Paper no.28), sparked a flurry of media activity, all wanting to know the “secrets to a long and happy marriage”.

The research was picked up by radio, television and print media across the country. The author, Robyn Parker, was in great demand, and to date has completed 18 radio interviews, three television appearances, and eight in-depth newspaper interviews – including an extended interview with the South China Morning Post.

Radio interest was across the board and included Radio National’s Life Matters, various ABC breakfast, morning and afternoon programs, SBS current affairs, and a number of AM stations. Some listeners who called in to talk-back had themselves been married for more than 50 years (and one for 64 years!). Interestingly, their comments about their own marriages echoed the characteristics of lasting marriages identified in the research. Channel Nine’s Today show ran a segment on the issue and included an interview with a delightful couple from Moonee Ponds in Victoria who have been married for more than 50 years.

A large number of print articles appeared that were based on the report, some of which also included interviews with couples in long-term marriages – who again reflected the characteristics outlined in the paper!

ABS–AIFS–LSAC–LINKS

Carol Soloff was appointed as Survey Manager of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children in July 2002. An employee of the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Carol has been released as an outposted ABS officer to contribute to this important national study housed at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. She brings to the position extensive experience in ABS household survey development at state and national levels, as well as survey management, operations and interviewing experience.

CONSULTANT’S RETURN VISIT TO INSTITUTE

Dr Heather Laurie visited the Institute on 16 July 2002 to meet with Institute members of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) team. Heather is the Principal Research Officer at the Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex in the UK where she is responsible for the large-scale British Household Panel Survey which has been carried out annually since 1991. She is an external consultant for the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, which, like LSAC, is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services.

In 1999, Dr Laurie spent two weeks at the Institute to provide detailed advice about the design and management of longitudinal studies, so this return visit was a good opportunity to combine work with catching up with friends.

DEVELOPING LINKS

Catherine Caruana, a researcher in the Institute’s Family and Marriage program, and Paul Crowley, Family Law Primary Dispute Resolution Coordinator at Victoria Legal Aid, met after the seminar presented by Mavis MacLean on 18 July 2002 to discuss the benefits of developing stronger links between their respective organisations. Victoria Legal Aid is one of the stakeholders invited to comment on the Caring for Children After Separation project proposal. Catherine and Paul worked together in another life as Family and Child mediators.
**Separating without law**

*Mavis Maclean* is a Senior Research Fellow in the Faculty of Law at Wolfson College, University of Oxford, and Academic Adviser for the Lord Chancellor's Department in the UK. She has had a long and close association with the Institute through her professional links and friendship with some of its staff and associates, particularly with the late Kathleen Funder.

She recently came to Australia for the first time, and presented at the 15th International Sociological Association's World Congress in Brisbane. She also kindly accepted an invitation to present a paper for the Institute's Seminar series on Thursday 18 July 2002. Her seminar, entitled "Separating without law", focused on the experiences of, and legal provisions for, separating cohabitants who had children to consider and property to divide.

**Why social capital matters**

*John Wiseman,* Assistant Director of the Policy Development and Research Branch of the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet in Victoria, presented a seminar on 18 April 2002, on behalf of himself and the Director of the Branch, Dr David Adams. The seminar explored the evidence about why social capital matters and the approaches being taken by governments to enhance social capital outcomes. It also presented initial findings of research on social capital trends in Victoria.

**Post-separation parenting arrangements**

In his seminar at the Institute on Thursday 20 June 2002, *Patrick Parkinson,* Professor of Law and Pro-Dean (Teaching Programs) at the University of Sydney, examined current conflicts in family law in Australia and argued that we are now moving into a new "third era" in family law. While the first era of family law was premised on the indissolubility of marriage and the second era on the assumption that marriage is freely dissoluble, the third era, he argued, will be shaped by the recognition that although marital and other such relationships may be freely dissoluble, parenthood is not. There are implications of this recognition for both the financial and parenting arrangements which are made following separation.

**New millennium families**

*Micahel Gilding,* Director of the Centre for New Technologies and Society School of Social and Behavioural Sciences at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, presented an entertaining and thought-provoking seminar at the Institute on 16 May 2002. The paper, entitled "Families of the new millennium: Designer babies, cyber sex and virtual communities", is published in this edition of *Family Matters* on pp. 4-10.

**Young people leaving care**

*Judy Cashmore,* Honorary Research Associate at the Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales, presented a seminar at the Institute on 15 August 2002 on behalf of herself and Marina Paxman. "Young people leaving care: Five years on", presented the main findings from a longitudinal study of wards leaving care in New South Wales. The study involved interviews with young people before they were discharged from wardship, and then three months, twelve months and five years after they left, focusing on outcomes such as – where they were living, how they were supporting themselves, their relationships, and their overall wellbeing.

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**Institute address changes from org to gov**

The Australian Institute of Family Studies domain name is now [www.aifs.gov.au](http://www.aifs.gov.au) to reflect its status as a Commonwealth Government agency. However, its original name of [www.aifs.org.au](http://www.aifs.org.au) will continue to operate simultaneously for as long as is necessary for people and search engines/web pages to register the change. The same change applies to Institute email addresses.
The reconciliation of work and family life is as important an issue in France as it is in Australia, and the announcement of another annual increase in the birth rate (for the year 2001) to 1.9 (Australia’s was 1.75) has been hailed as showing how successful French strategies on this issue are.

The importance of family-friendly policies in employment is demonstrated by, for example, the high employment rate of women with a child under the age of six years. In 1999 in France, 56 per cent of such mothers worked, and of these about 60 per cent worked full-time. (In Australia in 2000 these figures for women with a child under five years were 45 per cent and 33 per cent respectively.)

**Paternity leave**

The most publicised of France’s recent “family-friendly” initiatives has been the introduction in January 2002 of an extra 11 days paid paternity leave (to be taken within four months of the birth), in addition to the existing three days at the time of the birth. Forty per cent of eligible men are expected to take it. It has been controversial, with employers’ organisations expressing concern about the cost of the payment and doubting the need for extra leave when the recently introduced 35-hour week had made more paid annual leave generally available.

**Maternity leave**

The much longer established maternity leave consists of six weeks paid leave prior to the birth and ten weeks after, with longer for a third or later birth or for multiple births. In order to receive maternity payments, at least eight weeks must be taken, six of which must be taken after the birth (French Government 2002).

Both maternity and paternity leave are paid by the state social insurance system to the same income ceiling of about A$3,450 per month and are subject to the same eligibility rules under the state social insurance scheme. This usually requires that a mother claiming the payment must have been registered under this insurance scheme for ten months prior to the expected date of birth, and to have worked for certain minimum periods within the last three or six months. There is no requirement for a period of continuous work with the same employer.

The (taxable) payment amounts to 100 per cent of a woman’s average daily wage received during her last three months of work up to the ceiling. Some women workers receive extra payments above this ceiling from their employer under the collective agreement covering their workplace or work sector. Possibly up to 58 per cent benefit from extra statutory arrangements of various sorts (not necessarily paid) for maternity leave (Evans 2001).

Subject to notifying her employer and the social security office of the pregnancy, a pregnant employee’s contract is treated as suspended during maternity leave, and at its end she has the right to return to her job. The leave counts towards pension entitlements. French employment law provides for the employment of temporary workers to cover anyone on maternity leave. On her return, in some circumstances, a woman has the right to two half-hour periods a day during her child’s first year to breastfeed at work.

**Parental leave**

Maternity and paternity leave entitlements appear brief but, subject to various notice requirements, both parents are also entitled to take three years’ parental leave at any time up to a child’s third birthday (Fagnani 1999).

A parent taking this leave must have had one year’s employment with their current employer at the child’s birth. Part-time work may be undertaken instead...
of, or in combination with, time off during this period. Parental leave has to be taken in blocks of one year, with the employee specifying whether leave is to be full-time or part-time at each annual renewal, unless alternative arrangements are made with the employer.

On the expiry of leave, an employee must receive their job back or (and this is a potentially significant issue) a similar one at similar pay. There are rights to training on return. Concern has been expressed as to how these rights are working in practice and results of research into this issue should be published soon.

Partners satisfying the above criteria can both theoretically take parental leave. But it is only paid (by way of a flat rate non means tested and non-taxable benefit) where the claimant has two children with at least one under the age of three, and then not adequately to replace an average salary. The monthly payment is approximately A$875, with lesser payments made to those working part-time. So it is not surprising that of the 485,000 recipients (three quarters of whom were on full-time leave) in 1998, only 1 per cent were men. If both parents work part-time, the maximum combined payment is that made to one non-working parent. In addition, a parent of two children must have worked for two out of the five years before the birth of the second child; those with more children must have worked for two years within the preceding ten years (time registered as unemployed is taken into account). Thus it is easier to become eligible for the parental leave payment than the right to return to work.

