

Flexible Families: New directions in Australian Communities

Edited by June Inglis and Lyla Rogan; Pluto Press 1994; 249 pp; \$19.95.

'This is your life!' I thought to myself as I read this smorgasbord of papers about aspects of the family compiled by ACOSS as a contribution to the International Year of the Family. I was interested in it as a parent of two children living in a chaotic double-income household with a SNAG. It brought back ghosts from my past as a struggling part-time family lawyer and resource worker for several community organisations. It also raised many policy trials and tribulations I came across in my work as a legal policy officer on a project reviewing childcare, aged care and disability services legislation. I can recommend the publication to anyone who plans to follow, or has followed, similar paths.

The publication is directed at 'covering many issues central to improving the economic circumstances and quality of life of low income and disadvantaged families'. In the broadest sense most of the papers fit this theme. I found disconcerting, but interesting, the variety of levels at which these papers address issues and the differences in their writing style and approach.

Some of the essays included in *Flexible Families*, such as those by Farrar, Saunders and Cass, are statistical research-based academic analyses of general trends in families and family policy. I found Farrar's analysis of the changing role of the state in family life the most interesting of these macro level papers. He uses themes surrounding debate over families to assess the desirability of a range of family policies. Having well-developed outcome measures is important given renewed government interest in 'the family' and increased pressure to account for money spent on programs. Some of the bases Farrar uses to assess policy, such as opportunity for individual development or extent of increase in social participation, would be hard to measure accurately. On the other hand, as Saunders shows, there are increasingly sophisticated techniques to measure monetary and 'social wage' (goods and services) income.

Moving from the general to the particular, Fine directly addresses and goes some way towards resolving one family policy debate: whether formal care support for older people in the community strengthens or undermines the family.

Other essays in the book are more historical and descriptive. Walshe discusses support for and attitudes to single parent families in this vein. McCreadie writes on developments in the industrial relations arena for workers with family responsibilities.

As you would expect, some papers focus on setting the agenda and framework for future family policy. Disney, Cass and Gledhill share support for a more integrated approach to family policy. One of Gledhill's concerns is how to overcome the obstacles presented by our current constitutional arrangements. In my more jaded moments as a law reformer I have considered that abolishing the States is the only solution. Gledhill is more realistic. For Disney and Cass, integration means including issues such as transport, housing and regional development in family policy. These can have tremendous impact on family welfare but governments often ignore them in the battle over funding for more overtly family-targeted programs.

Breathing fresh air into the book are two consciousness-shifting essays. Cox bursts from the constraints underlying the current debate about work and family needs. She questions the assumption that the family is necessarily the ideal care and service provider. She argues that farming out what have been traditionally regarded as core household tasks to the marketplace (e.g. care of children) is part of an ongoing process that has occurred over the last 200 years as the family unit has become smaller. Collard, Crowe, Harries and Taylor write about important elements of Aboriginal family and kinship life on the basis of research conducted by Aboriginal people with families in Western Australia. The article reports in a direct fashion what people say about their family structures and values and their relationship to the non-Aboriginal

world. It clearly conveys the complexity, subtlety and fluidity of values and relationships in WA Aboriginal culture. The authors argue that respect for these values and the space for Aboriginal people to develop their own systems of survival are essential for any solution. This requires an approach way beyond the provision of 'culturally sensitive services' referred to in some other essays.

Two of the papers sit rather uncomfortably with the rest. I empathise strongly with Burrow's defence of public expenditure and public education in particular but I find some of the links she makes with family policy unconvincing. She suggests that a 40% decrease in parental contact time in the last 20 years may be a reason for strains in the fabric of community cohesiveness and the need to rethink education. I think this assertion requires further examination. Scutt's analysis of the narrow topic of Family Court judges' attitudes to gender and homosexuality, while interesting, is dated. As all the cases she discusses are between seven and seventeen years old her focus is definitely on the past rather than the future.

Overall, despite its rather eclectic approach, I think *Flexible Families* is worth a read for anyone involved in the family policy area. One way or another it reflects what I have found to be the state of play in the family policy arena. The major piece missing in my view is an analysis of what, for the purposes of family policy, should 'count' as a family. Farrar suggests that policy is moving towards allowing members to choose for themselves the kinds of relations they want to establish with each other and the outside world. If this is so, governments responsible for providing legal and support frameworks will be facing a number of dilemmas. Does entitlement to family support become a matter of self-identification or should the focus be on dependency? Does the concept of 'the family' become totally meaningless? Some of these difficulties are already becoming apparent in recent industrial relations cases. This is where the issue of flexible families becomes really interesting.

ROBIN MCKENZIE

Robin McKenzie is a legal policy specialist in Sydney.