Refining our understanding of family relationships

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The complexity of defining what or who constitutes a family is well known. With increasing variability in family structure and type over time, the idea of achieving a single, workable definition appears elusive for researchers, service providers and policy-makers alike. Yet it isn't just professionals who struggle with defining family. A crude method of identifying the broader community's difficulty is to examine the latest entry for "family" in the online collaborative encyclopaedia *Wikipedia*, which is put together by volunteers who are mostly informed lay people. In the article, there are vague references to different elements and ways of thinking about family, including economic, political, social and kinship aspects. Associated links cover an extensive range of topics, and reference is also made to the significant variability of families across cultures. Discussion behind the article is lengthy and further illustrates the differing and often conflict-inducing views of the contributors, including questions as to whether the article portrays reality or whether to scrap it and start again.[1]

One view, as proposed by Families Australia,[2] cuts through these debates to suggest that families are what individuals define them to be. As such, family can be a fluid concept that may have markedly different meanings to different individuals, even those living under the same roof. When extended families are taken into account, the challenge of definition is magnified. De Vaus (2004) pointed out that networks of family members beyond the household are an important part of families in Australia, and the extended family network is a key assumption of many family policies, such as those associated with the provision of care and support to other family members.

In some cultures, for example Māori, Italian and East Asian, extended families are considered the basic family unit. This is also true for Indigenous Australians, for whom "immediate" family members include aunts, uncles and many other relatives less likely to be considered close relatives in the Western concept of family. Such extended families are also likely to include not just those related by blood but also "fictive kin"—those who are given the title of a family member and then treated in ways implied by that title, such as a family friend being called "uncle".

Different age groups may also view families in different ways. In one New Zealand study, adolescents viewed affective factors—such as love, caring and support—as being more important criteria for belonging in a family than legal status or the presence of two parents (Anyan & Pryor, 2002). In a similar study of children (Rigg & Pryor, 2006), the majority had an image of family that did not mirror a traditional nuclear family form; affective factors were again most important. These findings, along with changing attitudes towards marriage and growing acceptance of cohabitation (Qu & Weston, 2008), may indicate generational changes in views of the important characteristics that define a family.

Values and belief systems can also lead people to understand family in a variety of ways, and often in a highly emotionally charged manner. Some ideas around particular types of family relationships may persist, or a simplistic view of a more complex relationship may be held, even after research and literature has indicated otherwise. These ideas may contribute to less satisfactory relationships between people if they hold different views about what constitutes a "real" family.

Another important point is not just the way in which we define family, but what constitutes the "ideal" or "proper" family. Smart (2005) drew a distinction between the family we "live with" and the ideal family that we "live by". An example that she used is the grandmother who thinks that modern-day couples who divorce lack commitment and dedication, yet feels that there are genuine reasons why her own child has divorced. Smart highlighted family policies in the UK, which are complex and sometimes contradictory, and argued that despite this, the policies can be seen as being appropriate, given that there are no clearly defined rules and obligations regarding family life. As Smart states: "voicing support for the supremacy of heterosexual marriage, while providing support for post-divorce families, offering tangible protection to cohabitees or initiating civil partnership legislation for same-sex couples, may be exactly the kind of contradictions with which families are well adjusted to living" (p. 554). Policies need to be responsive and dynamic in terms of the issues surrounding the ways in which people understand families.

Many good examples of persisting myths that are related to families and the "ideal" way in which people expect them to operate exist around adolescents and their relationships with parents. In the early 1900s, adolescence was viewed by psychologist G. Stanley Hall as a time of "storm and stress" and inevitable conflict, and this became a common understanding, deeply embedded in Western culture, of this period of development. Yet empirical studies since the 1950s have shown the limitations of the concept, and many attempts have been made by the research community to show that while a minority of young people experience stress and turbulence, many more adjust relatively well (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). One of the key factors in positive development during adolescence—family connectedness—is reflected in the literature on resilience. Relationships are one of the fundamental underpinnings to resilience, particularly those with primary caregivers and those characterised by warmth and support combined with appropriate control or discipline (Luthar, 2006).



While defining family is difficult, there is a need to have a broad societal perspective on family to help create a common understanding and shared goals for family health and wellbeing.

Research indicates that the autonomy strived for in adolescence is established more easily against a backdrop of secure relationships, such as those with primary caregivers, rather than at the expense of them (Allen et al., 2003). A key concept related to family relationships in adolescence is that of the "secure base", which is a concept more traditionally associated with infancy and early childhood. A secure base—an attachment figure who serves as a safe place to return to after exploration—is more of an emotional and cognitive support during adolescence and less of the physical support that is provided in infancy by caregivers.