Other leave and family friendly working arrangements

While substantial extended leave exists to care for a disabled or seriously ill child, a right to between three to five unpaid days per year carer's leave exists only for sole parents. (Although in the public service 12 paid days exists.) Similarly, there is no legislative provision entitling employees to flexitime or part-time hours for family reasons (other than the parental leave arrangements). However, extra-statutory family-friendly provisions do exist, and a European-wide survey of working conditions published in 1997, describes these as reported by women employees with a child under 15 years of age (Evans 2001).

It reveals that flexitime appears to be substantially less available than in Australia as only 26 per cent reported its availability, whereas Australian data puts the figure at 50 per cent. Forty-seven per cent reported sick child leave, and 51 per cent parental leave, although it is unclear whether these leaves are paid or not. Twelve per cent reported employer provision of child care.

The introduction of the 35 hour week in France should offer opportunities to increase family friendly working practices. However, early indications are that non-professional women have not felt as many benefits as might have been expected. A government survey reported only 40 per cent of such women stating that it had improved their daily lives (compared with 75 per cent for professional women; for men the figures were 57 per cent and 65 per cent respectively). Early research into the implementation of the 35 hour week indicates that, amongst other things, the trade-off for the extra hours off is, for some women employees, an increase in the type of work flexibility which makes their family commitments harder to manage due to a lack of certainty about their working hours.

Child care

The single most startling fact about family life in France is that school begins when a child is three. Although it is not compulsory for children to attend until they turn six, all children are entitled to a place at a pre-elementary school (for three to six year olds) when, or just before, they turn three years of age (35 per cent of two year olds are enrolled) (Le Corre 2000).

School hours are from 8.30 a.m. until 4.30 p.m. every day except Wednesday (at primary school children over six also study Saturday mornings). Child care is often provided (by schools/municipalities) to cover the lunch hours, Wednesdays, and the period between 4.30 and 6/6.30 p.m. so as to assist working parents. Small means tested fees are payable, and sometimes no fees apply. Otherwise family day care provision can be used.

Subsidised vacation care is also often provided (by municipalities and/or employers) at means tested rates. Although this provision is not uniform, Paris provides a useful example. There, the maximum cost of a day's care is usually the equivalent of approximately A$12 (meal included) – and all children needing such care are eligible to enrol.

The main pressure for extra child care concerns provision for children under three years. Continued government efforts are being made to expand the network of nurseries which are geographically unequally distributed (rural areas come off worst). The same is the case for out of school hours care.

Approximately 200,000 nursery places for under-three year olds existed in 1999. These are largely publicly funded and run (with means tested fees), although private nurseries do exist. A very large number of children are also cared for by the (registered and trained) family day care equivalent, with just under half a million families using such care in 1998. Some families employ nannies at home. Families receive relief on the social insurance contributions they must pay for both types of employees. Tax credits also assist with child care costs and a means-tested benefit is payable to assist less well-off families with family day care costs.

Overall, day care facilities are used by 29 per cent of children aged up to three in France, and 99 per cent of children from age three to the mandatory school age. The respective figures in Australia are 15 per cent and 60 per cent respectively.

The rhythm of life in France is in many ways different from that in Australia, but the work/family balance is one of those preoccupations which crosses cultural boundaries.

References


Alex Heron currently lives in France and has worked as a lawyer and for non-government organisations in Australia and England.
Fertility and public policy

Why is the birth rate in Australia low? Why do people choose not to have children? Are there implications for labour supply and international migration of below replacement fertility? It has been argued that a combination of immigration and fertility that leads to at least zero population growth in the long term is what is needed. This bibliography addresses the issue of the interrelationship of replacement fertility, replacement immigration, and childlessness by choice. The bibliography is based on references from the Institute’s database, Australian Family & Society Abstracts, published in the past two years.

The references are available on interlibrary loan from the Institute’s Family Information Centre. A number of the articles and papers are also available in full text on the Web. Others are available from bookshops and libraries.

Barnes, A. (2001), Low Fertility, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra, 47 p. (Occasional paper no. 2).


This paper attempts to identify the range of issues that contribute to falling fertility and to point to the general policy directions that might be considered if maintenance of fertility at its current level is to be supported. The paper considers whether the decline in fertility rates matters in terms of social policy, and reviews relevant academic work relating to possible causes. Discussion includes the direct financial costs of children; opportunity costs; institutional and cultural norms; gender issues in relation to fertility; gender issues in relation to children; establishment and breakdown of relationships; problems in partnering. Also discussed are whether to use immigration to solve the problem of falling fertility; and the link between attitudes, policy and outcomes.


Like a number of Asian and European countries, Australia has a fertility rate which has fallen below population replacement level. This paper discusses what is happening in Australia and what policy makers should do about it. The author draws on 1996 data from the Women’s Health Australia study to reflect on issues relating to fertility and motherhood and their implications for social policy. She concludes that in terms of gender equity women will continue to have difficulty in bargaining effectively to influence the kind of equality they want to achieve. Policy effort must be pursued not only at government level but across all levels in society and in all relationships, to improve techniques for bargaining effectively and, ultimately, to achieve an equality defined by women and men together.


Fertility at or below replacement level now characterises 64 countries with populations totalling 44 per cent of that of the world. Many of these countries have total fertility rates below 1.5 and some have recorded below-replacement fertility for decades. It appears likely that some countries will eventually adopt policies aimed at raising fertility. Accordingly, the paper examines the effect of past policies of this type, and briefly looks to the future. (Journal abstract)


Fertility in Australia is low and may well fall further. Why? The author discounts theories based on “post-materialist values” and argues that most young women want at least a two-child family. Fertility is low because of the high cost of children, the risk of taking long-term commitments in the face of an uncertain future, and the uneven nature of gender equity. This third reason is important. Women are treated as equals in the education system and the labour market, provided they participate as individuals. But once they become mothers they are more often treated as members of families, families headed by a male breadwinner. This is especially true as far as taxation and welfare are concerned. In these circumstances gender equity suffers. The author’s policy suggestions focus on gender equity: we need family-friendly workplaces, child-care reform and reform of the taxation system. Current arrangements reward stay at home mothers and mothers who work full-time. They penalise those who prefer a balanced compromise. If we persist in ignoring the needs of this group of women fertility will continue to fall. (Journal abstract)


In a previous issue of People and Place (vol. 9, no. 2, 2001), the author argued that the falling fertility rate in Australia was evidence that a paradigm shift
was required in Australian family support policy. The argument he was making was misunderstood by some sections of the media. As this may have been due to the inadequacies of his exposition, the author explains, he has written this paper to clarify his argument. Also, since writing the previous paper, more evidence has become available, particularly from European researchers on the causes of low fertility. The results of this recent research have been incorporated in this paper.


According to the author, the question “does low fertility matter” is now a question more and more answered in the affirmative. He notes that, in the 1995 round of the United Nations periodic survey of population policies, 28 countries with below replacement fertility considered that their fertility rate was “too low”. Since the previous survey in 1996, seven countries had shifted their view about fertility from “satisfactory” to “too low”. Greater certainty about the issue of low fertility, however, is not matched by certainty about the appropriate range of policies to address low fertility, states the author. In this paper he describes a wide range of policies that might be used to stop or reverse the downward slide of fertility rates. Discussion includes the example of Italy in the achievement of demographic sustainability: theories of low fertility; the new market-based economy and its impact on fertility; and some principles of action. The author’s belief is that reversal of low fertility is about inventing a new machine, not about the kinds of tools that are required to keep the present machine running.


Fertility rates have been low in almost all advanced countries for the past 25-30 years. In most cases throughout this period, fertility has been below the level that leads to replacement of one generation by the next. In the same period, mortality rates have also fallen sharply. As well as resulting in rapid ageing of the population, another important outcome of sustained low fertility for most advanced countries will be either stagnation or a fall in the absolute size of the labour force if current demographic and labour force trends continue. In this paper, the authors examine future trends in labour supply in 16 countries. They consider the impact on future labour supply of changes from current levels of fertility, migration and labour force participation. The 16 countries, which are chosen to display a range of differing current circumstances, are: New Zealand, United States, Australia, Canada, Singapore, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Japan, Sweden, Italy, Greece, Spain, the Netherlands, Thailand, and South Korea.


Apart from the economic consequences of falling fertility and the long-term defence implications of a static or falling population and a dearth of young men and women, there is something dispiriting about a supposedly “young” country being unable, or unwilling, to reproduce itself at a time when we have never been richer overall, states the author. Why the momentous turnaround in fertility in the last 40 years, he asks. We can never replace the missing children, he concludes, but it is possible to start taking measures now that will halt the slide. The place to begin is public policies which will more realistically acknowledge the way in which taxation and niggardly approaches to the costs of children have decimated our birth rate.


