

## Program Area B: Family and Marriage

In order to perform their various functions, families have to stay together over a sustained period of time. To do this, they have to develop strategies for living together and they have to adjust successfully to change. Research in this program looks at how this is achieved. The focus is at the 'meso level' – at the family as a functioning unit – and projects seek to understand how stable families come to be formed, how they succeed in managing problems and in adapting to change, and how the break-up of families can best be managed when they can no longer function successfully.

Research in the *Family and Marriage Program* focuses on two distinct sets of concerns. One addresses the factors promoting positive family relationships, while the other is more concerned with issues pertaining to family law.

### Positive family relationships

The focus here is how strong and stable families come to be formed, and how they succeed in managing problems and in adapting to change.

#### *Positive marriage and family relationships (existing core project)*

In 1999, a small qualitative pilot study was conducted to explore marriage from the perspective of people who are in long-term marriages. A series of focus groups was run, during which participants discussed what marriage meant, their perceptions of how marriage has changed, and its current status among younger couples and society in general. The findings of this study have been published in *Family Matters* (Autumn 2000) and were presented at the Family Strengths Conference (University of Newcastle, November 1999) and the International Conference on Personal Relationships (University of Queensland, June 2000).

Linked to this project was the September 1999 roundtable (co-hosted with the Australian Catholic University) on research issues in the field of marriage and relationship education. Based on the proceedings from this roundtable, the Institute published a Briefing Paper which will be the basis for a panel discussion at the Marriage and Relationship Education National Conference next year.

This pilot study also laid the basis for the development of two new, linked, core projects.

#### *Relationship trajectories (new core project)*

Taking advantage of the Institute's new Australian Family Panel Survey, a longitudinal study of the trajectory of relationship satisfaction has been designed with the aim of investigating the effects of a range of individual and couple characteristics on the short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes of both marital and de facto relationships. This project will monitor changes in respondents' relationship satisfaction and stability over time, allowing some of the key factors associated with relationship success and dissolution to be identified and investigated.

#### *Typology of premarriage education programs (new core project)*

One of the factors that may contribute to relationship satisfaction and success, and which is to be measured in the panel survey, is attendance at some form of marriage or relationship education. However, there is currently great variability in the programs available to couples preparing to marry or cohabit. This small study is using information obtained from program providers to classify preparation courses according to a set of criteria drawn from the program evaluation literature. The

resulting typology codes will be added to the panel survey data to provide a further factor in the analyses of the trajectory of relationship satisfaction. This project is being conducted in collaboration with the University of South Australia's Centre for Research in Education, Equity, and Work.

## Family law

The projects undertaken in this second strand of the program focus on how the break-up of families can best be managed in the event of parental separation and/or divorce.

### ***Divorce transitions (existing core project)***

The Australian Divorce Transitions Project examines the process of divorce and its consequences for parents and children. The project includes a children's perspective on divorce.

Three guiding principles have been applied by the Institute in selecting the research issues to be addressed in this project. First, precedence was given to securing national data on the divorce transition, given that population estimates are a fundamental plank in any agenda for family law reform or for the review of services and support provisions. Second, the project focuses on particular groups among those divorcing so that any diversity in this population is recognised. And third, the project was designed to enable trend analysis by comparing recent divorce transitions with those which took place in the early 1980s and which were described in three books published by the Institute – *Settling Up*, 1986; *Settling Down*, 1993; and *Remaking Families*, 1996.

The Australian Divorce Transitions Project is currently in its dissemination phase. The findings have already played a significant role in informing important law policy and law reform debates in a number of areas including, over the past year: spousal violence and post-divorce financial outcomes, matrimonial property division, and current proposals to introduce legally binding pre-nuptial agreements. A special issue *Family Matters*, devoted to 'Families,

divorce and family law', featured findings from the project. Most recently, the Institute was invited to give a presentation of findings from this project to the Family Law Pathways Advisory Group established by the Federal Attorney-General and the Minister for Family and Community Services to report on ways of achieving a better family law system for families.

### ***Siblings and parental divorce (existing collaborative project)***

There is scant information available to the Family Court on how to make decisions in the best interests of the child, particularly when decisions can affect children from the same family differently as in the case of 'split residence' arrangements. This project aims to explore the function of the sibling relationship for children during and following the divorce of their parents with a view to assisting the Family Court in making decisions relating to residential and contact arrangements.

This non-core funded project is being undertaken in conjunction with the Family Court of Australia and the University of Queensland Family Centre. The first and second wave of data collection is now complete. The project is now in the dissemination phase.

### ***Overlapping jurisdictions in child protection (newly imported project)***

In recent years, increasing concerns have been expressed regarding jurisdictional overlaps in the area of child protection and consequent 'systems abuse' – a term used in this context to refer to emotional harm suffered by children due to duplication of processes within state and federal legal systems. As the first empirical analysis on the topic, the central aim of this study is to consider a sample of cases involving jurisdictional overlaps between the Family Court of Australia and the Melbourne Children's Court. The objective is to provide a systematic analysis of the problem, on which discussion about jurisdictional overlaps and possible reform can proceed. Data collection is underway.