

**Issues in developing a conceptual
framework for 'Family Wellbeing'
National Family Wellbeing Symposium
ANU
20-21 June 2007**

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**The views expressed in this presentation are those of the author
and do not necessarily represent the view of the New Zealand
Families Commission**

The Families Commission

- Crown owned entity established under its own Act in 2004
- funded by government
- acts as “advocate for the interests of families generally”
- not permitted to act on behalf of individual families, or in particular cases

Functions include:

- encouraging informed debate
- increasing public awareness of matters relating to the interests of families
- encouraging the development of policies that promote the interests of families
- stimulating and promoting research

Structure

- Full-time Chief Commissioner, Dr Rajen Prasad
- Plus five part-time Commissioners
- Approx 35 staff
- Including Policy and Research team of approximately 12

Wellbeing frameworks in New Zealand

No developed and accepted model of “Family Wellbeing”

- MSD produces annual “Social Report”
 - Nine domains; 2-3 indicators per domain
 - Mostly individual-based
- Children’s Commissioner is planning an indicator report for children – annual ‘scorecard’ type report
- StatsNZ is conducting a Review of Family Statistics

Wellbeing frameworks in New Zealand (cont)

- Families Commission is developing a “State of New Zealand Families” report
 - Will not be Family Wellbeing indicator report
 - Rather aim is to “tell a story/stories” about the key aspects of current state of families, with implications for future and future policies
 - Will use statistical trends/measures but supplemented with qualitative information and consultative information from families

Families Commission approach to family wellbeing

- Do not have an explicit developed 'family wellbeing' framework/model
- Our thinking is influenced by ecological model
 - With families at the centre of inter-related systems that impact on them
- Tend to glide pragmatically over conceptual difficulties
- The organisation and content of our work programme, though, reveals and implied model

The Commission's work programme – reflects its approach to family wellbeing

Four main areas:

1. Positive family functioning

- Promoting parenting, & parenting skills and knowledge
- Promoting positive family relationships

2. Physical and social environments that promote family/whānau wellbeing

- Preventing family violence
- Promoting family-friendly environments

Work Programme (cont'd)

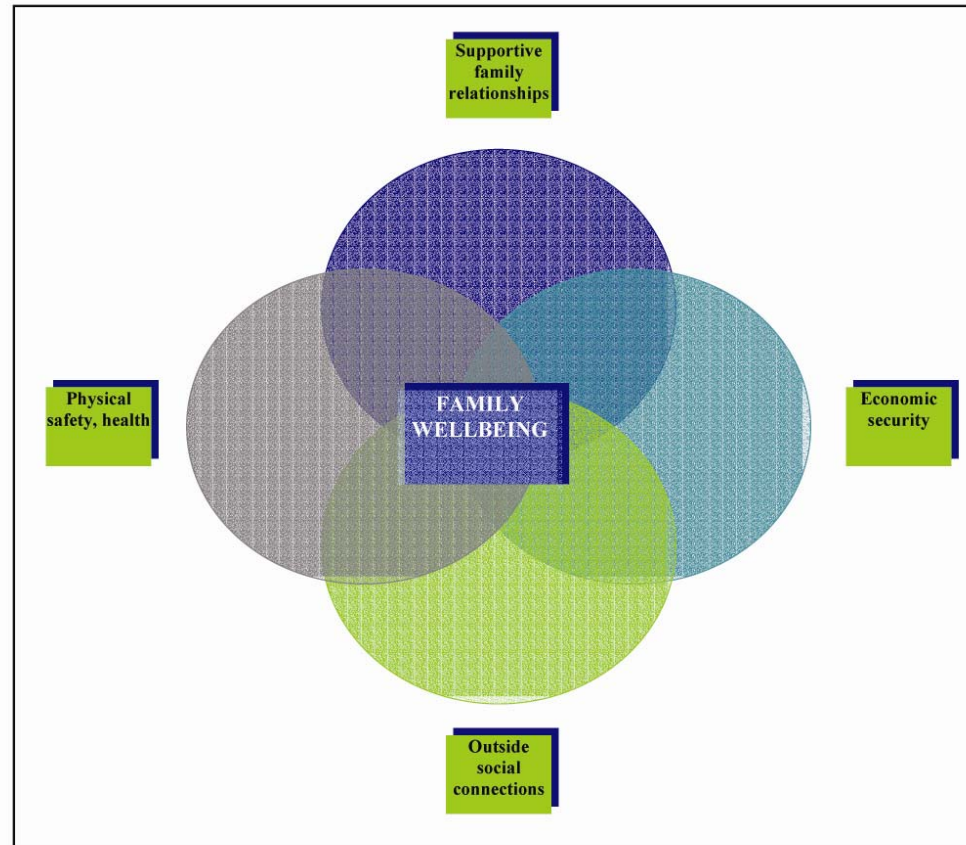
3. Economic circumstances of families

- Work/life balance: flexible work, childcare, out-of-school services
- Family incomes