This document presents information on contemporary social issues and areas of public policy concern in Australia, and describes Australian society and how it is changing over time. An article on “Trends in childlessness” (pp. 37-40) provides an overview of the growing proportion of Australian women and their partners not having children, and outlines some of the reasons for women and their partners remaining childless. Estimates for 2000 suggested that 24 per cent of women currently in their reproductive years would never have children, a trend also seen in other developed countries. Characteristics of women who remain childless, including their educational attainment, cultural background, religion and labour force participation, are also discussed.


Historically, childlessness is highly unusual in human societies. However, childlessness has been increasing in Europe for several decades and is following a similar trend in Australia. This snapshot looks at the prevalence of the desire for childlessness, actual childlessness and the ramifications.


Estimates of historical and contemporary levels of childlessness are both subject to assumptions about data and method. In Australia, the proportion of childlessness has fluctuated considerably over the past century, ranging from 30 per cent of women born around the turn of the twentieth century to below 10 per cent in the cohorts that produced the baby boom. Although childlessness is increasing among women currently in their childbearing years, a return to record levels is unlikely in the short term. It is expected that about one in five women currently of reproductive age will remain childless. (Journal abstract)


As many as one in four people are now choosing not to have children, and yet it is still considered a taboo subject. This publication contains the opinions and experiences of more than 80 “child free” Australians aged between 22 and 66 years. Far from the cold, lonely and unfulfilled people that is the stereotypical view of childless people, they are happy, enthusiastic and satisfied with their lives. This book answers questions such as: Why are so many people choosing a life free from children? Are they being selfish? What are the advantages and disadvantages? Do they regret their choice? And Who are the role models for people making the decision now and what can they expect for their futures?


The current decline in family size in Australia has sparked considerable debate. Having children is usually seen as a matter of choice, but external circumstances may place constraints on this choice. What is the impact of relationship status on men’s and women’s intentions about whether or not to have children? And how do changes in relationship status affect those intentions? Based on data from the Australian Family Formation Project, the analysis in this paper focuses on intentions and outcomes.
This paper considers several policy responses to declining birth rates in Australia over the twentieth century, revealing key continuities in the "administration of population". Early in the century pro-natalist policies to enhance fertility predominated. In spite of evidence in the 1890s, 1920s and 1940s that economics shaped family sizes and that women's lives included paid work, little acknowledgment of this occurred outside wartime. In the second half of the twentieth century, immigration largely replaced pro-natalism as a desired means of building population numbers. Century's end brought new concerns about fertility decline, an ageing population, immigration and increased asylum seeking. These concerns revitalised the call for a population policy and raised unresolved questions for women. (Journal abstract)


With their birth rates low enough for long enough, a number of countries, mostly European, face the likelihood of a lengthy period of decreasing population. A recent United Nations report calculates the migrant intake required to hold their populations constant—what it terms replacement migration. The implication, perhaps unintended, is that such constancy should be a policy objective with immigration the principal instrument. Privileging demography in this way, however, is hard to defend. There are social limits to immigration in terms of the acceptable proportion of migrants among total recruits to a society (births plus migrants) which may come into play well short of full replacement. The relevant economic issues in considering migration have more to do with trade pacts and human capital than with domestic market size and human numbers. And environmental quality might benefit from a smaller population. For many countries migration is likely to be only a small part of the complex array of responses to persistent low fertility. (Journal abstract)
As reported in the last edition of Family Matters, the Stronger Families Learning Exchange was established earlier this year at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, with the objective of contributing to the evidence base about the effectiveness of early interventions for families and communities.

An initiative of the Commonwealth Government as part of its Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, the Learning Exchange has two components. Its Clearing-house provides the latest information on research and programs concerned with family wellbeing, primary prevention, and early intervention for families. Its Training and Support Team provides advice and assistance to community development projects on the use of action research to evaluate their work.

These community projects are funded by the Commonwealth’s Stronger Families Fund. To date, 25 of an anticipated 80 projects, located in areas of high need across Australia, have been funded. The focus of each project is to develop community support for strengthening the functioning of families, particularly those with children aged from birth to five years. The means by which this is done varies across projects, the view being that problems are best solved through local solutions developed through active community participation.

Making a reality of action research evaluation

The Stronger Families Training and Support Team at the Institute comprises Adam Tomison (Manager), Liz Branigan (Acting Team Leader), Tania Lienert, Sandra Billard, Colleen Turner, Richard Munt, Maya Havi-land and, more recently, Anne Garrow. The team has worked hard to take the idea of using action research evaluation to support the work of projects in the field and turn it into a reality. The team has developed evaluation frameworks, project principles, key performance indicators, and varied methods of supporting interactions with the projects.

The diverse experience of team members has ensured these frameworks have emerged as both rigorous and flexible.

A key part of the project support has been for the team to establish relationships by visiting each of the projects. More than 15 visits have now been conducted to projects across Australia – from Hobart in Tasmania, to Cairns in Queensland, to Derby in northern Western Australia, and many places in between, such as Wagga Wagga in New South Wales, and Melbourne, the Team’s home base.

The recent six-day visit by Maya Haviland and Adam Tomison to the Jalaris project in Derby is a good example of the types of projects with which the team is working (see story below).

For further information regarding the operations of the Stronger Families Training and Support Team, please contact Dr Liz Branigan (03) 9214 7800; lizb@aifs.gov.au, or Dr Adam Tomison (03) 9214 7821; adamt@aifs.gov.au.

JALARIS PROJECT

The Jalaris Aboriginal Corporation, established in 1994 in Derby in the far north west of Western Australia, is attempting to meet the fundamental needs of the Aboriginal community’s children for education, nutritious food, clothing, safety and health care by providing a centrally sited drop-in facility five days a week.

Over the years, local children have been frequent visitors to the Jalaris “Mungarri” centre, often with their aunties and uncles and their jabby (grandfather), and they have been fed as a matter of course if they are hungry.

On the basis of its kinship with the community, and the reputation it has developed over the years, Jalaris received funding from the Stronger Families Fund to expand and professionalise what has been an informal service.

Jalaris estimates that there are as many as 200 children in the immediate area, of whom 50 or more may drop in each day. The kitchen supplies low cost nutritious meals, and sells cheap but healthy snacks like fruit iceblocks; a small games arcade is also available. Having attracted the children, Jalaris identifies health, emotional and social problems, including truancy, and in association with relevant professionals provides assistance.

Funding has also been provided for the “Blue House”, a drop-in centre for young women and their children. This centre is designed to help young women to deal with general health issues, substance misuse, domestic violence, isolation, boredom and lack of education. It provides opportunities for the women to learn parenting skills and other practical activities, such as computer literacy, cooking and sewing.
The discussion paper by Pamela Kinnear, New families for changing times, is a useful and constructive contribution to the debate about contemporary family change. It presents an argument about the nature of changes in contemporary families and contends that these changes are not a sign of the disintegration of the family or a symptom of a moral collapse. Rather, they are constructive attempts by people to build families that work in the new and complex postmodern world in which we live.

“Far from selfishly sacrificing children on the altar of parental sexual and personal gratification as conservative commentators would have it, for the most part, parents and their children are engaged in an intense project of re-inventing family life in a rapidly changing world.” (p.55)

The paper is framed within the debate between what Kinnear calls the “conservatives” and the “progressives”.

The conservatives (especially the “regressive” conservatives as she calls them) portray contemporary family changes entirely negatively and view family breakdown as a reflection of a moral breakdown in society and the dominance of the corrosive effects of selfish individualism. According to Kinnear, the family policy goal of regressive conservatives is to protect the traditional nuclear family so that the societal disintegration that they see as stemming from the decline of the nuclear family will be halted.

On the other side of the debate are the progressives who dismiss the extent and the implications of changes in family formation and dissolution patterns over the last 25 years.

Although Kinnear acknowledges that the progressives underestimate the dramatic extent of changes and the possible negative effects of some of these changes for children, the tenor of her discussion paper is highly critical of the conservative interpretation of family change. While taking the extent of family change seriously, she is much closer to the position of the progressives in being less inclined to see these changes as a wholly bad thing.

Kinnear acknowledges that there have been major changes in the way people form and live in families. However, unlike the conservatives, who see such changes as symptoms and cause of moral and social decay, she interprets them as adaptive ways in which individuals and families are responding to the massive changes in the wider society. Although she does not say so directly, the implication is that if people were not making these changes in the way they “do family” then families would be under much greater strain and much less able to play the generally positive role they play in the lives of family members.

