Family in the Context of Migration: Challenges of Inclusion in Multicultural Australia

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INTRODUCTION

The family is one of the main institutions of society. Virtually everyone, in all societies, is brought up in a family context. They are places where the young are nurtured, where socialisation occurs and where inter-generational legacies are transmitted.

Families do not exist in isolation. They need to be situated within the changing socio-economic environment of contemporary societies as well as within processes of cultural and social change.

Family structures, practices and behaviours are not simply imposed by governments and other agencies but are chosen, and actively developed, albeit within particular social and cultural contexts and constraints. The systems of migration have an important impact on the family and the kinship relationships. Strict migration laws break up traditional family structures, reduce family support structures and limit the connection between generations.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the issues of families of culturally diverse backgrounds in the context of migration and settlement. I will do this by critiquing the definition of family, examining the impact of migration and settlement processes on families and conclude by examining the broader societal factors that impact on families in Australia.

DEFINING "THE FAMILY"

As in other aspects of social life, there is a great variation in family structures across cultures. The factors that are taken into account of a definition of family includes:

- Connections with other kin

- Marriage patterns and norms (who is permitted to marry whom, how spouses are selected, monogamy-polygamy, who is allowed to live with whom)

- Approaches to divorce and re-marriage

- Structure of families and roles which individuals play (wife, husband)

- Parenting and step-parenting (Booth et. al. 1997; McDonald 1995; De Vaus 2004).

Families are as diverse as the people making them up and they are constantly changing. In 1994 the National Council for the International Year of the Family (NCIYF) formally re-defined the family to include:

> Two parents with dependent and older children, sole parent families, step-families, siblings caring for each other, spouse/partners caring for each other, networks of relatives extending well beyond the household, families caring for elderly members and those with disabilities, families whose structures and relationships may differ according to race, ethnicity, religious faith and cultural background (NCIYF 1994:2).

A number of authors point out that, although this definition recognises the diversity of family make-up, the traditional concept of the nuclear family prevails in the Australian culture (Bottomley et. al. 1991). The key trends in western societies identified in writings include:

- Family ties formed around clans or kinship groups have declined over centuries;

- Changes in family size – such as nuclear, single parent households;

- There is a trend towards free choice of spouse (usually through romantic love);

- High level of rights for women, particularly as women have entered the workforce;

- Patrilineal inheritance eg. children taking on the surname of the father; and

- Increasing efforts to promote the rights of the child (Hartley 1995, Weston et.al. 2001).

These parameters pose major challenges in multicultural societies in a number of ways: In western developed cultures, the processes of modernisation and industrialisation have changed the nature of families to *nuclear* families, often consisting of parents and children. Gill Bottomley states that there is an ideology

of the family often adopted which presents a "naturalness" of the nuclear family (in Bottomley et. al. 1991).

Many families across the world still identify on the basis of kinship and definitions of family are broader and extended. This is reflected in the language. For example the word "uncle" could be maternal or paternal uncle. Many cultures have complex word systems to reflect kinship relationship. This is often not recognised by institutional processes and systems that define family and kinship based on nuclear family structures. This becomes problematic in many elements of life starting from the migration process (who is allowed to migrate as part of the family) and extending to many areas of life such housing and accommodation arrangements and social welfare payments (Batrouney & Stone 1998; De Vaus & Qu 1998; Morrisey et.al. 1991).

Australia is a multicultural country with over 40 per cent of its population being born overseas or the child of someone born overseas. Migration impacts continue over generations. We must acknowledge that we talk about "multicultural families" but each family, even within the same culture, is different and carries within it a set of complexities relating to gender, class, education, and regional influences.

In the migration process, this definition of nuclear family often causes problems for families as who is considered a part of the family and who is considered independent are issues of contention. The systems of migration have an important impact on the family and the kinship relationships. Strict migration laws break up traditional family structures, reduce family support structures and limit the connection between generations. People from non-English speaking backgrounds were identified to be less likely to live near parents and relatives (Millward 1998; De Vaus 2004).

When considering family, we tend to work around the human life cycle of child, youth and ageing. However, we need to be mindful of what definitions we use as some concepts may be problematic eg. who is old and who is young. The concept of older generation varies across cultures. In a study that I undertook of ageing in the Muslim community (over 14 ethnic communities) the definition of old age varied from 40 to 70+. The definition of who is a young person is equally problematic. In some cultures, a young person who is not married and in others you are no longer young by the time you reach 16 or 18 (Babacan 1998).

MIGRATION, SETTLEMENT AND FAMILIES

When people arrive in Australia, there is a stage in which they adjust or settle. The term settlement refers to the period following an immigrant's arrival in a new country. The National Population Council (1988) defined *settlement* as:

> The process by which an immigrant establishes economic viability and social networks following immigration in order to contribute to, and make full use of,

opportunities generally available in the receiving society (Cited in DIMIA 2003, p. 1).

Cox (1996) points out that, "it is the period during which immigrants need, depending on each person's situation, to find housing and a source of income, to develop or find an adequate means of communicating with existing residents, and to begin building a satisfactory personal and social life in their new environment" (Cox, 1996, p. 1).