4. Family knowledge base

- Research funding
- Community engagement
- Community consultation (incl “The Couch”)

Work programme closely matches the Families Australia Wellbeing Framework



Desirable characteristics of a family wellbeing framework/model

1. First, in respect of *outcomes*, ultimately it is individual wellbeing that matters
2. Intra-family differences in/distribution of wellbeing matters
 - avoid family as “black box”
 - (eg, work-life balance; family violence; incomes)
 - Creates measurement difficulties (sometimes ways around this (eg equivalisation in incomes) other times not so easy

Desirable characteristics of a family wellbeing framework/model (cont)

- 3 At same time families are interdependent units that share income generation and caring activities
 - Framework should be capable of recognising families' collective goals and aspirations
 - “caring for” other families members has its own rewards, but is also a process of equivalising wellbeing across family members

Desirable characteristics of a family wellbeing framework/model (cont)

4. Able to deal with time, family change through time
 - with individuals, dealing with same person through time; whereas composition of the collective Family changes through time

 - some measurement issues can be dealt with (eg longitudinal surveys like HILDA, SoFIE manage this)

Desirable characteristics of a family wellbeing framework/model (cont)

- 5 Able to deal with families across households
 - sometimes self-definition adequate; sometimes not
 - Callister/Birks (FC 06): our terminology/data organisation methods can distort reality (“sole parent” “absent father” etc)
 - they prefer concept of mother-child-father “triad”:
 - emphasises family as network
 - focuses on processes, not attributes
 - SNZ family stats review: multi-household families key aspect of development of conceptual framework

Desirable characteristics of a family wellbeing framework/model (cont)

5 Capable of handling cultural differences

- In NZ: both Māori and Pākehā concepts of family
 - Whānau does not equate to European “family”; or even “extended family”: has different place in Māori society
- “Whānau ora” is not same as “family wellbeing”

So, where does this leave us?

- a big ask for any model/framework?
- fundamentally we want to try to capture two things:
 1. The collective wellbeing of individual family members
 2. That part of family wellbeing which is the wellbeing of the entity itself over and above the wellbeing of individual family members

I. The collective wellbeing of individual family members

- domains and indicators is the straightforward part
 - Know from research what factors matter
- complexity lies in conceptualising and aggregating wellbeing across the family
 - but practitioners routinely do that already.
 - In social work, health and education it is standard to consider the wellbeing of the whole family, not just the client/patient/student.

I. The collective wellbeing of individual family members (cont)

Take medical example:

- the choice of treatment may well vary depending on level of support from other family members and their circumstances and state of health.
- Equally I may need support, even treatment, coping with the ill-health of another family member

Conceptual framework and measurement needs similar:

- 'family wellbeing' in health domain is sum of each member's health (however measured)
- where each member's health is function of own health plus interactions with each other family member

II. The wellbeing of the entity itself

- A rather trickier problem?
- At one far extreme: some might argue there is nothing additional to measure
 - It can all be captured in terms of various dimensions of the relationships between family members .
- Perhaps better to think in terms of social capital theory:
 - “family capital”

II. The wellbeing of the entity itself (cont)

Possible benefits of 'family capital' approach:

1. It allows the notion of 'investment'
 - common to invest in the wellbeing or healthiness of the family as a unit. The stuff of building and maintaining the wellbeing of one's family
 - allows the complexities and trade-offs in these processes to be considered (intra-family issue)

II. The wellbeing of the entity itself (cont)

2. Allows a role for time

- in terms of the individual's and family's life course
- and multi-generationally – those tangible and intangible aspects of family wellbeing that have been passed down to me from grandparents and great-grandparents

3. Can extend widely

- eg to the traditions and rituals that are part of what bonds a family. These can be small or big but add to the strength and resilience of a family

II. The wellbeing of the entity itself (cont)

4. Allows for varying degrees of “extendedness”
 - from the dyad, parent-child, or couple relationship,
 - through the nuclear family
 - to the wider extended family grouping

II. The wellbeing of the entity itself (cont)

- Is this approach measurable?
 - not sure
 - Social capital theory is of only limited encouragement on that front

To Conclude

- “Family wellbeing” has become an established part of the lexicon
- Used regularly – and usefully – by practitioners
- Used – rather more loosely and vaguely – by policy-makers and politicians

- Conceptual underpinnings, and measurement, are lagging behind
- But there are ways forward