In providing a basic description of the main changes in family formation, Kinnear points to the increase in divorce rates, the decline in marriage rates, the delays in marriage, the rise in cohabitation, and the decline in fertility to an historical low point. Such trends have led to a greater diversity in household structures. There is a steady increase in the proportion of one-parent families, ex nuptial births, blended families and stepfamilies. De facto relationships have become commonplace, new methods of conception are becoming more available, and same sex relationships are forcing their way onto the agenda for recognition as a new form of family.

There can be little debate that these changes are occurring both in Australia and other western countries. Where commentators differ is how they read these trends. The regressive conservatives read all the changes as a sign of the damaging
effects of selfish individualism and the dominance of the doctrine of self fulfilment, regardless of the cost to others and to relationships and responsibilities to others.

**New families for changing times** challenges this conservative interpretation of changes in families. The challenge has three main strands.

First, recent family changes must be seen in a much longer-term historical context than the conservatives generally employ. When seen in historical context recent changes are but a continuation of a long-term historical patterns.

Second, changes in contemporary families reflect other profound changes in contemporary society. To expect families to be immune from change when all else is changing is sociologically naïve. To promote unchanging family forms in the context of wider social, economic and cultural change is to undermine the central role of families in helping individuals live and thrive in a rapidly changing and complex world. Families will adapt to the changing world in which family members live. To discourage families changing and adapting in this way is to threaten the critical role that families can play in people’s lives.

Third, while the possible impact of divorce on children is cause for concern, the extent to which parents with children separate does not reflect the failure of adults to take seriously their moral responsibility to care for vulnerable children. Kinnear is of the view that parents do not divorce lightly, that the effect of divorce on children is not as great as often represented, and that divorce itself is not the culprit when understanding why children in separated families have lower wellbeing ratings than those from intact families.

### The historical argument

Kinnear takes issue with the assumption underlying some of the conservative alarm about contemporary change. The complaint about the direction of current changes assumes a stable past – some sort of golden age when families worked well for the benefit of all. The changes we are now seeing, conservatives argue, represent the destruction of this stable, happy and secure past.

Kinnear points out that this view is historically simplistic, and that the history of the family is a history of change. She provides a summary of the broadly accepted generalisations about the patterns of change in western families over the centuries.

- There has been a growing importance of the nuclear family and the declining role of the wide kinship and community networks.
- There has been the separation of work from home. Industrialisation meant that the family unit ceased to be the unit of economic production. As economic production moved out into the workplace families became a unit of consumption and reproduction. The separation of work from home eventually led to greater, gender based, role specialisation with husbands and fathers working in the formal economy while mothers and wives became increasingly restricted to the domestic sphere.
- There has been the increasing duration of marriages as life expectancy increased.
- There have been changing conceptions of the appropriate foundations of marriage – from an institution founded on familial and economic obligations to one based on romantic love, companionship, affection and sexual satisfaction.
- The has been a greater child centredness of families.
- There has been an increasing privatisation of families and the separation of the private family sphere from the wider public sphere. Rather than being an integrating force, families became “a haven in a heartless world” – an “emotional refuge in the cold and competitive society” (Lasch 1986: 43).
- There has been declining family size and fertility that can be dated to the late 19th century.

In sum, Kinnear argues that the recent changes in family formation patterns are not especially new – they are part of longer-term trends and patterns. The reason some of the recent changes appear so dramatic is that they are contrasted with the atypical era following World War II when fertility rates and marriage rates were especially high. She argues that using this comparison point rather than longer-term historical patterns has caused the conservatives to get the more recent changes out of perspective.

### Idealisation of families

According to Kinnear, the view that contemporary family trends reflect a form of moral bankruptcy tends to idealise the way in which families have functioned in the past. While contemporary families have their failings, and new family forms have their shortcomings, Kinnear says that the image of the happy families of the 1950s and 1960s is a myth, and points to the “dark side” of many families where women were oppressed and children maltreated.

This dark side, which contains a seam of violence and abuse, continues in today’s families. Kinnear argues that the alarm about instability of families and the breakdown of marriages and families privileges the importance of family stability (families staying together) at the expense of the damage that is perpetrated in some families as the price of stability.

### The sociological argument – postmodernism and all that

Families are part of a wider society. The way families function will partly reflect the nature of the wider society. But the way the wider society functions will reflect the workings of families. According to Kinnear, the conservatives argue that family breakdown is due to the moral
breakdown in the wider society and the rise of selfish individualism. Because families play such an important role the only hope for society is to protect families from the undermining influences of the wider society. As the family is protected and survives so will the wider society eventually benefit.

While she accepts the role of wider society in shaping families and the role of families in shaping the wider society, Kinnear argues that the conservative picture of selfish individualism and family disintegration is a misreading of what is really happening. Her picture of contemporary society is heavily influenced by the position of sociologists such as Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman.

These sociologists paint a picture of contemporary, post-modern society as one in which the nature of social changes is such that a diversity of family forms is both inevitable and desirable. Rather than regarding family changes as dysfunctional and negative, this view regards the changes as adaptive and as potentially positive.

Essentially the argument of these sociologists is that we are experiencing a radical economic and cultural transformation. According to Kinnear, the global dominance of market capitalism has been accompanied by the dominance of neo-liberal economics, free trade globalisation of economic and cultural activity and the progressive deregulation of institutional structures . . . decollectivisation and the rise of individual enterprise bargaining, workplace flexibility, downsizing, labour market casualisation, the rise of the portfolio career . . . " (p. 22).

In western societies the politics of the individual prevails over the politics of the collective as epitomised in Thatcher's pronouncement that there is "no such thing as society" (Kinnear 2002: 22). According to these social theorists modern people must be self-reliant and invent their own world and their own pathways through it. Post modernity is a time when the old institutional givens of life have broken down. Rather than living according to the life script provided by the social categories to which we belong (gender, class, ethnic group, religious group) we must work out and negotiate our own biographies.

This process of losing the certainties that were derived from the old categories and collectivities to which we belonged and having to invent our own pathways is called individualisation which, as Kinnear emphasises, is very different from the selfish individualism to which the conservative critics draw attention.

This transformation from living in a society where our moralities, behaviour and pathways were more or less given can be extraordinarily difficult for the individuals involved. Indeed Beck refers to being "damned to individualisation" (Beck 1998: 33). Working out these new ways of living is risky business and is accompanied by the danger of new ways not working. As people must take more and more responsibility for their own fate, the downside is that failure increasingly results in "personal guilt, conflicts and neuroses" (Beck 1998: 35).

However, the process of individualisation should not simply be seen as a negative phenomenon. As Kinnear argues: "As with most social and cultural transformations, the process of disembedding older ways of life is fraught with uncertainty and the benefits are mixed. But while the disembedding of industrial society continues, at the same time it gives way to the process of re-embedding new ways of life" (p. 24) in which individuals "cobble together their biographies for themselves" (Beck 1998: 33).

The question for contemporary adults is "How shall I live" (Giddens, 1991: 14). As far as family formation is concerned this means that individuals will have to develop their own answers. The way we "do marriage" will change as we progressively move to designer marriages and families away from the one size fits all model.

Kinnear’s argument is that we must interpret family changes in this light – as attempts by modern people to construct family forms that work for them. This is not a matter of people being selfish individualists who do not care about the consequences of their actions for others. Rather, contemporary family changes are part of a work in progress as individuals try to reinvent families now that the givens of how to "do family" have evaporated. She argues (p. 26) that "rather than [the resulting] family change being a sign of moral decline, family relationships become the site where new debates about morality and ethics are played out".

According to Kinnear, rather than reflecting an abandonment of morality the process of reinventing or re-embedding values and behaviours requires a new level of moral reflection that simply accepting the givens of did not require.

Impact of family changes on children

The negative impact of divorce on children has been the cause of widespread concern. This impact has been an important part of the charge that divorce and other family changes reflect immoral, selfish individualism. The charge is that while parents pursue their own happiness, fulfillment and gratification in new relationships their children suffer.

While acknowledging that the weight of the evidence indicates that there is a consistent statistical association between family separation and child wellbeing, Kinnear questions what this evidence means.

She argues two main points. The first is that although the differences in wellbeing of children from separated and intact families clearly exist these differences are not all that substantial.

Second, separation cannot be held solely or largely responsible for the differences between children from separated and intact families. Instead, Kinnear attributes the differences to factors that tend to be associated with separation (conflict, poverty etc.). It is these things that account for the poorer outcomes among children in separated families.

That is, it is not the family structure itself that produces the poorer outcomes but other factors associated with these family structures that create the difficulties for children. Accordingly, the focus of concern should be less on the family arrangements in which children live and more on the quality of the relationships within all family arrangements. Conflict within either couple families, lone parent families or blended families is bad for children. Policy interventions should be more concerned with helping people in all family forms to deal with the ways of managing conflict and less on a single-minded preoccupation with the type of family in which children live.

