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Diversity: Beyond the nuclear family

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We speak of families as though we all know what families are (Laing 1969)

As most of us experience society through the lens of our early family experiences, we grow up believing 'our' family is the same as everyone else's. Entering school as young children, we soon realise that our notions of what is normal may be different from those of our classmates. The 'cereal packet image of the family' (Leach 1968: 8), representing mum, dad and the kids happily breakfasting together, abuts sometimes harshly against the realities of sole-parent families, step- and blended families, extended families, same-sex families, childless households, and even the single person household where the strongest ties are not with biological kin, but with intimate friends. Add to this the diversity of ethnic and cultural backgrounds that Indigenous Australians and postwar migrating families contribute, and all Australians will eventually encounter family types quite different from their own.

This phenomenon is not confined to Australia. In the West, in particular, researchers have been documenting the plurality of existing household and family types for almost two decades (Rapoport and Rapoport 1982; Weeks 1986; Bernardes 1997; Bittman and Pixley 1997; Baker 2001). Once dominated by parents and their offspring, contemporary families now comprise a diverse range of different family and so-called non-family types (National Population Council 1987: 1; Giddens 1992).

In an attempt to explore the sources of this diversity, Rapoport and Rapoport (1982) identify five types of family diversity:

- *Organisational diversity*, which is due to different patterns of work outside and inside the home, and to changing marital trends. This category includes 'reconstituted families' as a result of divorce and remarriage, and dual-career families, some of which have resulted in a greater democratisation of domestic labour.
- *Cultural diversity,* which accounts for much family diversity in Australia, as Indigenous and migrant households from diverse regions such as Western Europe, Southern Europe, Middle Eastern and many groups from East and Southeast Asia bring with them aspects of family and household composition.
- *Social class diversity*, which is demonstrated in the material resources of families, the relationships between couples and between parents and their children, and the socialisation and education of children.
- *Life cycle diversity,* which exists between families whose members are from different historical periods. The impact of the Depression and the experience of war were defining influences for many Australian parents of the baby boomer generation. Baby boomers, in their turn, have tended to rear their children differently because of the greater economic prosperity and rapidly changing social morés of the 1960s and 1970s.
- *Family life course diversity*, which refers to the difference that occurs when a family has a baby, when the children reach their teens, and finally when (or, increasingly, if) they leave home. At each of these stages, families have different priorities, and may organise themselves in terms of work and domestic labour, rather differently than at other times. (Bernardes 1997: 11–12)

Theorising diversity and difference in families

Family diversity as described by Rapoport and Rapoport (1982) has contributed to the myth that the nuclear family is disappearing. As Bittman and Pixley (1997) have pointed out, examining household types at one juncture obscures transitions such as children leaving home, thus creating single-person or couple households; having children; separating and divorcing; ageing and moving to live with married children or to supported accommodation; and then dying. Throughout this period, nuclear family households are created and broken up and then recreated—sometimes several times. Increased longevity, declining

fertility, rising divorce rates and an increase in the proportion of people who will never marry are all contributing to the apparent decline in the nuclear family in Australia (1997: 4–5).

However, the nuclear family remains a powerful normative ideal in much of the Western world, and people who do not follow this pattern may be considered deviant, or not even families at all (Stacey 1996; Bittman and Pixley 1997). For example, in all parts of Australia except Western Australia, under the *Family Law Act* (section 60H), whilst the de facto or married male partner of a woman who conceives using IVF is deemed by law to be a parent of the child, the consenting lesbian partner is not (Caruana 2002). Lesbian partners and their children are not, by law, included in the definition of a family. In a similar manner, involvement of extended family members in child-rearing continues to be significantly overlooked in many government and non-government systems (Baker 2001).

Sometimes, however, different family patterns are not rejected outright, and there are attempts to modify them in order to bring them into alignment with this normative ideal. A number of researchers and policy-makers, for example, conclude that parents should be offered incentives to get married and remain married to ensure that children are raised in two-parent families (Jaffee et al. 2003).

