

Family Wellbeing: confusions and challenges

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What is family wellbeing?

Two prior questions:

What is 'family'?

What is 'wellbeing'?

Family Definition(s)

- Legal relationships
- Biological connectedness
- Household composition
- Self definition ('families of meaning')

- "Families are for giving me stuff; food, clothes, and presents. Loving, caring for me, and for giving things back to". 14 year old.

How do adolescents define families?

- In one study, 80% of terms used to define a family were affective referring to love and support
- Only 40% or less used terms related to legal, biological, or cohabitational criteria for definition

Anyan, S. & Pryor, J. (2002). What is family? Adolescent Perceptions. *Children and Society* 16, 1-12.

How do children define families?

- 37% indicated 'families of meaning'
- 32% referred to biological links
- 25% referred to cohabitation

Reference: Rigg, A. & Pryor, J. (2007). Children's perceptions of families: What do they really think? *Children and Society* 21, 17-30.

Percentage of children endorsing family groupings (n=111)

| | |
|---|--------|
| Married couple plus child | 100.00 |
| Nonresidential biological father | 99.1 |
| Nonresidential immediate family member (biological) | 95.5 |
| Stepfamily of ten years | 94.6 |
| Grandparents | 93.7 |
| Grandparents no contact | 93.7 |
| Aunt, uncle, and cousins | 93.7 |
| Lone mother plus child plus new partner (married) | 92.8 |
| Children alone (no parents) | 92.8 |
| Lone mother plus children | 90.1 |
| Cohabiting couple plus child | 88.3 |
| Married couple no children | 88.3 |
| Lone father plus children | 87.4 |
| New stepfamily | 84.7 |
| Residential unrelated person | 64.9 |
| Family without love | 62.2 |

Diversity as virtue?

- ‘Nontraditional’ family forms are closing in on nuclear families in terms of numbers
- Diversity in ecological sense - ‘Let a hundred flowers bloom’
- Normalisation of diversity

Negotiation of membership

- 'Any collectively shared definitions of relationships and individual positions has gone' (Beck).
- Family membership is decided and negotiated.
- Stepfamilies a specific example: *What* is this family, and *who* belongs in it?

Functions of families (1)

- Membership and family formation (sense of identity and belonging)
- Economic support
- Nurturance, education, and socialisation
- Protection of vulnerable members

Functions of families (2) Whanau

- Support and succour (including economic support)
- Care and upbringing of children (responsibility of whole whanau)
- Care and management of group property
- Organisation of hui
- Dealing with internal conflicts and problems

Family Strengths

- Communication
- Togetherness
- Sharing activities
- Affection
- Support
- Acceptance
- Commitment
- Resilience
- (Flexibility and adaptability)

Family Social Capital: definitions

- “the resources stemming from possession of a durable network of acquaintance or recognition” (Widmer)
- “the ability of families to manage successfully the material and symbolic resources they possess for benefit of their membership” (Bordieu)
- “...the stock of social good will created through shared norms and a sense of common membership upon which individuals may draw in their efforts to achieve collective *or personal objectives*” (italics added). (Furstenberg)

Working definition from these:

- Family social capital is the stock of social goodwill created through shared norms and a sense of common membership, *and the ability to manage and utilise resources including social goodwill*, upon which individuals may draw in their efforts to achieve collective or personal goals.

Establishment of FSC (Western cultures)

- “Nomos building” (Durkheim) - the establishment of a common reality of rules, expectations, rituals, and memories.
- Social exchange across generations from families of origin
- Ongoing negotiation and decision-making about rules, values, membership. Higher levels of negotiated content in western cultures than in others.

Establishment of FSC (Maori)

- Shared identity often present in whanau and iwi
- Challenge to restoring ruptured connections with whanau, iwi, and hapu
- Integration of Maori social capital with multicultural New Zealand

Ability to manage and utilise FSC

- Generation of FSC does not guarantee its accessibility and utilisation by members
- My under-use or over-use (violation of norm of reciprocity)
- Families vary in ability to utilise social capital available outside household (communities, schools, etc)

Is FSC a Good Thing?

- Most studies focus on parent-child relationships (dyadic variables), and focus on outcomes for children and adolescents
- Need to assess a normative consensus among family members, from multiple perspectives
- And quality and nature of relationships instead of presence or absence (Coleman's approach)

Preliminary evidence from Youth Connectedness project (1)

- Strong and consistent correlations amongst family identity and family cohesion measures, and outcomes including:
 - life satisfaction
 - positive coping styles
 - positive aspirations
 - positive relations with others
 - Confidence
 - global wellbeing.

Evidence from Youth Connectedness project (2)

- These relationships between group family variables and outcomes might be explained by other factors
- Coping styles and dyadic variables (relationships with fathers and mothers) examined for mediation effects
- Family identity and family cohesion were still strongest predictors of wellbeing, although other variables partially mediated.

How might FSC be operationalised?

- We will want to know whether or not FSC enables families to carry out the functions identified as integral to family wellbeing

- Amongst other factors, we would want to measure:

Internal cohesion

Intersubjectivity

Trust

Reciprocity

Commitment of family members to group

Presence of rituals and other mutual activities that foster a sense of belonging

Conclusions (1)

- Diversity is a fact of family life, and we need to work with it in order to foster family wellbeing
- We need to identify further the core functions of family life, since this is the offered definition of family wellbeing (the ability to carry out functions)
- Commitment to the group signals the difference between a family group and any other group of people (workmates, flatmates)
- New forms of commitment need to be fostered and honoured

Conclusions (2)

- New forms of commitment need to be fostered and honoured (civil unions, informal commitments - “what is the point of all this?”) in order to create a sense of family identity
- Negotiation and decision-making skills need to be taught and fostered in family groups in order to cope with change and difference

A model of family wellbeing

