family ADVOCACY

PO Box 502
Epping NSW 1710

305/16-18 Cambridge St
Epping NSW 2121

Phone: (02) 9869 0866
Facsimile: (02) 9869 0722

Record 136

File Number 10109

Author: Cox, Eva

Title: The place of family in social policy

Original source: Family Matters Number 34

Resource type: Written **Publication Date:** 01/05/93

Publisher Info: Aust. Institute of Family Studies

Abstract

The author examines the place of family in social policy in the past and proposes a new role in the future, in light of the fact that economic policies are under scrutiny in the aftermath of the decade of greed. Cox's main point is that economic policies which do not take the household sector into account are not going to represent accurate accounts of society. **Keyword: Families**

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THE PLACE OF FAMILY IN SOCIAL POLICY

What should be the position of families and households in social and economic policy? EVA COX argues that there are many aspects of interpersonal relationships in good families that we need to incorporate in the more public parts of our lives. On the other hand, she says, policy makers often have unrealistic expectations of the capacity of these small and fragile units.

Eva Cox is Director of Distaff Associates. this is an edited version of her address to the Families and Social Policy Plenary session of the Institutes Fourth Australian Family Research Conference in February.

Australians are struggling to emerge from a position of over-commitment to a flawed policy agenda that put too much faith in market forces. In the sad aftermath of the so-named 'decade of greed', with its focus on money as the desired good, social policy should recognise that most people are actually more interested in quality of life, and see money as a means rather than an end.

Flaws in the economic model have been addressed in many articles and books: the simple assumption that markets work and governments do not, has caused problems in the United States and the United Kingdom, to which no easy solutions have been found.

As current economic theories are under scrutiny, I would propose some reforming of paradigms, and suggest that this should be the introduction of another sector - the family and household units in which major exchanges occur, for it is they that underpin the two visible sectors of markets and government. It is estimated that families add about 40 per cent of Gross Domestic Product, but it is rarely seen as part of production and exchange cycles. If mentioned at all, it is defined only as the source of individual and group consumption.

This public and private (family) divide is probably crucial to many policy issues, with decisions taken here influencing the quality of life, and the maintenance of community and society.

The public sphere comprises those activities that take place in paid work, in political and community activities. It covers the purchase of goods and services, recreation and other activities occurring outside the home. This is the sphere of 'economically rational man', presumed to operate in his self -interest in recent fashionable economics.

Relationships in households are based on blood, law, property and, presumably, on a sense of mutual obligation. Once the producer and consumer of its own services and products, the household became a purchaser of goods and services, using the benefits of cash income. However, the traded goods and services have only partially replaced the internal but often invisible family economy.

The household has decreased in size, even over the past two generations, but has increased the area it occupies. We have an

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increasing number of single-person households and an increasing proportion of households where no-one is home full-time providing services. The last decade has seen unprecedented changes in Australian households: more women entered the paid workforce, with female participation rising by 40 per cent compared with male rises of 14 per cent. Thus the gender gap is closing and some predict that by the end of the century the workforce will be half female. At the same time, part-time jobs are expanding and there is talk of the workplace returning to the home, at least for some people, with the technology of phones, computers and faxes allowing more geographic scattering and work-at-home options. Other changes are our higher education levels and delayed child-bearing.

So today's families are very different from those of earlier times. We may still have strong ties with relations and close friends, but these often involve telephone calls and car trips rather than trips to the next room or next door. Despite this, a great deal of support is offered to those in our immediate networks, although this does not usually involve the level of hands-on care which was once available. Most women and some men provide services to others within the household, and often in other households, as part of their everyday routines.

Social policy has been primarily concerned with those issues that have moved from the private (family) to the public (paid) sphere. The regulation of the workplace has only ever applied to the paid workplace - health, education and community services were only the focus of public concern in so far as they were public issues. Always they were underpinned, albeit invisibly, by the household sector.

The second wave of feminism is responsible for the process of putting many of the household issues on the public agenda. There is no longer official acceptance that the privacy of the home allows forced sex or violence; child care services that replace home caring have become a major public policy debate; the issues of family care have arrived in the workplace; and the paid workplace in the home is being recognised through outwork support programs.

The feminist perspective provides a point of view of social and economic policies not often available to those who set the policy parameters. It reveals the often implicit division in theories and values between those activities and areas of operation seen traditionally as male, and those associated with women. The economics of the family is not part of mainstream discourse.