Postmodern society exposes people to a wider range of family patterns, as travel, migration and changing behaviours and values challenge family boundaries (McDonald 1995). It is not uncommon, in any group of children today, to have children from two-parent biological families, children from sole parent families, children living in step-parent families, children living with extended family members, children living with gay or lesbian parents, as well as adopted and (officially or informally) fostered children. While conservative opinion identifies diversity in family patterns as the cause of a range of problems including increasing violence, crime and drug abuse, as well as simply being bad for children (Stacey 1996), the evidence is mixed. The presence of fathers in a two-parent household, for instance, is not always linked to positive outcomes for children, and can be detrimental depending upon the characteristics of the father (Jaffee et al. 2003). In addition, family discord and poor parenting are clearly linked to less positive mental health outcomes for children (Sanson and Lewis 2001).

Declining rates of marriage and fertility, rising divorce rates and other social trends mean that fewer people will live in the ideal family norm—the nuclear family. So we need to understand the sources of family diversity, and the impact of diversity on family members themselves.

Cultural variations in families

All families are subject to social influences outside the family sphere, and these influences become more pervasive at different times. However, the way in which families are structured, the role each member plays within the family and the socialisation processes through which children are encouraged to become responsible adults, are all shaped by the cultures into which all humans are born. By culture, we are referring to the beliefs and behaviours which are passed down—however imperfectly—through the generations so that all of us reared within a particular culture regard particular ways of thinking and acting as the right and proper way. Conventionally people think of culture as particular to ethnic or language groups, and in this chapter we focus largely on this kind of cultural diversity. However, we can also recognise cultural life-ways subsumed within broader social categories—such as the difference between middle-class and working-class cultures, for example, or the beliefs and behaviours attached to particular groups of young people.

Family structure

The most frequently acknowledged difference between cultures is that of family structure, and throughout the world people have organised themselves into an amazing variety of structures—from minimal mother–child households to nuclear families, polygamous households in which more than one spouse is maintained (with the usual pattern being a man with more than one wife), and extended and multi-household families, which may consist of siblings, each with their own spouses, their parents, adult children and their spouses and children, as well as other related kin (Batrouney 1995; Lev-Wiesel and Al-Krenawi 2000).

There are many ways of categorising these different structures. Myers (1992), for example, identifies a range of cultures where individuality is considered important and where the nuclear family tends to be the norm. Individuals within such families are encouraged to seek self-fulfilment through independence, not only from community/society, but also from their own family members. Young children are taught to be self-sufficient, while adolescents move away from the family home and set up their own living arrangements. Elderly parents move into retirement homes or hostels apart from their adult children. Children are encouraged to establish an adult life separate from their parents and family, and it is not uncommon for elderly parents to lose contact with their adult children and grandchildren. This approximates the ideal for many middle-class Australians.

However, even in strongly Westernised countries such as Australia, extended family members are sometimes significantly involved in each other's lives. The Melbourne Carers Study found family members (child caring for a parent, parent caring for an adult child or spousal caring) were closely involved with activities such as dressing, mobility, managing money and incontinence. Despite these roles, nearly half of the people caring for other relatives did not live in the same household with the person for whom they were offering daily care (Schofield and Herrman 1993). Grandparents can often be involved in the lives of their grandchildren through offering child care (McDonald 1995). Generally, in the Western world, elderly parents and their adult children are more likely to form shared households when the parent becomes too disabled to live independently and moves in with a married child (usually the daughter). Unmarried adult children are more likely to move into their parents' household to form a shared residence (Brody et al. 1995).

In other cultural groups, such as the Chinese, Vietnamese and Lebanese, for example, the interests of the individual are ideally subordinate to that of the extended family group (Hartley 1995). Children are taught that they are responsible for the care of elderly relatives (not just parents). Sons may be held financially responsible for parents' old age. Daughters may be expected to remain in the family home to care for parents or other elderly relatives. In return, rearing of children may be undertaken by other family members whilst the biological parents study or work to establish a more secure future for the family group. Decisions about occupation, or opportunities to study, tend to be made by the family group (bearing in mind the individual's interests and abilities) with the aim being to benefit the family as a whole, not just the individual concerned.

