

FAMILY RESEARCH THE NEXT THREE YEARS



In February, the Australian Institute of Family Studies issued a Briefing Paper setting out some ideas for future research directions and inviting people to comment. Many did, and much of this feedback helped shape the new Research Plan which the Institute has just published. Here, PETER SAUNDERS, Research Manager of the Institute, outlines the basic contours of the new Research Plan and discusses some of the new project ideas which are now under consideration.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies has just outlined the framework for its research over the next three years.

The 1975 Family Law Act requires the Institute to carry out research which will help strengthen the stability of the Australian family, and this is the starting point for our new research plan. But what exactly does 'stability' mean?

Stability should not be confused with lack of change. In a rapidly changing society, a core institution like the family must itself be expected to develop. Institutions that do not develop and adapt as time goes by become anachronistic and stagnant. We have therefore taken 'stability' to refer, not to lack of change, but to the emergence of patterns of family life that are sustainable over time.

More specifically, a stable family is one which (a) supports the wellbeing of its individual members (particularly children), (b) functions successfully as a social unit through time, and (c) contributes positively to the wider society of which it forms a part.

These three dimensions of family stability are identified in the Institute's new Research Plan as the themes of three new research 'programs' within which all new projects will be located. All our future work will address one of these three themes: stability at the level of the individual personality of family members (the Children and Parenting Program); stability at the level of the family unit itself (the Family and Marriage Program); and stability in the relation between the family and other social institutions (the Family and Society Program).

Children and parenting program

Families in western cultures have lost many of their traditional tasks as a result of industrialisation and modernisation, but there are still two areas where they have crucial, and unique, functions to perform. First, they provide emotional gratification for adults, for most of us still look to the family to provide deep, committed and affectionate relationships, particularly in the form of enduring and exclusive sexual union between adults. Secondly, they play the crucial role in the socialisation of children.

Both of these areas are important for the Australian Institute of Family Studies to look at, but the second is the really crucial one. Above all else, the family is the basic unit for producing the next generation of Australians. It does not do this alone, of course, for the schools, the local neighbourhood and increasingly the mass media influence the ways young people think and behave, but the family is still the primary agency in rearing children.

This then points to the first core question to which the Institute will be addressing its research:

What family arrangements (or other child care arrangements) best produce well adjusted and happy children who can fulfil their potential and grow into socially responsible and well adjusted adults?

At the moment, there are two projects running at the Institute which address this question. One of them, the *Parenting-21* project, is comparing the way Australian parents from different cultural backgrounds go about raising their children (Violet Kolar reports some of the results from this study in her article elsewhere in this issue of *Family Matters*). The other, the *Looking After Children* evaluation, is looking at how best to provide a caring environment for children growing up in out-of-home care. The Institute is also host to the *National Child Protection Clearing House* which has been carrying out research on various initiatives aimed at preventing child abuse within families.

Over the next few months, we shall develop two new projects in the area of Children and Parenting as the two existing projects come to completion. There are a number of possibilities.

We could launch a major review of existing evidence, from Australia and overseas, on the influence of different family structures on children's wellbeing, for there has been a lot of research on this contentious question and we need to draw some of the threads together. Alternatively, there is a proposal that we should develop a study of fathering and how fathers balance family, work and other commitments. A strong case can also be made for continuing with our work on child care outside and beyond the family to determine the types of care arrangements, parenting styles and family circumstances that best meet children's developmental needs and which produce the best outcomes for children.

Family and marriage program

In order to perform their various functions, families obviously have to stay together over a sustained period of time. To do this, they have to develop strategies for living together (for example, division of domestic tasks, strategies for conflict resolution), and they have to adjust successfully to changes over time (for example, the birth of children, the departure of children to form new, independent households, the growing dependency of ageing parents towards the end of their lives, the transmission of property from one generation to the next).

Given its origins in the Family Law Act, the Institute has tended in the past to put more emphasis on arrangements surrounding the failure of marriages than on the factors contributing to their success. In the future, however, we seek to

strike a better balance between these two concerns and to look specifically at what it is that enables families successfully to stay together and to function well as social units. Given the growth of de facto unions, we shall also incorporate these into future research in this area.

The core question posed at this level of analysis is:

How do stable families come to be formed, how do they succeed in managing problems and in adapting to change, and what are the best arrangements for managing the break-up of families when they can no longer function successfully?

