

# Emerging family research issues 2002...

**Australian Institute of Family Studies**

The Australian Institute of Family Studies has started the new millennium with a broad array of ongoing research projects across its three research streams (Children and Parenting, Family and Marriage, Family and Society) and with some major research initiatives.

Where will Institute research head in the longer-term? What might be the research road ahead? Crystal-ball gazing is a tricky pursuit, and the research plan for the next three years is still under development. Nonetheless, we can predict with some confidence the principles and processes which will underlie the selection of research topics which the Institute should address and how it should do so.

For example, the development of the research plan and specific research initiatives will continue to involve discussion with a comprehensive range of stakeholders across policy, practice and research communities. A primary criterion in selecting among options will be that the issue is of critical and far-reaching concern for families in Australia. Another is that the issue is on the cusp of policy debate and development, and amenable to change through policy initiatives.

The Institute's research will also continue to combine policy relevance with good social science: to found its research on an understanding of the latest theoretical positions and to use cutting-edge methodological rigour in addressing the selected issues.

Institute studies will remain diverse in nature, exploiting the complementary strengths of smaller-scale in-depth studies, large-scale surveys, and secondary data sources. To tap social trends over time, individual and family trajectories and pathways, and stability and change, we will have a continuing need for longitudinal data. To understand subtle intra-family and developmental processes, fine-grained data collection and analysis will also be a necessity.

As the importance of "joined-up" approaches to both policy and service-delivery gains increasing recognition, the research community is also recognising the need for cross-disciplinary partnerships to address the complex research questions that face us. The broad range of disciplinary expertise contained among Institute researchers places us in a good position to address these complex questions. This implies that, while we retain the three-stream structure established in 1999, we can expect that

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many projects will benefit from cross-fertilisation.

Further, the trend towards collaborative research with others outside the Institute, already underway in projects such as the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Children (LSAC), and the Multiple and Changeable Childcare (MCC) project, is likely to blossom further.

The established Institute practice of augmenting its core funded research with contract work has served it well in the past and is likely to continue into the future, with the continuing caveat that contract research should fit closely with the Institute's own research agenda.

Broadly speaking, the Institute's mandate is to conduct and disseminate research which enhances the capacity of "the family" to support the individual and collective wellbeing of its members so as to allow them to be healthy and productive members of society. Future research will address challenges posed to the achievement of these goals, considering the family within an ecological framework where intra-family processes as well as community and cultural levels of influence operate and can promote or threaten resilience.

Three broad and overlapping thematic areas where research data will need to inform policy and practice are diversity, change, and the interactions of family with work and community.

### 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. For instance, important research questions revolve around diversity of family forms, of cultural background, and of migration experiences.

- *Family forms:* A number of "new" family types are becoming more prevalent and/or prominent. For example, the functioning and needs of same sex couples with or without children, families formed through reproductive technologies, and lone parents and their children will need continuing investigation. At the same time, the relatively high rates of divorce/separation and repartnering after divorce mean that "second families" are common. Optimal ways of supporting such families will continue to be an important focus for research.

- *Indigenous families*: Two hundred years after white colonisation, the research community can not claim a distinguished record of working with Indigenous communities to help resolve the multiple problems facing them (see, for example, G. Davidson, A. Sanson and H. Gridley, "Australian psychology and Australia's Indigenous people: Existing and emerging narratives", *Australian Psychologist*, vol. 36, pp. 92-99, 2000). Given the troubling and unacceptable statistics on almost all indicators of health and wellbeing among Indigenous families, family researchers have a responsibility to find ways to contribute towards solutions. As a starting point, research will need to be based upon a spirit of partnership and mutual respect if it is to hope to be useful.
- *Culturally diverse families*: As Australia continues to include people from diverse backgrounds, the evidence base for ensuring that their needs during and after settlement are best met will need to expand. For example, how should differing culturally-based perspectives on child-rearing and family roles and responsibilities be reflected at a policy level? What is the impact on immigrant and refugee families and their members of the experience of deprivation, discrimination and violence, and how best can we support their recovery? How do strong communities characterised by both diversity and cohesiveness come to be formed and sustained?

## Change

Change is ever-present and often stressful.

- In the family context, the nature of 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. The Institute has a history of contributing to informed debate on family law issues in particular. The recently released report *Out of the Maze: Pathways to the Future for Families Experiencing Separation* (Family Law Pathways Advisory Group 2001) recommends various strategies to facilitate smoother pathways through the legal system surrounding relationship dissolution, in order to minimise conflict and help families meet new responsibilities and commitments. Many aspects of child support payments and of contact between non-resident parents and their children remain matters of debate, especially in the context of many fathers' increasing commitment to the parenting role. Evaluations of the effectiveness of current practice and future initiatives will continue to be needed to inform policy.
- Changing family demographics (fertility rates, family size, and the ageing population): The declining birth rate, entailing smaller-sized

completed families, older parents and increasing numbers of couples without 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, one of the many changes confronting us is the rapid expansion in information technology which is increasingly pervading family life. These new 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 an important issue for the future.
- More broadly, as outlined in the Institute's Briefing Paper No. 5, (February 1999), Peter Saunders identified a core area of family research as being the relations between family change and changes in the economic subsystem (for example, in the labour market), political subsystem (for example, changes to state welfare) and community subsystem (for example, in the crime rate). This remains true today.

## Work and community

As it becomes the norm for parents to combine parenting and paid work, there needs to be in place structures and supports that allow parents to manage their multiple roles, and that optimise the quality of family life and children's development.

While some of the basic questions regarding non-parental child care have now been well researched, there are gaps in knowledge about others, one example being the effects of informal care provided by neighbours, relatives and baby-sitters.

As the nature of work changes, research around "family-friendly" workplaces will also need to evolve further.

There is also increasing interest in the capacity of communities to enhance the wellbeing and resilience of their members, but understanding of the necessary characteristics of such communities and the processes by which they support families is still sketchy.

This brief glimpse into the future does not pretend to be comprehensive or definitive. As the Institute proceeds with its research planning for the next triennium, it welcomes input from readers about issues they believe should be placed high in the family research agenda.

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