In some Indigenous communities, child-rearing is thought of as a community responsibility. A recent study revealed that parents felt secure in the knowledge that other members of their community took equal responsibility for their children, and could be relied upon to supervise, discipline, support and care without having to be asked (Sims, O'Connor and Forrest 2003). Moving children from one household to another was therefore not a signal that no one loved the child, nor of insecurity or lack of care. Instead, it was a measure of joint responsibility—a signal of shared loving and caring and a community approach to parenting. Torres Strait Islander families report similar feelings, in some cases claiming that all people on the island are related and responsible for supporting each other and for teaching children (Batrouney and Soriano 2001). Such extended family patterns and roles tend to be modified as families move into urban industrialised areas, but they are still maintained to some degree (Bourke and Bourke 1995).

The importance of children to the family unit is also changing. Over the next 20 years in Australia, a large increase is projected in the number of single-person households (from 1.6 million households in 1996 to 3.4 million in 2021), through both choice and unwanted circumstances (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1999). Increasing numbers of people will never marry, and nearly half of those who do marry will end up divorcing (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2000). However, for many cultural groups in Australia and elsewhere, such trends are abhorrent. For Pacific Island cultures, for instance, children continue to be considered essential for a happy and fulfilled adult life (O'Donnell 1995). Many Chinese in Australia continue to expect their children to care for them in their old age, and to provide for the continuation of the family through succeeding generations (Mak and Chan 1995).

Family roles

Roles within families and expectations attached to these roles vary socially, culturally and through time. Traditionally, Western cultures have imposed gendered expectations on the roles played out in the family domain, with caring and domestic tasks assigned to the mother, wife and daughter roles. In contrast, men are commonly assigned the public role of breadwinner/financial support (McDonald 1995). In countries like Australia, women now comprise around half of the paid workforce, but studies of the division of labour within the home in Australia indicate that women are still responsible for most domestic labour, especially child care (Bittman et al. 2000). The time men spend with their children has increased over the past few decades, but they tend to spend more time in play activities rather than caring tasks. The gendered nature of roles in migrant families varies a great deal, depending upon the time of migration, the education level of the family (especially the mother), and participation in the paid workforce.

In some societies—for instance, amongst Indigenous Australians—kinship terminology for the father, mother and other close kin is extended throughout the broader social group so that, for example, all women of the mother's generation are called 'mother' and stand in the same relationship to the child as does the biological mother. Role expectations are the same for all of these women. In some groups, extended family members live together in one household—for example, in traditional Chinese families it is common to have three generations living together (Mak and Chan 1995). Another variation of this pattern exists among Filipino families (Soraino 1995), where extended family members live in different households but maintain extensive involvement in shared family life.

Socialisation of children

Cultural values shape the characteristics and abilities of children, determine the learning opportunities and thus shape the skills children acquire. Ideally, children in Australia are encouraged to play outside, and often engage in active games where skills such as running, jumping, throwing and kicking balls are practised in many different ways. Children in communities where either playing outdoors is not safe or in contexts where overcrowding restricts children's play are encouraged to develop fine motor skills (such as drawing and cutting) through participating in quieter, less active indoor pursuits (Sims 2002).

Culture shapes parental perceptions of what represents desirable behaviour in their children (Youniss 1994). When communities are small and more homogeneous, there are shared perceptions of desirable outcomes for children, and family values are congruent with community and societal values. However, few societies remain isolated from external influences. For instance, when families migrate, parents may experience a clash of values. African migrants in Australia, for example, have experienced dissonance between their own view of physical punishment (as a tool for demonstrating strong love and concern for their children) and that of the community and society around them (where excessive punishment is perceived as child abuse) (Sims and Omaji 1999). Actions considered abusive in some cultures are highly valued in others. For example, in the Western world, branding children will attract strong criticism. However, some cultures mark the transition between childhood and adulthood with ritual scarification. Parents who fail to ensure that their children participate in such ceremonies are considered abusive and neglectful (O'Donnell 1995).