In other words, settlement is a process of adjusting to a new society. It is about making a new start, finding your place in society, playing a role and feeling as much at home in the new place as in the country of origin. Adelman et. al. (1994) see settlement as promoting long-term equality of outcomes in relation to resources and power in society. The process of adjustment to a new society is dependent on many factors and it is an ongoing process. It is a dynamic process and involves the interface of the social, psychological and political dimensions of the person/family entering Australia and the society that receives them. The impression created by initial settlement experiences has a lasting impact on the settlement process. This includes what services are available, what attitudes exist towards the newly arrived and what government policies are in place. The settlement phase is greatly affected by the host society's (i.e. Australia's) reaction to the newly arrived. The situation will determine the new class stratification, political system, power relations and the economic reality of newly arrived migrants. The level of resources, the presence of family and the existence of supportive networks are also important in determining successful settlement. The presence of the ethnic group in Australia, the support of ethno-specific as well as mainstream structures and services is seen as fundamental in successful settlement (Wooden et.al. 1994; Cox 1987; Jupp et.al. 1991).

The settlement and adjustment process for the family is a particularly complex and time-consuming process. Many factors of family life are renegotiated subject to the pressures of the new life. The family often falls in the "private sphere" that is different from the public sphere of work/employment, politics. Thus the home environment is not much understood by the external world. In ethnic communities the language of the private sphere is often different as ethnic communities often use a language other than English at home. For many migrants, particularly refugees, who have been uprooted by war, violence and migration, the struggle to keep families together is about struggle for human rights and justice (Morrisey et. al. 1991; Hartley 1995).

In a study of settlement and adjustment in Australia, Wooden et. al. have concluded that, compared with men, women are more likely to have limited economic means and be subjected to traditional family constraints on behaviour. Separation from family and kin-based social support systems is a particularly important factor for women. Unfavourable employment and housing circumstances, prejudice and discrimination in the labour market and in the community also have disproportionate impacts on women.

Migration places stresses in the family that may take many years to resolve. Some of the key stresses include: changed economic status – either loss of status or better economic conditions that alters relationships, conflict and stress of re-establishing themselves, possible torture and trauma and adapting to a different environment of language, religion and culture. In many instances families are forced to shift from being used to collective responsibility for social problems to taking on individual responsibility in the post-migration phase.

The stresses of migration have brought about problems such as domestic violence, poverty and inter-generational conflict with children regarding marriage customs, restriction of freedom for women and clashes over behaviour and mode of dress. The post-migration re-negotiation of family life takes place around many issues including:

•   Approaches to work (who works eg. women),

•   Role of women in the household,

•   Decision making processes in the family,

•   Individual rights and responsibilities in the household, and
•   Cultural norms (eg. dress codes).

The migration process places considerable tension on family cohesion. Some of the dimensions that are affected include:

•   Structure – who lives with whom;

•   Association – communication and activities shared with relatives;

•   Function – transfers and exchanges of money and goods, socio-economic status (or loss of);

•   Affect – feelings of affection, closeness, satisfaction with relationships; and

•   Value systems – beliefs about family culture, obligations, and role definition.

The family in the migration process loses considerable support systems. Sometimes other members of the community become symbolic uncles, aunties and grandparents in order to compensate for this. This depends on the size of the community, social cohesion within the community and the resources available to them. The positive contribution of such figures and relationships on young people and their emotional health is well documented. Where there is a small community or there is considerable fragmentation then this is not possible and other resources are needed. However access to services that are culturally

appropriate are a significant issue raised by many families. Other times family support can be provided by service agencies (Wehrly et. al. 1999; Morrisey et. al. 1991).

Families stay connected over time through inter-generational transmission of legacies. Legacies help family members articulate family identity, learn more about family history and provide succeeding generations with information about the family culture and ethnicity. Transmission of legacies leads to cultural continuity. But these are selective processes and depend upon favourable conditions. Some of the factors that influence transmission of values include personal characteristics of the first generation (education, age, gender); family interaction variables (parenting styles, approaches to discipline, nature of marital relationships); and social environment (assimilationist pressures, oppression, loss of economic status, presence of other community members).

The process of acculturation, it is argued, breaks up the transfer of legacies. Immigrant acculturation and the development of young people are highly debated areas. A number of areas are identified in the literature as problematic in the process of acculturation:

• Diminishing parental authority

• Increasing influence of peers, rejection of conformity values

• Eroding of ethnic cultural heritage including loss of language

• Difficulties with family communication patterns

• Perceived roles and behaviours

• Selection of spouses or partners or dating

• Caring responsibilities, especially of elders and conflicting role demands from society

• Lack of achievement values, rejection of parental aspirations

• Lack of collectivism values, more individual (Harvey 2001; Booth et. al. 1997; Merali 2004; Hartley 1995)

As family is the structure for negotiation and development of identity and connection to the broader society, multicultural families can be sites of conflict, tension and stress. All child protection literature indicates that stress on families is one of the factors of risk to children – psychological and physical risk (Giglio 1997; Koroma et. al. 2002).