Kinnear concludes her argument about family change by urging us to look to the positive and not just the negatives of family changes. While there are downsides to contemporary family changes, it is not an option to revert to the
atypical family arrangements and patterns of the 1950s. She argues keeping dysfunctional families together just for the sake of the children is not a constructive approach.

Kinnear concludes by arguing that:

“Families are changing, but they are doing so for reasons far more complex than a decline in moral values and the rise of selfish individualism. Modern parents face a complex world with competing pressures, unique risks and fewer collective guidelines about how to live their lives and about what constitutes moral action. But far from selfishly sacrificing children on the altar of parental sexual and personal gratification as conservative commentators would have it, for the most part, parents and their children are engaged in an intense project of re-inventing family life in a rapidly changing world.” (p.55)

**Understanding family change**

I have outlined Kinnear’s argument at length because it is a constructive attempt to understand the nature of contemporary family change. Her interpretation of these changes has much to commend it. The emphasis on longer-term patterns of family change is a welcome antidote to the common tendency to view current changes either within the very limited timespan in which we have lived or against an imaginary golden age that existed either in our childhood or in some more distant past. Changes must be placed in a proper context in order to understand what they mean. A longer-term historical context is vital to this fuller understanding.

Another important strength of Kinnear’s account is the attempt to place contemporary changes within a broader sociological context. She has chosen to emphasise the interpretation of modern society that stresses the dis-embedding from the certainties of the past and the givens of gender, class and ethnicity. She emphasises how family changes will inevitably reflect the wider social, economic and cultural changes that have emerged in recent years.

It is important when trying to understand family change or develop family policy that we have a firm understanding that families cannot be and should not be insulated from broader social changes. We will not develop better or stronger families by cocooning them from the pressures and demands of the wider society. To do so will simply create a chasm between the private and public lives of individuals and threaten to make families less adapted to and relevant to the rest of people’s lives.

There is room however, to question the extent to which this interpretation of modern society is correct. Certainly one can go too far in claiming that we have been dis-embedded from the constraints of class, gender and ethnicity. While we may have more room for movement in the categories or collectivities to which we belong, most of us nevertheless are constrained within these categories and identities. Many givens remain, and structures still constrain.

While Kinnear is more optimistic than the conservatives about the implications of family changes, she is not naive. She does not pretend that the road ahead is smooth or that all attempts to develop new ways of living in families will be successful. Nor does she pretend that it is easy. What she does do is to urge that we try to adopt a positive and constructive approach. Changes have taken place and will continue to do so. Rather than simply resisting family changes in the hope that we can reconstruct families of the past, a more constructive approach is to support people in families as they seek to live in an everchanging and complex world. Not only does this mean supporting a diverse range of family forms; it also means adopting a positive mindset whereby the pluses and not just the minuses of these new ways of “doing family” are tested.

Having said that, I feel that on occasions Kinnear may err a little on the side of optimism. While she rightly challenges simplistic explanations of family change that do not go beyond notions of selfish individualism, my own opinion (and that is all it can be) is that she is too ready to dismiss this dimension of behaviour both within and outside of families. The consumer society in which we live promotes an individualistic orientation which can readily lead to selfish individualism. While we should avoid attributing all changes as the negative outcomes of the moral failure of selfish individualism, nor should we be blind to role of such factors in family changes.

Nor should we over-rate the capacity of individuals to construct successful new ways of forming and living in families. While I agree with Kinnear that many family changes can be the result of well motivated, positive moral decisions, it is another thing for these choices to result in successful family outcomes. My reservations about the capacity of many people to manage and to reinvent new and successful family arrangements do not lead me to say that we must return to a “tried and true model”.

Rather, it means that the direction of policy should be to support a diverse range of family arrangements. Regardless of what any of us might think are desirable family arrangements, the fact remains that diversity will develop. That is the nature of contemporary society. The goal of policy should be to ensure that people are supported, as far as is possible via policy interventions, to manage in a diverse range of families: to make the best of a diverse situation.

**References**


David de Vaus is an Associate Professor in Sociology at La Trobe University, Melbourne, and Senior Research Advisor at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.
The following selection of books on family-related topics are recent additions to the Institute's Family Information Centre. They are available through Libraries, through the Family Information Centre via the Inter Library Loan system, or for purchase from good book shops. Prices are given as and when supplied.

**CAROLE JEAN**

"You can't learn parenting from a book. What you can learn is how other parents in similar situations have handled some of the issues you face and then use this to come up with a version that works in your family." With this statement in mind, the author aims to provide parents with both practical ideas and tips on parenting today's teenagers, drawn from both his experience as a therapist and as a father. Chapters cover adolescence, and how it has changed over time; parenting practices that work and don't work; the phases of parenting; parenting adolescents; and resilient parents. The book is written in a lively style and would make interesting reading for both parents and professionals who work with parents and their adolescent children.


Written by the Director of the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, this book examines the key trends in economic and social policy in Australia over the past 25 years. The author contends that economic liberalism has contributed to an increase in unemployment, inequality, social dysfunction, and alienation in society. Individual chapters explore the performance of the Australian economy over the past three decades; labour market change; the relationship between income and standard of living; and economic inequality. The final two chapters set out the author's suggestions for changing the current welfare system. This book should make enlightening reading for all concerned with economic or public policy in Australia.


"You can’t learn parenting from a book. What you can learn is how other parents in similar situations have handled some of the issues you face and then use this to come up with a version that works in your family." With this statement in mind, the author aims to provide parents with both practical ideas and tips on parenting today's teenagers, drawn from both his experience as a therapist and as a father. Chapters cover adolescence, and how it has changed over time; parenting practices that work and don't work; the phases of parenting; parenting adolescents; and resilient parents. The book is written in a lively style and would make interesting reading for both parents and professionals who work with parents and their adolescent children.


Now in its third edition, this practical guide outlines the legal responses to domestic violence within Australia. The first chapter gives an overview of the definitions of domestic violence, incidence and causes, myths about domestic violence, and the needs of victims. Chapter two looks at the ways in which...
criminal law in Australia responds to domestic violence, including the role and powers of police; details of the law as it relates to each state and territory are given. The Family Law Act is the focus of chapter three. The relevance of domestic violence to Family Court proceedings is examined, and the procedure for obtaining a restraining order or injunction aimed at preventing further violence is described. The final chapter examines Protection Orders. A comprehensive list of legal and other support services is given, as are details of cases and statutes mentioned in the text. This will make useful reading for anyone involved in providing services/assistance to victims of domestic violence.

Moving on without parents: Planning, transitions and sources of support for middle-aged and other adults with intellectual disability, by Christine Bigby, MacLennan and Petty, 2000.

With intellectually disabled people living longer lives, increasingly the issue of who will care for them after their parents die becomes a concern. This Australian research deals with this period of transition from parental care. The study examined the lives of 62 older people with intellectual disabilities who had remained at home with their parents until at least mid-life. Issues covered include: key person succession plans; the transition from parental care; and the post-parental care phase. Sources of support (both formal and informal) for intellectually disabled people in later life are also discussed. Numerous case studies are used throughout the text as illustrations. Detail is also given of the study's methodology and design, and additional research material in the form of tables are also included. There is a substantial bibliography. This book would prove valuable to anyone working with, or caring for, older people with intellectual disabilities.


Written for professionals who work in child protection and related fields, this book is a compilation of chapters written by experts from a range of disciplines. The book is divided into four sections. Section One, Prevalence and Prediction, contains chapters on recognising changes in incidence and prevalence of child abuse, followed by individual chapters which look at predicting fatal child abuse and neglect, physical maltreatment, emotional abuse and sexual abuse. Section Two focuses on primary and secondary prevention. Topics covered include the etiology of child maltreatment, the treatment of child abuse and neglect, parent education and positive parenting, home visiting, and social policy and child protection. Sections Three and Four both look at tertiary prevention, with Section Three focusing on how to help children and families affected by child abuse, and Section Four examining working with offenders. This book would make a valuable addition to the professional reading for all of those working in the area of child abuse prevention, as well as students in this and related fields.


This book outlines the history of interracial marriage within Australia. Using a chronological approach, the author begins with a brief discussion of interracial marriages between 1788–1900, followed by a further chapter covering the years 1901–1950. The decades from the 1950s to the 1990s are discussed in more detail, with a chapter devoted to each. For this project, the author interviewed more than 100 couples, and a number of their adult (or near adult) children. Excerpts from these interviews are used throughout the book, and a number of chapters are devoted specifically to the children of interracial couples. Themes examined throughout the text include government policy, community views and attitudes, effects of an interracial marriage on immediate and extended family, coping with differences (including cultural and religious), and in some cases, reasons for relationship breakdowns. Written in an engaging style, this book would be useful for professionals who work with interracial couples, as well as anyone contemplating such a relationship.

