

## **Family, Work and Well-being over the Life Course**

### **Workshop Report to the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia**

The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia workshop “**Family, Work and Well-being over the Life Course**” was held on the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> October 2011 at the University of Queensland. The workshop was convened by Dr Belinda Hewitt (UQ), Associate Professor Lyn Craig (UNSW) and Professor Janeen Baxter (UQ).

The workshop brought together Australian researchers and government representatives interested in understanding the intersections between work, family and well being in contemporary Australia.

In the last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century major changes occurred in work and family life in Australia. These changes meant greater personal freedom and more financial independence for women. Concomitantly, however, there was concern that the family as an institution was being undermined. A popular discourse emerged about the loss of traditional values and the breakdown of family life and a renewed focus on the ideals of motherhood. According to some protagonists, family relationships had become transitory, contingent and unreliable and the social fabric less stable as a result.

Since the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, there has been a surprising reversal of some of these trends in Australia. In 2008 divorce rates were at their lowest in 20 years, fertility rates were at their highest in 30 years, and marriage rates were no longer in decline. There is also some evidence that values and beliefs about work, family and gender roles have become more conservative than they were 30 to 40 years ago. Parental time with children, rather than diminishing as widely feared, has risen and women’s workforce participation has ceased to increase. Men’s average work hours have continued to decline, but a higher proportion of full time employees are working very long hours than in times past. The gender division of labour in households with young children has become more pronounced. While these recent trends may indicate a possible resurgence of the “traditional family”, other trends suggest that this not necessarily the case.

While the stability of recent trends is uncertain, one thing is clear – pathways through the life course now look very different compared to a generation ago. In general the aims of the workshop were to document and better understand these recent trends in family and work life, and to consider their implications for well-being, gender equity and work and family policy. This was underpinned by a life course perspective, and we concentrated on 3 important phases in the life course: the transition to adulthood (18 - 30); the time squeeze of mid-life (30 - 50); and older ages (50+). It should be noted, however, that the majority of research focused on the mid-life (30 – 50) as this is where the competing demands of work and family is the most pronounced.

The workshop was successful on a number of counts. First, it brought together some of the most influential thinkers in Australian family research as well as policy makers to critically

engage with the research presented by early and mid career researchers. Second, the quality of the research presented was high and much of it was at the cutting edge of national and international debates. Third, a diverse range of issues was covered including the changing nature of intimate relationships and living arrangements, parenting practices, the impact of work on family life and vice versa, and the impact of work and family on health, well being and life satisfaction. Fourth, there was a high level of engagement with the implications of the research for both family and employment policy. Finally, the research presented in the workshop will have publication outcomes. It will be the basis of a special issue of the Journal of Population Research (September 2012) and a book (proposal currently being considered by UNSW Press).

In total, 25 participants attended over the two days of the workshop. They came from a wide range of backgrounds, including Sociology, Demography, Psychology, History, Economics, Epidemiology and Social Policy. The majority of attendees were academics, including a mix of early and mid career researchers, and senior academics. They were either based in Brisbane or travelled from Sydney, Melbourne, and Canberra. In addition, representatives from the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and the Human Rights Commission attended, who contributed expert policy knowledge that extended and enriched the discussion and debate. There were 15 academic papers presented over the two days in 5 sessions organized around the 3 stages of the life course identified above:

- The transition to adulthood: Young adults, work, family and well-being
- Squeezing it all in: Work, family and well-being in mid-life, with three sub-themes:
  - *Time*
  - *Work-family crossover*
  - *Well-being of adults and children*
- Ageing and the life course

The 6<sup>th</sup> and final session of the workshop was a panel that included summary discussions of the previous two days by eminent family researchers Professor David de Vaus and Professor Janeen Baxter and representatives from the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and the Sex Discrimination Commission. The expert summaries were followed by a broader discussion, with all workshop participants that identified, discussed and debated the following key themes that emerged from the workshop:

Arguably the strongest theme to emerge was the **interconnected nature of work and family life and how this extends across the life course**. In the session on the transition to adulthood, evidence was provided to show that adolescents who were not in education or work were doing less well than their peers in education or work. Young women who were thinking about their future family life were already anticipating trade-offs of career for family, but young men did not. As young women move from their teens to their 30's many of them adjust their work priorities to balance having children. Much of the research on the mid-life was dominated by issues to do with balancing family and work, including the implications for gender equity, time

management, health and well-being. Job characteristics were found to be very important for the wellbeing of adults and children. Flexible employment was shown to be important for managing family life, particularly for single mothers. It was agreed that this was the most difficult and challenging time in family life. This was further supported by research showing that over the life course, life satisfaction is relatively high during late teens and early 20's, is at its lowest when people are in mid-life and increases again in older age. Together, this research suggests that there is much more policy work to be done in terms of helping Australian families manage work and family commitments. A major point of discussion was that work and family are currently treated as separate policy areas, but with so much overlap between them, policy development in one area inevitably has consequences for the other. Potentially policy could be more effective if this cross over was taken into account when developing policy in either area.

Another key theme was the **diversification of work and family life over the life course and the emergence of more complex life pathways**. For many years now it has been documented that the traditional life pathway that included stable employment (particularly for men), stable marriage, family & children, and nearly universal homeownership is a remnant of the past (if indeed it ever existed). In addition, many people no longer aspire to this life trajectory. Much policy formulated in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was based on the assumption that this life course was standard, but this may need to be re-thought. Evidence presented at the workshop suggested that more people are living alone than ever before, particularly in older households. However, some of the research also suggested that even though these people are in lone households, many of them may be partnered, but in "Living Apart Together" relationships, challenging standard notions of family. In addition, people have more complex relationships, with more transitions involving cohabitations, marriages, separations, divorces and more periods of living alone. These transitions have implications for well-being, both in the short term and cumulatively over the life course. This highlights the need to have flexible and encompassing policies that embrace the lived reality of people's work and family lives for all stages of the life course.

A major research output from the workshop is a special issue of the *Journal of Population Research*, due for publication in September 2012. This will be guest edited by Belinda Hewitt, Lyn Craig and Janeen Baxter, and will include 5 papers (peer reviewed and competitively selected) from the workshop as well as an editorial piece. In addition, the issues canvassed in the workshop will be further elaborated upon in a book. A proposal has been submitted to University of New South Wales Press. This book will be edited by Lyn Craig, Belinda Hewitt and Janeen Baxter.

In closing we would like to sincerely thank ASSA for making this workshop possible. Not only was it intellectually stimulating, but we met new people, reinforced existing research networks and overall had a lot of fun!

Belinda Hewitt  
Lyn Craig  
Janeen Baxter



Attendees of the ASSA workshop on **Family, Work and Well-being over the Life Course** 20-21 October 2011, the University of Queensland

Back row: Alison Aggarwal, Melissa Johnstone; Joanna Lim, Bruce Smyth, Jennifer Baxter, David de Vaus, John Murray, Judy Rose, Lachlan Heybroek, Liana Leach, Peter Butterworth, Lyndall Strazdins, Heather Evert.

Front row: Mariska van der Horst, Anna Zhu, Lyn Craig (Convener); Janeen Baxter (Convener); Belinda Hewitt (Convener) and Edith Gray.