Ongoing debates about paid and unpaid work were analysed by Marilyn Waring (1988) in her book *Counting for Nothing*. Her critique of the way in which National Accounts and Gross National Products ignore unpaid work suggests that these omissions seriously undermine the framework in which public policy is devised. In any discussion of family policy this is almost self-evident. One of the characteristics of families is that most of the goods and services exchanges occurring within families and households are non-monetary transactions and therefore, by usual economic definition, invisible. There is a theoretical glass wall between those items traded in the market or

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produced for that purpose and exchanges within affinity groups.

This has been noted in public policy. The ratification of the ILO Convention on Workers with Family Responsibilities, the subsequent campaigns on sharing the load, the pressure on workplaces to make them more family-friendly, and the recognition of the need for child care and elder care all acknowledge the changing relationship of the workplace and household.

Academics are recognising this slowly. Particularly for male researchers, housework and child-rearing have become a fertile and legitimate field. However, it is of concern that the current directions for much of this research tend to put these female experiences into a male-norm framework. We move easily into valuing housework by looking at its paid equivalent and translating it into cash amounts, we cost care in terms of day care, and we cost the care of the infirm in terms of the costs of nursing-home beds.

This raises a broad mainstream economic trend relating quite closely to future discussion in family policy. The early industrial revolution in Britain moved household production into factories which spun and wove and made household goods for sale back to consumers. The present post-industrial revolution is moving services (whether entertainment or personal care) from households into the public domain.

Skills developed in households should inform our service delivery industry. Production and exchange in households and family work very differently than the marketplace. In its best manifestation, elements of altruism, empathy and mutuality intersect with the tasks.

Richard Titmuss's (1970) *The Gift Relationship*, based on a study of blood donors (paid and unpaid), has two noteworthy conclusions: one is the right to give, to be altruistic; the other is the definition of altruism as giving to a stranger as an acknowledgment of common humanity. In families we give to those who are familiar, with the giver assuming some level of reciprocity, some right to expect assistance when needed. Titmuss defined social policy as the giving to strangers, translated as community-funded services provided for those in need. He rejected a charity model, in which the gifts were selectively targeted only, as failing the test of accepting strangers as similarly entitled to assistance. The provision of collective rather than family care can be seen as examples of the services which wander from paid to unpaid sectors and vice versa (for example, child care). By taking into equations and discussions the hidden world of families and care, the policy outcomes may improve the quality of lives and social environments.

It may be significant that Titmuss's daughter (Ann Oakley), against considerable opposition, was at that same time exploring the sociology of housework. This is just one indication that the subject of housework has taken two decades to become legitimate. Even so, there is still little recognition of its peculiar characteristics. Instead, it is subjected to the inappropriate frameworks of industrial jobs, ignoring the possible benefits of looking at the basis for sharing and altruism (giving) that families can illustrate.

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This leads to another area of current research and debate which is rarely mixed with economic debates - that is, what is called the 'ethic of care'. This covers the sets of exchange relationships that are manifested in personal relationships and affect the process of labour in families. From this, I am selecting those aspects which seem to be best used in conjunction with the usual social policy concerns. The concepts of care and acceptances are very much part of the language of family. Family relationships are assumed to be affective, not instrumental, and the processes holistic, not easily broken into tasks as workplace jobs may be. Until recently, there has been little work on the nature of the differences.

Hilary Land (1991) describes caring time as the time available to assist in small ways - for example, to pick up the wool for a knitter who can no longer bend. Caring time completes the care process in a way which validates the person cared for, makes them feel important. This should be defined, therefore, as combining the physical tasks with relating to the person.

We recognise this implicitly, but not explicitly, be defining good care as quality time, such as with children. In child care, however, the debate often gets reduced to 'being there', rather than active care as in mothers-at-home. So there is a real need to look at what we mean by care.

This raises the issue of time. It if often assumed that time is an immutable measure, but we need to remember that linear definitions of time used to organise our lives, assume that we do things sequentially, like on assembly lines. The models of tasks are therefore those developed in the industrial workplace. This assumes that tasks are easily separated and distinct, and that they are best accomplished one after the other.

But care time is not amenable to this. Household time is more aptly described as cyclical, like the times of seasons. Most tasks are never completed, they recur and replenish like the full dirty clothes basket. We also deal with them in overlays rather than sequentially, doing various things at one time - putting on the wash, admiring the toddler's drawing, overseeing the baby's safe passage, and making sure the cake is not burning, all while working out what to cook for dinner and listening to mother complain about her arthritis on the phone.