Carole Jean is the Reference Librarian in the Institute's Family Information Centre.
1–4 October 2002
The Worlds of Research
Blue Mountains, NSW
This conference from the Australian Association of Social Research has the theme The Worlds of Research: Coinciding and Colliding. Papers will focus on Methodological collisions; Functional collisions – industry and academia; and Disciplinary collisions.
Further information: Elaine West, Humanities and Social Sciences, Charles Sturt University, Locked Bag 678, Wagga Wagga NSW 2678. Phone: (02) 6933 2664. Email: elwest@csu.edu.au. Web: www.socialresearch.org.au/200 2.htm

2–4 October 2002
Australia’s Demographic Future
University of New South Wales
The Eleventh National Conference of the Australian Population Association, entitled “2020 Vision: Australia’s Demographic Future,” will cover a diverse range of population issues, both in Australia and internationally.
Further information: Dr Nick Parr, APA Conference 2002, PO Box A1026, Sydney South NSW 1235. Phone: (02) 9850 8570. Email: nparr@efs.mq.edu.au. Web: www.gisca.adelaide.edu.au/apa/natconf.html

4–5 October 2002
Early Childhood Matters
Melbourne, Vic
The Early Childhood Matters Conference from the Department of Human Services, Victoria, has the theme: Starting Strong: Making the most of the first eight years.
Further information: Early Childhood Matters Conference, Department of Human Services, Level 1, 555 Collins Street, Melbourne 3000. Phone: (03) 9616 8516. Email: earlychildhoodmatters@dhs.vic.gov.au. Web: www.dhs.vic.gov.au/earlychildhoodmatters

8–11 October 2002
Connecting Families and Communities
Darwin, NT
Hosted in the Year of the Outback, and open to all practitioners, managers and researchers interested in family relationships and family support services, Connecting Families and Communities: Family Services Australia Conference will examine the role of family relationships service providers in connecting families and communities.
Further information: Family Services Australia, PO Box 326, Deakin West ACT 2600. Phone: (02) 6281 1788. Fax: (02) 6281 1794. Email: fsa@fsa.org.au. Web: www.fsa.org.au

10–11 October 2002
Healthy Justice
Sydney, NSW
Addressing the impact of the justice system on the health of children, young people and their families, this conference from the Association for the Welfare of Child Health is a priority conference for everyone concerned with developments in the psycho-social care of children and young people who experience the justice system.
Further information: Ms Louise Pitney, Conference Secretariat, Conference Action Pty Ltd, PO Box 576, Crows Nest NSW 2065. Phone: (02) 9437 9333. Fax: (02) 9901 4586. Email: lily.fair@angelfire.com

10–11 October 2002
Mental Health and Separation from Family
Liverpool, NSW
The First National Conference on Mental Health of Persons Affected by Family Separation will be the first of its kind to address the extensive mental health issues of persons affected by family separation, through adoption, state wardship etc. The conference will involve the participation of mental health professionals, non-government organisations, and groups such as Origins Inc., Supporting People Separated by Adoption, Indigenous groups, and Care Leavers of Australia Network (CLAN).
Further information: Lily Arthur or Dian Welfare, Origins Inc, Mental Health Conference, 33 Chadwick Crescent, Fairfield West, NSW 2165. Phone: (02) 9604 7006 or (02) 9560 8808. Email: lily.fair@angelfire.com
Contemporary issues in family research

In 2002, the Australian Institute of Family Studies is continuing its series of seminars presenting research on national and international issues related to family. The seminars are designed to promote a forum for discussion and debate, and are free and open to the public.

Seminars are held at 11.30 a.m. (usually on the third Thursday of each month) in the Seminar Room on the ground floor of the Institute, at 300 Queen Street, Melbourne 3000. They run from one to one-and-a-half hours.

Seminars coordinators for 2002 are Institute researchers Judy Hughes and Kelly Hand. People wishing to attend a particular seminar should phone Grace Soriano at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, Phone (03) 9214 7888.

SEMINAR PROGRAM

■ 15 AUGUST 2002
   The fourth round follow-up of the Wards Leaving Care Study: 4-5 years after they have left
   Dr Judy Cashmore
   Honorary Research Associate
   Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales
   Facilitator – Sarah Wise, Australian Institute of Family Studies

■ 19 SEPTEMBER 2002
   The effects of time pressure on mothers’ health
   Dr Michael Bittman
   Senior Research Fellow
   Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales
   Facilitator – Matthew Gray, Australian Institute of Family Studies

■ 17 OCTOBER 2002
   Life Chances and policy outcomes
   Janet Taylor and Alex Fraser
   Research Coordinator and Research Assistant
   Brotherhood of St Laurence, Melbourne
   Facilitator – Christine Millward, Australian Institute of Family Studies

■ 21 NOVEMBER 2002
   Motherhood and the challenge of immigrant mothers
   Dr Pranee Liamputtong Rice
   Reader/Associate Professor
   School of Public Health, La Trobe University
   Facilitator – Sarah Wise, Australian Institute of Family Studies

■ 12 DECEMBER 2002
   Effects of multiple child care arrangements on young children: Early findings from the Child Care Choices Longitudinal Study
   Sarah Wise
   Principal Research Fellow
   Australian Institute of Family Studies
   Facilitator – Kelly Hand, Australian Institute of Family Studies

Further information: Kerry-Anne Hoad, ACER Professional Development Unit, 347 Camberwell Road, Camberwell VIC 3124. Phone: (03) 9835 7402. Fax: (03) 9835 7499. Email: conference@acer.edu.au. Web: www.acer.edu.au
behaviours; managing early warning signs; relapse prevention; and recovery and hope.

Further information: LyndaTrevenar, Conference Coordinator, The Meeting Planners, 91-97 Islington Street Collingwood, Vic 3066. Phone: (03) 9417 0888. Fax: (03) 9417 0899. Email: carers@meetingplanners.com.au. Web: www.carersconference.info/

26–31 October 2002 Youth and Family Judges and Magistrates Melbourne, Vic

This is the 16th World Congress of the International Association of Youth and Family Judges and Magistrates, a non-government organisation that represents worldwide efforts to deal with family matters and the protection of children and young people and their families, and with the criminal behaviour and developmental and adjustment problems of youth. The congress theme is “Forging the Links”; and sub-themes are: 100 years of juvenile justice; Children in vulnerable circumstances; Judicial decision making in child, youth and family law; Participation of children and young people.

Further information: The Meeting Planners, 91-97 Islington Street, Collingwood Vic 3066. Phone: (03) 9417 0888. Fax: (03) 93417 0899. Web: www.youthandfamily2002.com/

27–30 October 2002 Ageing Perth, WA

The International Federation on Ageing Sixth Global Conference and Expo will offer an international perspective of ageing trends and issues. It will draw together people from developed and developing countries to discuss what the future holds for older people and develop strategies to better meet their needs. “Maturity Matters” is the theme, and an interactive program is planned that will challenge the myths around ageing.

Further information: Secretariat: Congress West Pty Ltd, PO Box 1248, West Perth WA 6872. Phone: +61 8 9322 6662 or +61 8 9322 6906. Fax: +61 8 9322 1734. Email: IFA@congresswest.com.au. Web: www.congresswest.com.au/IFA/

27–31 October 2002 Child Migration New Orleans, USA

The First International Congress on Child Migration is a long awaited development to discuss and debate the many implications of child migration and its contemporary resonance in our local and global communities. The conference theme is “Return, Reunite and Reconcile” – a 21st century global opportunity to open the door to change.

Further information: Sue Jaques, The Child Migrants Trust, 28a Musters Road, West Bridford, Nottinghamshire NG2 7PL, UK. Phone:+44 (0) 115 982 2811. Fax +44 (0) 115 981 7168. Email: sue@jaques.foxworld.co.uk

29 October 2 November 2002 Child and Adolescent Psychiatry New Delhi, India

The 15th International Congress of the International Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Allied Professions, is being hosted by the Indian Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health.

Further information: Email: secretariat@childindia.org. Web: www.childindia.org/index.html

30 October – 1 November 2002 Family Support Services Sydney, NSW

The theme of the Family Support Services Association Conference is “Practising wisdom: How do we do what we do?” Workshops are planned in the areas of Management/organisational sustainability; Professional practice; Child and family casework issues; and Group work programs.