Thus all the more reason we need to ensure that there is adequate mechanisms to support multicultural families. This raises serious access and equity considerations.

ACCESS AND EQUITY ISSUES

Australia is a country of immigrants and issues of immigration, ethnicity, cultural diversity and race have formed the debates of our nation building. Over six million migrants have come to Australia since the end of World War II. This mosaic of cultures has created a nation unique in its diverse composition. Diversity and inclusiveness have to now form the backbone of every society. Issues relating to diversity now need to be confronted and acknowledged in more integral ways than ever before, as there are consequences for not addressing these issues. Thus our society is diverse and there are global, cultural, social, economic and political imperatives to accept this diversity.

In the globalised world we live in we face a number of challenges. The first is the challenge of being an inclusive Society – one that is values diversity, fosters understanding and freedom from all kinds of discrimination and racism based on ethnicity, religion or language. The second is the challenge of equality – where all citizens, regardless of their ethnic, religious or linguistic backgrounds, will be treated equally, be able to take part in all aspects of civic life, have access and equity to services and programs and be able to achieve equality of outcomes in all walks of life. Social exclusion of minorities will mean that a significant proportion of our society does not actively take part in our society. Our challenge is to build a society in which all members of our community can be empowered to participate in all aspects of their lives, engage with government and become active global and local citizens (Babacan 2003; Barry & Hallet 1998; Pierson 2001).

Access and equity were aspects of the principle of *universalism* in the delivery of government services, based on the concept of universal entitlement. The access and equity strategy recognised that, while services may be universally applicable, they may not be equally accessible if they were uniformly designed and delivered, because the clientele may not be uniform (OMA 1992).

Community attitudes greatly influence the potential to achieve successful settlement and integration to Australian society. The public debates in Australia concerning immigrants reflect confusion, anxiety, scepticism, ambivalence, lack of knowledge and modern racism. Particular communities have been impacted on significantly such as the Asian and Muslim communities. Pettman (1992) points to how particular approaches that are dominant may be embedded in key organisations and social arrangements such as the judiciary, parliament, health and educational systems. She states:

"Institutions validate rules, roles and certain understandings about entitlements which are often seen as fair or universal, but which actually reflect and protect dominant social interests – through, for example, understandings about who is a good parent, a reliable tenant or borrower, or the best for the job. They are activated by bureaucrats, social workers, receptionists and so on, whose own perceptions, priorities and values are fused with cultural meanings that speak of their own personal histories and social location. Within particular constraints and in their own ways, they do their job." (Pettman, 1992, pp. 57-58)

Studies indicate that immigrants and refugees face barriers to accessing services and resources throughout the settlement stages: cultural, physical, language, psychological and geographical access issues become serious. There are important reasons why access and equity become significant when considering families of culturally diverse backgrounds. These include a lack of availability of culturally appropriate services, a lack of institutional recognition of family diversity, negative attitudes, dominant societal values and norms, language and religious barriers and social exclusion. The National Council for the International Year of the Family (1994) noted the barriers ethnic families face in accessing support services and stressed the inequities facing families of non-English speaking backgrounds.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Batrouney and Stone (1998) point to a general policy shift away from state-based supports for families towards the promotion of family "independence" and self-reliance. They argue that there is a popular perception of the cohesiveness of migrant families compared with Australian-born families and that migrant families are already relatively self-reliant. They strongly underline that this stereotype is challenged by factors such as the specific characteristics and needs of migrant families as well as the impact of family and migration policies. Furthermore, families from culturally diverse backgrounds may hold values that favour close interaction, mutual support and self-reliance across the extended families. However, a lack of resources and the likelihood of family members living overseas prevent them from realising these values (Batrouney and Stone 1998; De Vaus & Qu 1998). Similarly, De Vaus and Qu note that ethnicity is a source of inequality when considering family and point out that some ethnic groups are more vulnerable than others.

The discussion on access and equity and barriers to service provision illustrates the need to critique our understanding, perception and practice frameworks. We need to ask ourselves some key questions as academics, service providers, community leaders and policy makers:

• What definitions of family are we using?
• What understanding do we have of the experiences and struggles of families of culturally diverse backgrounds?

- What access and equity policies do we have in place? What support systems or services have we provided?
- What policy issues pose challenges to us as key stakeholders?
- What definitions and conceptions are we using in our analysis, diagnosis and service provision around key terms such as family, service delivery, access?
- What assessment are we making of risk and abuse to children in multicultural contexts? What are our tools for diagnosis? What cultural norms inform them?
- What evidence base do we have for our work – research, other data?

These questions are valid and need to be asked, debated and addressed. Different ethnic groups have varying approaches to the family which pose challenges for professionals – in making assessments, developing cross cultural competence, building inclusive policies and practices and in developing appropriate interventions (Welbourne 2002; Hartley 2002; Wehrly et. al. 1999). We meet these challenges head on, as our strength is in our people, our children, and our diversity. Expenditure and resources spent on families is an investment in our future. We need to ensure that we invest in all parts of our society and not just some segments.

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