Conflict between value systems tends to become exacerbated as children of migrants become more immersed in the host culture and only experience their parental culture at home. Language fluency tends to decrease over first and second generations post-migration, and children are more inclined to challenge cultural beliefs and expectations as they take on the characteristics of the host culture (Baker 2001). In Australia, migrant parents from a range of different areas (such as China and Polynesia, for example) worry that their children learn to value independence and assertiveness too much, and do not demonstrate adequate respect for their elders (Mak and Chan 1995; O'Donnell 1995). Thus increasing conflict within families is common as older migrants experience the frustration of their locally born and reared descendants' changing values and practices. A feeling of 'being between worlds' is commonly expressed by second and third generation children of migrants.

Indigenous families

Once regarded as a 'dying race', Indigenous people have become one of the fastest-growing groups in Australia. This is despite the stark fact that life expectancy for an Indigenous Australian is around 20 years less than it is for other Australians. The Indigenous population is younger (median age of 20) than the general Australian population (median age of 34), and more likely to live in rural or remote areas. However, the highest concentrations of Indigenous people live in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation (ATSIC) regions of Sydney, Coff's Harbour, Brisbane, Cairns, Wagga Wagga, Hobart and Perth (Edwards and Madden 2001: 13)—that is, those areas favoured by the rest of Australia. The diverse geographic distribution and the continuing social and cultural heterogeneity of the Indigenous population, including the cultures of the Torres Strait (Batrouney and Soriano 2001), influences the structure of Indigenous families.

From the outside, many Indigenous families appear indistinguishable from their non-Indigenous neighbours in similar socioeconomic strata. However, Indigenous people:

- constitute greater numbers of one-parent families;
- are more likely to live in multi-family households;
- are less likely to live alone;
- live less frequently in private houses or flats;
- are more likely to be renting from public or community housing authorities;
- are less than half as likely to own or be purchasing their own home;
- comprise a greater proportion of those living in temporary or impoverished dwellings; and
- constitute households almost twice the size of the Australian average of 2.5 people (Bourke and Bourke 1995: 50–51).

While some of these differences are attributable to poverty, Indigenous families today remain influenced by the traditional past, experiences of colonialism that fragmented family structure, and contemporary beliefs and lifestyles that refer to allegiances to place and family (Barwick 1988).

Traditional Indigenous families

Traditional Indigenous families, like hunter-gatherers in the rest of the world, consisted of extended family groups comprising men, their wives and children, and vertical and horizontal groups of classificatory kin (such as mother's sisters, classified as 'mothers', and mother's sisters' children, classified as

'brothers' and 'sisters'). These extended families or clans were themselves part of larger land-based or language groups known as 'tribes'. Every person was born into a known social category (termed 'moieties' or halves, sections and sub-sections), where roles and the responsibilities attached to them were clear with respect to everyday social interaction, marriage, the land and religious life. This was, and remains for many, a natural and social world which is more sociocentric than egocentric—that is, relationships between people and between people and land were conceptualised in terms of the group, rather than the individual (Berndt and Berndt 1968, 1978; Burbank 1988).

Ideally, all men and women were expected to marry and have children. Although the genders were more equal in many respects than in contemporary Western societies, men had more formal power in contracting and leaving a marriage. Marriage partners were restricted to those in appropriate social categories, and deviance from this rule could result in death. Females would know the range of men deemed proper husbands, and usually joined their appointed husbands before puberty, although a sexual relationship may not start until after puberty. Exchange marriages between appropriate family groups established long-standing relationships of mutual obligation, which were of greater social significance than the relationship between husband and wife (Berndt and Berndt 1968; Burbank 1988).

Children were reared by this extended family group, although the biological parents—particularly mothers—were influential in the child's early years. They learned to identify their family members correctly, and to know who were appropriate and inappropriate companions. Within these kinship rules, they had considerable autonomy in terms of their behaviour and were indulged by most family members while young. This freedom changed when rites of passage marking the transition from childhood into adulthood meant greater social and ritual responsibilities, including marriage and child-rearing (Berndt and Berndt 1968; Batrouney and Soriano 2001).

Contemporary rural and urban families

Indigenous families, largely in northern Australia, who have maintained close association with their country, languages and traditions share many of the characteristics described above. In these communities, the continuation of practices such as polygyny (a man having more than one wife), and the control of marriage by extended kin, including the betrothal of very young women to much older men, constitute the starkest contrast between traditional Indigenous and Western European marriages. None of these communities is isolated from popular culture, however. The impact of Western notions of romantic love, freedom and individualism means that young women may now

resist traditional marriage arrangements. There have been complaints, too, that the breakdown in reciprocal kinship obligations means less protection for women and children, resulting in horrific rates of sexual assault and violence in some communities (Bell and Ditton 1980).