In a study of women in Sweden, Karen Davies (1990) says women often conceive of time as spirals or like a cat's cradle as they mix paid and unpaid responsibilities on a daily basis or over a lifetime. She points out that Newtonian linear time is very much the artefact of modernity and bound to the culture of industrial society.

This is further borne out in a study (Cox and Leonard 1993) recently finished for Telecom, which looked at the use women make of phones in unpaid work/care. It was found that women do much of their care at work. They use the telephone to organise the household - delegating chores, planning and organising tasks so they can be completed in minimum personal time, offering emotional support and personal validation to a child doing homework, or spilling her news or pain over the phone.

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The care debate should cover household modes of interaction and production: the relationships based on tradition, power, emotion and trust, not contract and money as in the paid workplace. These are associated with women, and are less valued in the public sphere than the male-defined abstracted rationality, seen as part of the workplace.

Care in paid workplaces is often seen as different from care provided in households. There are aphorisms on the fact that money cannot buy love, and that assume that payment necessarily distorts relationships. There are assumptions that family-based care relies on ties which over-ride the nature of the tasks. For example, there are assumptions (which never operate in offices and factories) that there is something wrong with others cleaning your house. There is also the assumption that only fulltime housewives do housework and child care, ignoring the figures which indicate that nearly all women do housework, regardless of their workforce status.

This also raises the issue of who benefits. The time use study (Bittman 1991) indicates that the biggest increase in housework occurred for women when they acquired partners, not when they acquired a child. So the issue of managing child care and the actual provision of services needs also to be disentangled. This, together with an analysis of the components of physical, emotional and mental care, would give us a greater understanding of the paid work and household/family care nexus.

We cannot ignore the gender aspects. I do not accept an essentialist view of women as carers and men as aggressors, but I do recognise that these are gendered aspects of the social values placed on those areas of workplace function associated with 'masculine' traits. These tend to be valued more highly financially, and also take up much of the attention in training and credentialling. Therefore when the area of care and the function of family as carer feeds into paid workplaces, the issues of care-work receive low priority in financial support and research, but lots of platitudes.

I would therefore like to deconstruct the care-work nexus briefly and suggest that there are many hidden facets of issues which could and should inform public policy debate. These include the following:

- The components of care (often assumed to be a single function) should be examined. The care of another person requires a range of functions, including the affirmation of the person through relationships, ascertaining their needs, organising the components and the delivery of all or some of these. The sharing of care between the public and private requires this type of analysis to meet the needs for care.

- There should be the recognition that it is still primarily women who are the managers of care, even when they are in paid work. There is ample research evidence to show that women use the phone, maintain the relationships, and organise the care, even when in full-time paid employment.

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- A reassessment of the models of care, developed often in the community, taking into account the various needs of those cared for and assessing the way these can be met (rather than assuming a mass production model) is likely to be best. This should recognise that many family members will be willing and able to maintain the emotional support aspects of care, even when the physical tasks become too difficult.

- There is the need for the development of community-based services that place high value on care skills, and recognise that these are complex and usually involve more than the ability to wash a patient or clean a house. Task analyses mean that many of the services are forced to reduce interaction time which may be an essential part of care - for example, in nursing homes.

Debates sparked by economic rationalists over the past decade presume the public sphere is a representation of the world. Therefore equations have assumed that there were trade-offs between markets and government activities, but failed to include the household sector. This is problematic as households underpin many production and service functions. Not taking these functions into account could easily contribute to the failure of many predictions.

It is therefore possible to suggest that theories of the state which fail to account for the household sector as an active, interactive part of the system are likely to be deficient. This seems self-evident, but most treatises on economic and social policy fail to mention, or give proper attention to, the interaction. So we have sociologies of, an policies for, families in one conference, and the economy in another.

We need to remember that these debates take place in a changing world. The family as it was is no more, but we still need to belong, to be nurtured and cared for. As we change the geography and shapes of our formal families, we often depend on friends or even workmates for some of our emotional needs and our sense of identity.

We need to extend the sense of family much more broadly so we can recognise communality amongst strangers, be able to validate our links in the broader community of paid workplace, community and friendship. We identify ourselves through our links with others and need to remember that, for most of us, families will only be part of our determination of who we are. Therefore, understanding how households and families work is important in understanding how the community relates.

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