Further information: FSSA, PO Box 223, Glebe NSW 2037. Fax: (02) 8512 9866. Web: www.fssansw.asn.au

30 October – 1 November 2002 Evaluation in Practice Wollongong, NSW

This Second International Conference of the Australasian Evaluation Society, “Evaluation in Practice: Making a Difference”, will examine the role and contribution of evaluation to social justice, environmental management and economic development.

Further information: Australasian Evaluation Society. Phone: (02) 6262 9093. Fax: (02) 6262 9095. Email: aessocfieozemail.com.au. Web: www.aes.asn.au

7 November 2002 Youth Mental Health Care Brisbane, Qld

The aim of the Youth in Mind: Youth Mental Health Care in General Practice Forum is to provide the opportunity for discussion of the role of General Practice and Divisions in addressing mental health issues affecting young people.

Further information: Fax: (02) 6251 3390. Email: youthinmind@adgp.com.au. Web: http://ndya.adgp.com.au/

7–9 November 2002 Early Childhood Melbourne, Vic

“Honouring the child, honouring equity: Risking change to make a difference” – this conference has the following key themes: Risking change in theory, practice, policy and research for equity and children’s rights; Risking change in theory, practice, policy and research for honouring children.

Further information: Gayle Pung, Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood, University of Melbourne. Phone: (03) 834 40958. Fax: (03) 8344 0995. Email g.pung@unimelb.edu.au. Web: www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/LED/CEIEC/welcome.html

8 November 2002 Friendships and Relationships Edinburgh, Scotland

To be held at the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships at the University of Edinburgh, this national conference will bring together key experts to explore “Friendships and Relationships across the Lifecourse”.

Further information: CRFR, 23 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh, EH8 9LN. Phone: 0131-651-1832. Email: crfr@ed.ac.uk. Web: www.crfr.ac.uk/

8–9 November 2002 Early Childhood Melbourne, Vic

The “Critical Early Childhood Years: Rethinking current interventions and strategies” conference will be hosted by the Queen Elizabeth Centre, Melbourne. The conference will have the following themes: Care and education in early childhood; New understandings of early childhood; High needs families and high risk infants; and Prevention and early intervention for parents and children: building parenting competence.

Further information: Conference Secretariat, Gini Solutions: Phone: (03) 9859 5508. Mobile phone: 0419 178 138. Fax: (03) 9859 0519. Email: ginisolutions @bigpond.com.

14–16 November 2002 Effects of Early Stress Sydney, NSW

Frozen Futures: A Conference Exploring the Effects of Early Stress on Later Outcomes comes from The Australian Association for Infant Mental Health Inc and National Investment for the Early Years. Themes are: Effects of stress in early childhood; and Prenatal influence on subsequent life course.

Further information: AAIMHI/NIFTeY Conference Secretariat, Conference Action Pty Ltd, PO Box 576, Crows Nest NSW 2065. Email: confact@conferenceaction.com.au

19–24 November 2002 Family Relations Houston, TX, USA

The theme of the 64th Annual Conference of the National Council on Family Relations is Families Over the Life Course: Bridging Research and Practice. The focus will be on the following questions: Is strengthening marriage to reduce the divorce rate a workable strategy for policy and intervention? How can we foster resiliency in children and adolescents in low income families? Is parent and child
wellbeing getting better or worse under welfare reform? What are future prospects for increasing father involvement in child rearing and household activities? What can be done to enhance long-term caregiving of elders by their family members? What are successful approaches to university–community collaborations to enhance child and parent wellbeing?

Further information: National Council on Family Relations, 3989 Central Avenue, NE, Suite 550, Minneapolis, MN 55421, USA.

25 November 2002
Ageing Research
Brisbane, Qld

The Australasian Centre on Ageing, a collaborative research initiative by the University of Queensland and the Office of Ageing, Families, Youth and Community Care, Queensland, will present ERA 2002 – a forum for emerging researchers in ageing. The forum will address “Different Disciplines, Different Methodologies in Ageing Research.”

Further information: ERA 2002 Forum Coordinator, Australasian Centre on Ageing, University of Queensland, Connell Building, St Lucia Qld 4072. Phone: 3346 9084. Email: aca@uq.edu.au. Web: www.uq.edu.au/aca/

25–27 November 2002
Regional Australia
Queanbeyan, ACT

Sustainable Economic Growth for Regional Australia (SEGRA 2002) will focus on how regional and local communities can make economic growth in their region happen by attracting and retaining better business, better infrastructure and better regional services leading to sustainable employment and regional growth.

Further information: SEGRA Secretariat, Management Solutions (Qld) Pty Ltd, GPO Box 2301, Brisbane Qld 4001. Phone: 3210 0021. Fax: 3210 0044. Email: mansol@bigpond.com. Web: www.users.bigpond.com/mansol

28–29 November 2002
ACOSS National Congress
Hobart, Tas

The theme of the annual congress of the Australian Council of Social Service is “A Fair and Inclusive Australia.”


1–4 December 2002
Students with Disabilities
Sydney, NSW

The Pathways 6 Conference will focus on issues of access, participation and outcomes for students with disabilities in education and training settings. The theme “Inclusive Education Through Universal Access” has been chosen to highlight the progression of inclusive practices in education for students with disabilities and to build frameworks for implementing these practices in a range of environments.

Further information: Conference Organisers, International Conferences and Events (ICE) Aust Pty Ltd, 178 Princes Highway, Sylvania, Sydney, NSW 2224. Phone: (02) 9544 9134. Fax: (02) 9522 4447. Email: pathways@icem australia.com. Web: www.iceaustralia.com/pathways/

16–19 January 2003
Home Economics
Adelaide, SA

This conference will enable participants to reflect on and debate contemporary issues that surround individuals and families in their everyday activities, and reflect on and revitalise their skills.

Further information: Christina Tassell, HEIA Conference Manager, 13 Baudin Avenue, Fairview Park SA 5126. Phone: (08) 8251 2404. Fax: (08) 8270 2550. Email: ctassell@oac.sa.edu.au.

19–23 February 2003
Family Day Care
Wellington, NZ

The New Zealand Family Day Care Association and the International Family Day Care Organisation invite you to the Seventh International Family Day Care Organisation Conference.

Further information: Lyn Foote, Dunedin College of Education, Private Bag, Dunedin NZ. Phone: +64 3 477 2289. Fax: +64 3 477 6573. Email: lyn.foote@dcetace.ac.nz

21–23 February 2003
Youth Justice System
Bond University, Gold Coast, Qld

Hosted by Legal Aid Queensland, the Making the Youth Justice System Work Better conference will identify best practice in youth justice. It aims to present a young person’s perspective on the issues and focus on the high representation of Indigenous youth in the youth justice system. Key topics areas will include the place of education and familial networks in the lives of young people who are in, or at risk of entering, the youth justice system.

Further information: Jo McDonald, Legal Aid Queensland. Phone: (07) 3238 3024. Fax: (07) 3229 7067. Email: jmcdonal legalaid. qld.gov.au.

21–26 February 2003
Mental Health
Melbourne, Vic

The World Federation for Mental Health Congress Biennial 2003 is hosted by the Mental Health Foundation of Australia. The objective of the Congress is to provide a forum for practitioners and researchers from around the world to communicate current developments and advancements in the field of mental health and psychiatry.


CALL FOR PAPERS

Steps forward for families: Research, practice and policy

8th AIFS Conference

Submissions are invited from people interested in presenting papers, symposia or workshops at the Eighth Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference. The conference will provide a valuable forum for those interested or involved in family research, family policy, or providing services to families in Australia. It will feature the presentation and discussion of findings of the Institute’s own studies, along with work from a wide range of researchers, government bodies, service providers and community organisations.

Further information: Jo McDonald, Legal Aid Queensland. Phone: (07) 3238 3024. Fax: (07) 3229 7067. Email: jmcdonal legalaid. qld.gov.au.