Far more common are those families in southern Australia whose composition and relationships have been fractured by successive government policies which removed people from their land, herded them on to government reserves and missions run as 'total institutions', and separated—both forcibly and by encouragement—lighter skinned children from their families. These policies were instituted 'for their own good' (Haebich 1988), in the hope that the children could be assimilated (albeit at the lowest social level) into white Australia (Read 1983; HREOC 1997; Haebich 2000).

The issue of the 'stolen generations' (those children removed from their families) continues to divide Australians. The *Bringing Them Home* inquiry (HREOC 1997: 37), which heard stories from Indigenous people across Australia, calculated that between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed. Although this has been vigorously denied by the Howard government, the ABS found that in 1994 one in ten Indigenous people aged 25 or more claimed that they had been removed from their natural family (ABS 1996: 115). This means that many Indigenous people were reared

apart from family networks, often connecting with them only years later, or not at all. For instance, Ruby Hunter, the now well-known Indigenous singer, was taken at four years of age and raised in foster homes and institutions, not knowing she was Indigenous until she was around ten or twelve. Like many others, she attributes her early adult life of drinking and homelessness on this loss of family and place (cited in Bourke and Bourke 1995: 62–63). Others have spoken of their inability to be positive parental role models because of these traumatic childhood experiences (HREOC 1997).

Indigenous children are still much more likely to be removed from their families than other Australian children. Comprising 2.7 per cent of the nation's children, they make up about 20 per cent of those children placed in out-of-home care, usually on the grounds of emotional abuse or neglect, rather than physical or sexual abuse, or irretrievable breakdown in the relationship between parents and the child. While acknowledging child protection needs, Indigenous people and others are unhappy with the culturally inappropriate ways neglect and abuse may be determined, and many view intervention by child welfare authorities as negative (Cunneen and Libesman 2000).

However, in spite of this awful history—and perhaps also because of it—Indigenous ways of life continue, even when people have been separated from their land and culture for generations. Urban-dwelling people throughout Australia continue traditional relationships with their extended kin networks, resulting in household sizes much larger than for other Australians. For some, coupled with poverty, decrepit housing and racism, this has meant constant conflict with non-Indigenous neighbours and housing authorities, often resulting in eviction and homelessness (McGlade and Purdy 1998). However, the extended kin network is also an asset when the reciprocal sharing of income and goods provides a safety net for those without home or income. Mobility is also a feature of these households, as children and adults move between kin in the country and city (Gale 1981 cited in Van Krieken 2000: 357–8).

Many urban Indigenous families are outwardly indistinguishable from their non-Indigenous neighbours—in terms of employment, the education of children, recreational patterns and the maintenance of home and garden. However, for those who identify as Indigenous, ties of locality, family and a shared history of oppression continue to be important.

Migrant Families

Australia was once infamous for its racially based 'white Australia' immigration policy, but successive periods of large-scale immigration have ironically resulted in one of the most ethnically diverse populations in the world. Including both

Australian-born residents whose parents were born overseas and those who were born overseas, the largest groups of non-English-speaking background come from Italy, Greece, countries of the former Republic of Yugoslavia, Vietnam, Germany, The Netherlands and Lebanon. In the 1980s, while the numbers of migrants from most European countries declined or remained static, those from Asia, Africa and Central and South America, and particularly from China, Hong Kong, Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia, Vietnam, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, increased by up to 30 per cent (Shu et al. 1994).

