

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 Program B 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.

Australian Divorce Transitions Project

This project aims to study the process of divorce and its consequences for parents; to examine the impact of divorce on an older cohort of couples for whom the issues of employment, housing, superannuation and future security are important concerns; and, as an extension of work undertaken in the Institutes's Consequences of Marriage Breakdown Study, to provide a children's perspective on divorce.

There are three aspects of the research. First, the study re-examines and extends the economic and social aspects of divorce presented in the first two volumes, *Settling Up* and *Settling Down*, emanating from the Consequences of Marriage Breakdown Study, and provides a contemporary basis for the evaluation of the impact of changes in family law and social policies over the last decade.

Second, the study examines matters of justice and equity as they relate to older people who divorce in terms of employment, retraining, social security provision and future security through superannuation entitlements, and builds on existing knowledge derived from the former Consequences of Marriage Breakdown Study.

Third, it provides a benchmark for evaluating new legislation concerning children in the *Family Law Reform Act 1995*, and informs debate in the consideration of children's views in matters concerning contact and living

arrangements, child support and wellbeing after parental separation.

Working Papers to inform policy debates on child support, matrimonial property division and superannuation, spousal support, current trends in child contact, and living arrangements are completed or in preparation.

Positive Marriage and Family Relationships

Strong and stable families are acknowledged to provide the optimum framework for children's wellbeing and the foundation for becoming responsible adults. Some of the questions policy makers and family theorists want answers to are: What are the factors that contribute to and sustain healthy marital and family relationships? and What makes strong families? The Positive Marriage and Family Relationships Pilot Study will attempt to answer these questions.

The major objectives of the pilot study are to explore the meaning and expectations that men and women have of marriage and marriage-like relationships as these images and values contribute to perceptions of marital satisfaction and may influence relationship stability; to gain an understanding of the factors and processes that contribute to satisfying marriages and family relationships as well as to those that are unhappy and may dissolve; and to use the information gained from respondents to inform policy discussions about interventions

that may promote and support strong and healthy families and prevent marriage breakdown.

The pilot study will consist mainly of 12–14 focus groups of married and de facto men and women. Some case studies will also be conducted. While group members are likely to draw on their personal experience, questions for the focus groups will be expressed in more general terms to elicit values and beliefs about marriage, de facto relationships and family life. More personal histories will be obtained from case studies.

Information gathered from study respondents will contribute to the Government's National Families Strategy.

Sibling Relationships and Adjustment to Parental Divorce

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. 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 wave of data collection is under way.

Spousal Violence and Financial Outcomes

Another non-core funded study, commissioned by the Office of the Status of Women, examined the prevalence of violence for divorced men and women and its relevance to property settlement and financial outcomes post-separation. A report has been completed and is soon to be published.