As such, strong relationships with parents are not just likely to be present but have an integral role to play in helping adolescents achieve autonomy. As eminent psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1986) once suggested, every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her. With troubled young people, however, one secure relationship may not be enough, as the risk is higher that relationships will disintegrate (Seita & Brendtro, 2003). Addressing this need may often require adults to tread a fine line between respecting a young person's emerging autonomy and being proactive enough to step in when things get tough, even if the intervention is unwelcome. Charles & Nelson (2000), in their article on permanency planning for young people in out-of-home care, found that being adolescent did not necessarily stop a young person from wanting to be adopted or to have a permanent family connection. This indicates that adolescents need to have a family to separate *from*, which is often compromised by their removal from their families in the first place. This need may in part explain the phenomena of young people often choosing to return to an abusive or neglectful home once released from care (Bath, 2000), indicating the strength of their connection to family may be stronger than any immediate need for security or comfort.

Research such as this characterises the complexity of adolescent–parent relationships beyond a common view that peers, and consequently romantic partners, become the more important source of support as children mature. The article in this edition of *Family Matters* by Vassallo, Smart, and Price-Robertson uses data from the Australian Temperament Project to examine how Australian parents see their role as their children become young adults. Of particular interest is the finding that young adults perceived that their parents provided far more support, and indicated a stronger connection to their parents than perceived by the parents themselves. This strengthens the notion that parents are, in fact, still a significant influence in their children's lives well into the adolescent and young adult years.

A number of other articles in this edition of *Family Matters* seek to elucidate the nature and characteristics of particular types of family relationships. Buchler, Baxter, Haynes, and Western take an important step in recognising cohabiting couples as a heterogenous group, by developing a typology of cohabiters based on marital history and current intention to marry. A number of other factors, such as age, years of schooling and religiosity, are considered in the article to differentiate these groups. Levels of satisfaction with relationships and life in general and the intention to have children or not are key examples of the ways in which cohabiters are differentiated.

Cashmore and Parkinson further examine one of the more pertinent issues in contemporary family research—the child's voice in decisions around post-separation parenting. The importance of listening to children's views is becoming more accepted, particularly as children are given the increasing opportunity to articulate their views and parents have the opportunity to hear. Yet Cashmore and Parkinson also highlight that one of the greatest difficulties is giving children a voice, while at the same time limiting their exposure to manipulation and pressure by parents.

One particular relationship for which there is still a comparatively limited literature base is that between step-children and step-parents; in particular, what differentiates positive and negative relationships. Cartwright, Farnsworth, and Mobley sift out some of the more subtle ingredients that characterise relationships between children and step-parents by using a series of in-depth interviews that take a retrospective look at these connections. This qualitative analysis gleans important information on step-parent practices that are experienced positively and those that work less well with the children involved. The study appears to support the importance of step-parents treading gently in the early years of their relationships with step-children, by playing less of a parenting and more of a friendship role.

Step-families are good examples of the ways in which families redefine themselves and their roles over time. Families in general are continually redefined as members enter and leave and others age, experience changes in health, gain or lose employment, and so forth. An increasing amount of attention is being paid to carers and care recipients within families and the quality and characteristics of their lives. In an important extension of this work, Williams and Owens report on a project that set out to identify best practice models and services that could benefit the wellbeing of carers, identify priorities for carer support and outline a research agenda. Practice, policy and research implications of the study are addressed.

In her article on sole-parent families, Robinson calls for a more nuanced understanding of the needs of the growing demographic of sole parents and their children. Sole parenting is a key example of a type of family for which attitudes and stigma continue to exist, which can affect outcomes for children and adults. Ongoing consideration of research in this area is needed to continually refine what it is about sole parenting that leads to poorer outcomes for some children, so that appropriate and effective policy and practice responses can be provided.

While defining family is difficult, there is a need to have a broad societal perspective on family to help create a common understanding and shared goals for family health and wellbeing. More specific investigations of family relationships delivered through research, however, can allow us to develop policy or embark on practices under the broad umbrella of "family" with a more sophisticated understanding of family relationships. The articles in this edition of *Family Matters* offer a snapshot of research that endeavours to provide some more subtle ways of understanding and responding to families.

An additional article in this edition, contributed by Boyd Hunter, queries the concept of social inclusion and its relevance to the unique disadvantage experienced by Indigenous Australians. While definitions and explanations of social inclusion and exclusion are becoming more commonplace in literature, Hunter challenges the notion by exploring recent interventions designed to alleviate Indigenous disadvantage. While not specifically examining family relationships, Hunter's article is relevant when we consider the intricate relationship between Indigenous families, their place and culture, and the collective nature of Indigenous family and community. He calls for local decision-making and a consideration of cultural issues to be incorporated into social inclusion initiatives.

We hope you enjoy the diverse portraits of family life featured in this edition and that they help to contribute to the refinement of policy and practice to the benefit of all families.

Endnotes

1 See <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Family>.

2 Families Australia (n.d.). *What is a family?* Barton, ACT: Author. Retrieved 3 April 2009, from <www.familiesaustralia.org.au/familiesweek/familiestoday.htm>.

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