Each migrant group brings with it different histories, regional variations and much social differentiation based on social categories such as class and gender, as well as origins in urban or rural environments (Hartley 1995). Family life among many of these groups has been likened to the so-called traditional patriarchal family of Western Europe, characterised by early marriage arranged by the extended kin network, higher fertility, women's confinement to the domestic sphere, and male dominance reflected in infrequent divorce, and rule over women and children. There is some evidence that these family structures, and the values that underpin them, are sometimes retained in Australia long after similar family forms in the countries of origin have changed through economic and social changes. For example, a comparative study of Greek mothers living in Australia and Greek mothers living in Greece found that women in Australia were far more likely to report an arranged marriage than women in Greece (73 per cent versus 25 per cent), and far less likely to report a pre-marital pregnancy (none versus 17.6 per cent) (Smyrnios and Tonge 1981). In part, this has happened because of cultural isolation in Australia and the consequent tendency for individuals to focus on their families for a wide range of emotional and social support (McDonald 1991).

While most observers note the persistence of a 'core culture' (Bottomley 1979) among migrant families, sociologists disagree about the persistence of cultural distinctiveness. Bottomley (1979), for instance, argues that Greek familialism is central to Greek culture, and is maintained within the domestic realm of family, protecting family structure and values from the influences of external social, economic and political factors. For McDonald (1991: 118), however, traditional family forms are unable to resist the inexorable pressures of social forces such as the media and school environments, women's work in the public domain, urban living which in turn isolates families from their wider kin networks, and the influence of Australian social institutions such as schools and courts.

These different points of view are illustrated in two studies of Greeks in Australia. Bottomley's (1979) study of Greek Australians in Sydney between 1969 and 1971 emphasised the continuing importance of the extended kin

Family barbecue

network, patriarchal authority over sexuality and marriage, the precedence of honour over romantic love, and the subordination of women and children to male heads of families. A distinct Greek identity was maintained, Bottomley claims, by primary relationships created by marriage and the creation of families, and social life based around those relationships. While Bottomley found some tendency to focus on one's own family of procreation, rather than one's family of origin, overall the emphasis was on the maintenance of ethnic identity and family networks which served functions met for other Australians by the public sphere.

A study of Greek women from diverse backgrounds in Melbourne in 1976 (Packer et al. 1976) found both change and stability in family patterns. Mothers wanted their daughters to marry Greek men, but believed they had little control over this and noted the decline in arranged marriages. Their university-educated daughters, however, still felt their parents had more control over their social and sexual lives than the parents of their non-Greek peers. These Greek girls believed themselves less sexually active than Australian-born girls, and were concerned about the impact of a loss of virginity on their marriage prospects. After marriage, differences between Greeks and non-Greeks diminished, with both as likely to defer the birth of their first child because

of the need to establish careers and economic security, and to see two children as the ideal (Packer et al. 1976).

Even more diversity is apparent among Lebanese migrants in Australia, some of whom are now fifth- or sixth-generation. These people differ in religious affiliation, with similar numbers identifying as Catholic or Muslim and a smaller number as Orthodox. Religion, family membership and village of origin constitute primary means of social identification, particularly among more recent arrivals. Not surprisingly, family structures among these groups vary a great deal. While multi-family households consisting of extended family members living together are more common among the Lebanese than among those born in Australia (along with those from Cambodia, Laos, Turkey, Vietnam, the Philippines and Indigenous families) (Hartley 1995), over time nuclear families of parents and their dependent children become more typical. Frequently, a modified extended family exists where married children live in close proximity to their parents, and there is close interaction between the two families (Batrouney 1995).

Patriarchal authority also varies among Lebanese families in Australia, with both 'traditional' patriarchal patterns and modified patriarchal forms of authority influenced more by education, occupation and income, rather than simply by tradition, apparent (Batrouney 1995). Among the former group, male dominance—particularly among Lebanese Muslims—has at times come into conflict with Australian law over divorce and subsequent custody and property settlements. The Australian Family Law Court allows Lebanese Muslim women and their families to contest male authority. Under Islamic law, husbands may seek custody of boys at seven years, girls at nine years, and all property not owned by the wife before the marriage (Humphrey 1984). In stark contrast, among some later generation, educated Lebanese Australians a much greater degree of egalitarianism is apparent between married partners (Brown 1994). Both of these examples support the point made earlier by McDonald (1991) about the pervasive impact of broader social trends on family structures and values.