The major current work at the Institute in this area is the *Australian Divorce Transitions Project* which will run to the end of the year 2000. This project was designed to document the process of divorce and its consequences for parents while also giving a child's perspective on divorce and considering the impact of divorce on an older cohort for whom the issues of employment, housing, superannuation and future security are particularly crucial. In addition, the research has included a survey of the prevalence and nature of spousal violence for divorced women and men and its relevance to post-separation financial outcomes (that is, property settlements and living standards).

We have a number of ideas for possible successors to the *Divorce Transitions* project. One is to conduct a review of the impact of the 1975 Act, a quarter of a century on, for there is a strong case for the Institute to lead a review aimed at answering the question of whether no-fault divorce has worked better than the system it replaced and whether it has encouraged more marriages to break up than would otherwise have occurred. Another possibility is an analysis of why rates of break-up of cohabiting unmarried couples with children are so much higher than those of married couples, and a third is to study popular conceptions of 'fairness' and 'social justice' as they relate to no-fault divorce. More in-depth work on the impact of divorce on children (93 per cent of homeless children come from 'broken homes', for example), and/or the impact of divorce on subsequent family formation might also be appropriate for a new project in this area.

To complement this work on divorce and separation, we have just begun a new exploratory study into what makes for happy and stable relationships where we are trying to identify what is different about those couples who stay together and those who do not. In future we could also develop research on the effectiveness of marriage education as a safeguard against later separation.

Family and society program

As well as adjusting to internal change and development, families must also adapt to changes in their external environment. Families contribute to, and are in turn affected by, developments in the economy, changes involving government (including the welfare state), and the changing pattern of social life of the wider community.

Change in any one of these three areas will have profound effects on family stability. For example, economic change, such as a decline in the number of traditionally male manual jobs, will force an adjustment in the way men and women organise their roles and responsibilities within the family. Political change, such as a reform of state welfare, may require families to meet certain of their needs in new ways. And community change, such as a rise in crime or vandalism, will lead families to adjust (for example, by withdrawing their children from local schools or by turning in on themselves).

It is, of course, equally true that rapid change in the family itself will spill over into each of these other areas. A change in the domestic role of women has profound implications for the world of employment; an increase in rates of single

parenting will almost certainly result in increasing levels of demand on state spending; a change in the way children are brought up may lead to more anti-social behaviour; and so on.

Our third program, therefore, will focus broadly on the relation between family change and economic, political and social change. The question to be addressed is:

How are contemporary changes in the economy, the organisation of government services and local community life impacting on the stability of families, and how is family change affecting the functioning of the economy, the demands made on government, and the overall cohesion of Australian society?

The main ongoing work at present in this area is a study of *Families, Social Capital and Citizenship*. This project is documenting the extent and diversity of formal and informal civic engagement supported by different types of families living in different sorts of communities. The task is to identify the necessary and sufficient conditions which underpin strong community life and to identify the sorts of developments which tend to erode it.

The *Families, Social Capital and Citizenship* project is a relatively recent innovation (a conference on this topic was held in Canberra in February and is reported elsewhere in this issue of *Family Matters*). In time, a second project will also be developed in this program, probably concerned with some aspect of welfare dependency, and to this end, the Institute is currently engaged in research for the Commonwealth Government which is considering whether there is any evidence for a 'culture of dependency' which is transmitted from parents to their children.

Other developments

In addition to establishing these three research programs, the Institute's new Research Plan also sets up a *Research Support Unit*. This will provide specialist statistical support, will run the Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing system (CATI), will administer a new core survey, and will monitor national statistics on family trends.

The new core survey will be a particularly useful resource, not only for the Institute's own researchers, but for family and social policy researchers throughout Australia. Using the CATI facility, it is intended to build up a panel of 10,000 households which will participate in an annual omnibus survey which will be the basis of most of the survey work done at the Institute. Development of this panel should provide a resource for researchers throughout Australia, and will allow swift analysis of specific issues as they arise. It is also intended to use the annual survey to generate a new annual publication on Australian Family Attitudes.

In addition, we shall continue to liaise closely with the Australian Bureau of Statistics and to monitor Australian family trends by analysing both ABS and other secondary data, and we hope to publish these trends regularly, both in hard copy and on our web site.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies has been in existence since 1980, and since then it has produced a stream of important work and has established for itself an enviable reputation as a key centre of family research. But like the family itself, the Institute has to change and develop if it is to continue to flourish. This is a good time to celebrate the strengths of the past while looking forward to new challenges, new debates, and the opening up of new perspectives. A new Research Plan is an opportunity for renewal.

The Research Plan can be viewed on the Institute's Web site at www.aifs.org.au/ Printed copies are available on request from the Distribution Officer at the Institute.