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1–4 March 2003
Rural Health
Hobart, Tas
The theme of the Seventh National Rural Health Conference is “The Art and Science of Healthy Community: Sharing country know-how”.
Further information: Seventh National Rural Health Conference, PO Box 280, Deakin West ACT 2600. Phone: (02) 6285 4660. Fax: (02) 6285 4670. Email: conference@ruralhealth.org.au. Web: www.ruralhealth.org.au

18–21 March 2003
Alzheimer’s Conference
Melbourne, Vic
“Today’s challenges, tomorrow’s choices” is the theme of the 2003 Alzheimer’s Australia National Conference to be hosted by Alzheimer’s Association Victoria.
Further information: Alzheimer’s Association of Australia, PO Box 108, Higgins ACT 2615. Phone: (02) 6254 4233. Fax: (02) 6278 7225. Email: secretariat@alzheimers.org.au. Web: www.alzheimers.org.au/

27–29 March 2003
Teaching Boys
Newcastle, NSW
Boys to Fine Men: School and Community Partnerships is sponsored by the Boys in School Program and the Engaging Fathers Project of the Family Action Centre, The University of Newcastle and the NSW Department of Education and Training. Conference themes include: Engaging boys: building on boys’ strengths in the educational process; Boys and literacies: building on home, school and community partnerships; Welfare and behaviour: building partnerships for developing resilience and purpose in boys.
Further information: Tulips Meetings Management, PO Box 116, Sylvania Bay NSW 2317. Phone: (02) 4984 2554. Fax: (02) 4984 2755. Email: boys@pco.com.au. Web: www.pco.com.au/boys2003/

7–8 April 2003
Home and Community Care
Launceston, Tas
The theme of this Home and Community Care (HACC) Service Providers State Conference is “Dare to be Different”.
Further information: Community Options Service (North), 233B Charles Street, Launceston Tas. Email: com.options@dhhs.tas.gov.au

1–4 May 2003
Early Childhood
Adelaide, SA
This conference, “Our Children the Future 3”, is an initiative of the Government of South Australia. It will bring together early childhood professionals involved in the care and education of children throughout South Australia, interstate and overseas. The conference theme “Respect Connect Reflect” embodies the ideals that will be reflected throughout the conference.
Further information: Secretariat, Department of Education, Training and Employment, GPO Box 1152, Adelaide SA 5000. Phone: (08) 8226 9548. Fax: (08) 8226 0099. Email: octf@sa.gov.au.

5–7 May 2003
Social Security Research
Brussels
Organised as part of the International Social Security Association’s research program, the Fourth International Research Conference on Social Security will focus on the new challenges generated by a “long life society”, with special emphasis on new roles for families in a multi-generational and ageing society; on reassessing work and retirement in a long life society; on adapting social security schemes to the challenges of a long life society; and on the effects of migration in an ageing society.
Further information: International Social Security Association (ISSA), Case postale 1, CH-1211 Geneva 22, Switzerland. Fax: +41 22 799 9509. Email: issaRC@ilo.org. Web: www.issa.int/engl/home.htm

21–26 June 2003
Family Violence
Prague, Czech Republic
Organised by the International Network on Family Violence (INVF), the Second World Conference on Family Violence will have the theme: Protecting Every Generation: Sharing solutions that prevent child abuse, spouse/partner abuse, and elder abuse.

7–11 July 2003
Sociology
Beijing, P.R. China
The theme of the 36th World Congress of the International Institute of Sociology will be “Social Change in the Age of Globalisation”. The host institute will be the Institute of Sociology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, which covers not only sociological and anthropological issues, but also social psychology, social policy and youth studies.
Further information: 36th World Congress, International Institute of Sociology, Institute of Sociology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 5 Jianguomen Nei Dajie, Beijing 100732, P.R. China. Fax: (86 10) 6513 3870. Email: iossass@public.bta.net.cn. Forthcoming Web: www.iis2003.beijing.com.cn

9–11 July 2002
Narrative Therapy
University of Liverpool, UK
The International Narrative Therapy and Community Work Conference is being organised by Dulwich Centre Publications and the Centre for Narrative Practice (Sheffield, UK).
Further information: Dulwich Centre Publications, Hutt St PO Box 7192, Adelaide SA 5000. Phone: (08) 822 33966. Fax: (08) 8232 4441. Email: dulwich@senet.com.au. Web: www.dulwichcentre.com.au/ukconference.html

20–23 July 2003
Child Abuse and Neglect
University of York, England
The theme of the Fifth National Conference of the British Association for the Study and Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect is Strengthening the Links – Research Policy and Practice: How effectively does research influence policy and enhance practice?
Further information: BASPCAN National Office, 10 Priory Street, York, YO1 6EZ, UK. Phone: +44 (0) 1904 613605. Fax: +44 (0) 1904 642239. Email: congress@basp can.org.uk. Web: www.baspcan.org.uk

24–27 November 2003
Child Abuse and Neglect
Sydney, NSW
The Ninth Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect will be hosted by the New South Wales Department of Community Services. This special event brings together people from across Australia who work to strengthen communities and families to protect children and young people.
Further information: Jeanette Morgan, Conference Manager, Department of Community Services, New South Wales. Phone: (02) 9209 6229. Fax: (02) 9209 6233. Email: jeanette.morgan@community.nsw.gov.au.

September 2004
Child Abuse and Neglect
Brisbane, Qld
The National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect is hosting the 15th International Congress on Child Abuse and Neglect in partnership with the International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPSCAN).
Further information: National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, PO Box K241, Haymarket NSW 1240. Phone: (02) 9211 0224. Fax: (02) 9211 5676. Email: napcanaus@aol.com. Web: www.napcan.org.au/News%20&%20Events.shtml
In the field of marriage and relationships research there has been a preoccupation with relationship breakdown and dissolution, which has tended to obscure the body of literature that explores the reasons why many marriages are enduring, satisfying and happy.

Drawing on this literature, Why marriages last discusses some of what is known about why many marriages last for very long periods and considers how knowledge of the ways in which marriages can be made to last can help young couples create and maintain their own enduring and rewarding marriages.

The paper is not intended to provide a critical analysis of the literature on long-lasting marriages. Rather, it aims to draw attention to the body of literature available on how enduring and rewarding marriages can be created and maintained.


Growing up in Australia

A major new study has commenced at the Institute. The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) will gather comprehensive, national Australian data on all the important domains of a child’s life – their experiences within their families and communities, their health, their child care experiences, and the early years of their education. As such, this study is a major step towards building the evidence base on which to develop sound policies in areas concerning children.

This landmark study was initiated and funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services as part of the Government’s Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. It will follow two cohorts of children: the first, a minimum of 5000 children aged 0–1 year will be followed every two years until they reach 6–7 years of age in 2009; the second, a minimum of 5000 children aged 4–5 years will be followed every two years until they reach 11–12 years of age in 2009.

Introducing the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children: LSAC Discussion Paper No. 1 is the first publication from the study. It focuses on the research questions that LSAC is designed to address, and how they will be addressed. To provide a context for these, the paper gives a rationale for the study, a description of the organisational structure of the consortium that will implement it, and an outline of the study’s design. The study will address the following seven broad questions:

- How well are Australian children doing on a number of key developmental outcomes?
- What are the pathway markers, early indicators, or constellations of behaviours that are related to different child outcomes?
- How are child outcomes interlinked with their wider circumstances and environment?
- In what ways do features of children’s environment (such as families, communities, and institutions) impact on child outcomes?
- What helps maintain an effective pathway, or change one that is not promising?
- How is a child’s potential maximised to achieve positive outcomes for children, their families and society?
- What role can the government play in achieving these outcomes?

The paper provides readers with an understanding of the potential of this study to make a unique contribution to research, policy and practice regarding young Australians and their families.


Marriages that last

In the field of marriage and relationships research there has been a preoccupation with relationship breakdown and dissolution, which has tended to obscure the body of literature that explores the reasons why many marriages are enduring, satisfying and happy.

Drawing on this literature, Why marriages last discusses some of what is known about why many marriages last for very long periods and considers how knowledge of the ways in which marriages can be made to last can help young couples create and maintain their own enduring and rewarding marriages.

The paper is not intended to provide a critical analysis of the literature on long-lasting marriages. Rather, it aims to draw attention to the body of literature available on how enduring and rewarding marriages can be created and maintained.

The papers in this volume are developed from those first presented at a workshop held at the Australian Institute of Family Studies in February 2001. The meeting contributed to the establishment of the Australian Research Alliance on Children and Youth, and of the nine-member consortium which successfully tendered for the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC).

The three papers in *Children’s health and development: New research directions for Australia*, form an essential part of the background to the Institute’s involvement in the Alliance and LSAC.

We know that the complex intersecting influences on children’s development fall into the province of medical researchers, psychologists, educators, sociologists, economists and others. Input from all these provinces is needed if we are to understand truly the causal pathways to good and poor developmental outcomes.

The first paper, by Fiona Stanley, Ann Sanson and Tony McMichael, argues for why interdisciplinary research is now so crucial. The second paper, by Graham Vimpani, George Patton and Alan Hayes, makes the case for the importance of experiences and environments in the early years for outcomes across the lifespan, and for the effectiveness of early intervention. The third paper, by Jan Nicholson, Ann Sanson, Lynn Rempel, Diana Smart and George Patton, helps to frame the role of the proposed new study by summarising existing longitudinal research on children in Australia and overseas.


**HOW TO ACCESS THESE PUBLICATIONS**

These three free publications are available online at the Institute’s website [www.aifs.gov.au](http://www.aifs.gov.au), or in print by returning the attached order form, with payment of postage to the Institute.

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