Despite such differences, however, research indicates the primary place of family in the lives of Lebanese Australians. Like many of the Greek Australians described by Bottomley (1979), family life constitutes the vehicle for the maintenance of ethnic identity, even among those who cannot speak Arabic or who are not identified with a particular church or mosque (Humphrey 1984; McKay 1989). This is apparent in the sponsorship of relatives to Australia, the persistence of arranged marriages, child-care and other patterns of family interaction (Humphrey 1984).

Same-sex families

According to the 2001 census, there are 19 594 same-sex couples in Australia, double the number of people declaring such partnerships in 1996. Of these, 11 per cent are raising children (ABS 2002). However, we have no way of knowing how accurate this figure is because of the continuing stigmatisation of homosexuality and the paucity of research on same-sex families, particularly in Australia (Wise 2003: 6). Clinical samples and polls conducted within the gay and lesbian community suggest that around 20 per cent of Australians identifying as gay, lesbian or bisexual have children (Lesbians on the Loose 1999; Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby 2000), and other same-sex couples either want or plan families of their own. In Victoria, 41 per cent of a same-sex sample hoped to have children, and this rose to 63 per cent for couples under 30 (VGLRL 2001). While donor insemination and other assisted reproduction techniques, adoption and fostering provide a number of means of having children, most children currently living in same-sex families are likely to have originated in a previous heterosexual couple relationship (Wise 2003: 26). The growing number of self-identified same-sex families raises important sociological questions about the nature of the same-sex couple relationship, the families they are building and even the meaning of the contested term 'family' (Weeks 2002: 218).

Some sociologists have suggested that same-sex couples and families represent 'elective families' or 'life experiments' necessary to late modern societies, where personal identity is created by individuals rather than fixed by birth to particular people and localities, and where voluntary relationships supplant traditional commitments (Giddens 1992; Weeks 2002). Unlike in the past, it is argued, individuals—such as very close friends or same-sex couples—are able to develop 'pure relationships' which are maintained for their own sake, rather than because 'it's what's expected' or 'for the sake of the children'. However, these intimate relationships are dependent upon a delicate balance between self-actualisation and dependency, equality between partners and open communication (Bittman and Pixley 1997: 64–70).

These idealistic notions of the 'pure relationship' and the democratisation and enriching of familial intimacy are contrary to contemporary debates about the family which are taking place in the public domain. The opposition of the Australian Catholic Church to IVF access for lesbians in 2002, and the appeal in 2003 to the Federal Attorney-General by the Australian Family Association that the Family Court's decision to uphold the validity of a marriage involving a transexual be challenged in the High Court, illustrate that traditional notions of the 'cereal box' family remain powerful. It is not only religious fundamentalists

or media-savvy conservative politicians who support the traditional family. A number of Australian studies have highlighted the way in which homophobia threatens the sense of safety of both homosexual adolescents and the children of same-sex parents (Ray and Gregory 2001). Regular readers of letters to the editor in local and national newspapers will also know that opposition to homosexuality in general, and to same-sex families in particular, is virulent in some quarters.

Just as in the wider community, there is intense debate within sociology about the appropriateness of same-sex couples and families for social cohesion and the rearing of children. The ideal type—heterosexual—family is seen by some sociologists as the best protection for the building of communities (Etzioni 1995). Even more negatively, same-sex couples have been viewed as pleasure-seeking, individualistic people whose lifestyles undermine traditional family values such as commitment (Sarantakos 1996a, 1996b; Phillips 1999).

Numerous concerns have been raised about the children reared in same-sex families, although many of these have more to do with ideological assumptions about what constitutes a 'normal' family than evidence of harm in these settings. Some people believe that children of same-sex couples will be confused about their own gender identity, and will experience problems in their personal and social relationships due to this, as well as teasing and ostracism by peers. Others are concerned about greater exposure to family breakdown associated with the presumed shorter lifespan of same-sex relationships. More extreme are the claims that the mental health of same-sex parents is worse than other parents, and that sexual abuse by gay or lesbian parents may be more prevalent than in heterosexual homes (Patterson 1992; Sarantakos 1996; Wise 2003).

Much of the available research has been on small, unrepresentative, middle-class, primarily American samples, and not all of these issues have been examined. The Australian Institute of Family Studies' Development in Diverse Families study will provide Australian data on how diverse family structures relate to the development of children (Wise 2003). However, there is already some evidence that children in same-sex families have similar adjustment profiles to other children. Studies of lesbian and heterosexual mothers on measures including psychiatric status, self-concept, happiness, overall adjustment or parenting styles and ability reveal no differences between the two groups (summarised in Wise 2003: 26–7).

It has been suggested that some same-sex families may provide a superior environment for the development of some characteristics and parenting behaviours. Homosexual fathers' reports of their own behaviour suggest that they may provide more authoritative parenting styles than heterosexual fathers (Patterson 2002). Other work has claimed that same-sex couple relationships

are more supportive and egalitarian, and domestic labour is more evenly shared than in other family types (in Wise 2003: 28). This is refuted in other research suggesting that same-sex couples are at least as likely as heterosexual couples to experience unbalanced power within the relationship (Sarantakos 1998; Worth et al. 2002).

The social contexts in which same-sex families live do enhance or impede their functioning, however. Despite growing acceptance of homosexuality, same-sex couples continue to be stigmatised by their families and the wider community, and this may mean that access to family support and health and community services is restricted for parents and their children. There are psychological and emotional costs attached to belonging to a marginalised community, too, and these may have a damaging effect on the couple relationship and that between parents and their children (Wise 2003: 27). In New South Wales recently, a study of 48 children from same-sex families reported that 44 per cent of primary school aged children, and around one-third of secondary school children experienced homophobic teasing and language (Ray and Gregory 2001: 31). Rather than see these issues as an inevitable aspect of socially marginal family types, social policies which protect and support same-sex families and their children are required (Ray and Gregory 2001: 34).

Conclusion

While the nuclear family of 'mum, dad and the kids' remains statistically prominent in Australia, it is slowly declining, and increasing numbers of people are creating or being raised in family structures quite different from this model. This variety originates in the cultural diversity of Australia's Indigenous and immigrant populations and social trends extending over more than 30 years which have resulted in more single-parent, step and blended, multiple household and same-sex families.

The 'double life' of the family means that family life is what people living in families do, but is strongly influenced by their beliefs about what families are and *should* be (Bittman and Pixley 1997: 145). In Australia, family ideology as expressed in many public debates around issues such as assisted reproduction, homosexuality, multiculturalism and juvenile crime contests the view that diverse family arrangements are valid or appropriate vehicles for the successful rearing of children. More than 30 years ago, when alarm about the changing trends in family life began in earnest, Adams (1971: 82) reminded sociologists of the family that: 'To assume that a form, because it is a variant, is abnormal, is to evade the task before us. The first job of science is, after all, to study what is, not what might be, or could be, or should be.' There is little evidence

that, controlling for other factors such as socioeconomic disadvantage, Indigenous, migrant or same-sex families are less able to provide the emotional or social support offered by the Western nuclear family. Parents and children in these families are affected by trends and influences in the wider society, however, and racism and homophobia need to be acknowledged as detrimental to healthy family development.

KEY TERMS

- Although the nuclear family is statistically still the most common family type in Australia, diverse family types, including Indigenous, migrant and same—sex families, comprise a significant proportion of Australian families
- In multicultural countries like Australia, family structure, the roles of family members, and the socialisation of children are influenced by cultural expectations
- Indigenous families, even those living in urban areas, are distinctive in terms of their extended kinship networks, mobility patterns and family beliefs and values
- Migrant families, while retaining a 'cultural core' from their countries of origin, are changing in response in broad social trends, such as the influence of the media on the socialisation of children and greater participation of women in the paid workforce
- Little research exists on same-sex families, but evidence to date indicates that children raised in these settings are likely to have few differences with those raised in more typical family types, if their social and community supports are similar
- Cultural values are embedded in family socialisation and influence what children are taught by their families at different stages of development, the learning opportunities made available to children, and thus the knowledge and skills children acquire

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

4.1 Is the term 'family diversity' simply a polite way of glossing over deviant family structures which may not equip children and adults for life in the broader community? What is the evidence?

4.2 How is family diversity acknowledged in social policies designed for children and families in Australia? What policy changes might assist diverse family types?

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