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Does the move away from traditional family forms and practices have implications for the quality of community life? This article explores the common assumptions, discusses the literature, and presents key findings from a recent Institute study.

Family and community life

Exploring the decline thesis

Recently, focus on “strong” communities, and concern about the possible “decline” or “break-down” of community, has re-emerged in academic and political discourse, and in the popular media. The aspects of community life that have been the focus of this concern include levels of membership and engagement in things such as community groups and organisations, and levels of trust – including trust in institutions and in people generally, including strangers (Putnam 1995).

These aspects of community life are seen as essential elements of strong and cohesive communities (Portes 1998; Putzel 1997; Cox 1995). They are thought to affect the capacity for community members to come together and cooperate in pursuit of common interests; to sustain an ethos of reciprocity and a common sense of mutualism and belonging (Inglehart 1997; Knack and Keefer 1997; Hughes, Bellamy and Black 1999).

In debates about community strength and decline, there has also been a focus on the quality of family life.

One of the common assumptions underlying these debates is that strong families are the foundation of strong communities. This is evident in current policy frameworks such as the Australian Government’s *Stronger Families and Communities Strategy* (Howard and Newman 2000), which promotes the family alongside the community as traditional institutions that provide the most effective source and form of social support, and relies heavily on the assumption that these institutions strengthen each other.

It is therefore not surprising that the changes that have occurred in family life are seen as a threat to the quality of community life. Concern is raised about declining marriage and fertility rates, increased rates of de facto marriage, divorce and lone-parent families, and increased rates of female workforce participation. It is argued that these changes in family life have weakened family bonds and the quality of relationships within families. This in turn is thought to threaten community (*The Age* 2001; Fukuyama 1999; Putnam 1995).



While this interpretation of family change and what it means for community life is a dominant one, the relationship between family and community life has rarely been the focus of theoretical or empirical scrutiny. To enhance the development of informed, evidence-based policy, this article does three things. First, the thesis about family and community decline is outlined in detail. Next, the paper reports findings from recent analyses of survey data from the Australian Institute of Family Studies *Families Social Capital and Citizenship* project that explored the thesis empirically. Finally, the policy and research implications of these findings are discussed.

The family decline thesis

The dominant interpretation of the changes that have occurred in family life and what they mean for community life, as outlined above, is one of family and community decline. We call this “the family decline thesis”. According to this interpretation, the changes that have occurred in family

life (including decreased marriage and fertility rates, increased rates of de facto marriage, divorce and lone-parent families, increased rates of female labour force participation, and increased individualism in intimate relationships) amount to the breakdown of family life. And as “strong families” are seen as the foundation of “strong communities”, this breakdown of family life is thought to lead to the breakdown of community (The Age 2001; Fukuyama 1999; Putnam 1995).

To elaborate: according to the decline thesis, the changes that have occurred in family life have weakened the family as an institution, and elevated in importance individual needs, relationships and pursuits outside the family. For example, divorce and separation represent the breaking of bonds, trust and reciprocity within families. No longer held together by law, tradition or financial necessity, relationships are inherently tentative and unstable, and are only continued in so far as they are thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for individuals to stay in them (Giddens 1992: 58). In addition, changes in gender roles are also seen as a threat. In particular, women’s increased workforce participation is seen as a threat to family relationships as it limits possibilities for family interaction and lessens the need for women to form or maintain relationships with men (Misztal 1996).

According to the decline thesis, the weakening of family life is thought in turn to lead to the breakdown of community. The assumption underlying this link is that strong families “strengthen” communities. While the mechanisms by which families strengthen communities are rarely articulated, families are seen as having an important role in the creation of social networks and as a conduit to broader forms of community engagement. Marriage and family formation are seen as important life transitions in this respect. Marriage embeds individuals within a network of extended family and friends, and child bearing and home ownership are associated with greater levels of neighbourhood attachment and involvement (Glezer 1997: 9).

In addition, families are seen as the key site for the transmission of behavioural norms (Winter 2000). For example, if children experience good quality connections with community and civil society through their families, this may lead to an increased propensity for those children to become engaged and active citizens

in adulthood. More generally, where children are exposed to cooperative behaviour early in life they are more likely to become cooperative adults (Mark 2002). However, family life is often idealised in this respect. As Cox (1995: 28-29) says, “it is assumed [rather than demonstrated] that families will provide models of good relationships and civic virtues”.

It is also widely believed that family relationships are essential for the development of basic trust (King 2002). As quoted in Mistzal (1996: 157): “It is an everyday and valued conception in our society that the family is the primordial source and location of trust. The expression, “If you can not trust your family, then whom can you trust?” has a large value and ideological appeal for us” (Barber 1983: 26).

To summarise the decline thesis, the breakdown of family life is thought to lead to the breakdown of community life, as strong families are seen as the foundation of strong communities. If marriage and child-bearing are a conduit to community engagement and attachment, and intimate relationships an important source of trust and security, then it follows that falling marriage and fertility rates, and increased

rates of divorce and separation, may lead to lower levels of community engagement and attachment, and a decreased trust of people generally, including strangers. Where the family is seen as the key site for the development of behavioural norms, it follows that if people don't experience cooperative relationships in their family life, they are less likely to have cooperative relationships with others in the community. Similarly, if individuals do not learn how to take responsibility for others within the family – say, as parents or providers – it will block their transition into responsible adulthood (Smart and Neale 1999: 4-5; Misztal 1996).

While the decline thesis represents the dominant interpretation of changes in family life and what they mean for community, there are of course alternative possible interpretations. It is possible that the changes that have occurred in family life are associated with “community breakdown”, but not for the reasons the decline thesis emphasises. Another plausible explanation for why we might expect these changes in family life to be linked to decreased levels of community attachment and trust is not because of their impact on the quality of family relationships, but because of their impact on other family resources such as time and money, which may in turn relate to community attachment and trust¹. For example, divorce leads to household disruption and mobility, as well as financial strain, and these factors may in turn impede individuals' capacity to engage in their communities (Gallie and Paugam 2000). For another example, women's increased workforce participation may be linked to “community decline” because the time constraints associated with paid employment may make other forms of community participation and voluntary activity more difficult.

It is also possible that the above changes in family life are in fact unrelated, or positively related, to community life. Family theorists who interpret changes in family life in a positive light point out that while some family ties may have weakened, others have become stronger (Misztal 1996). For example, while women may spend more time in paid work, men have become more involved in bringing up

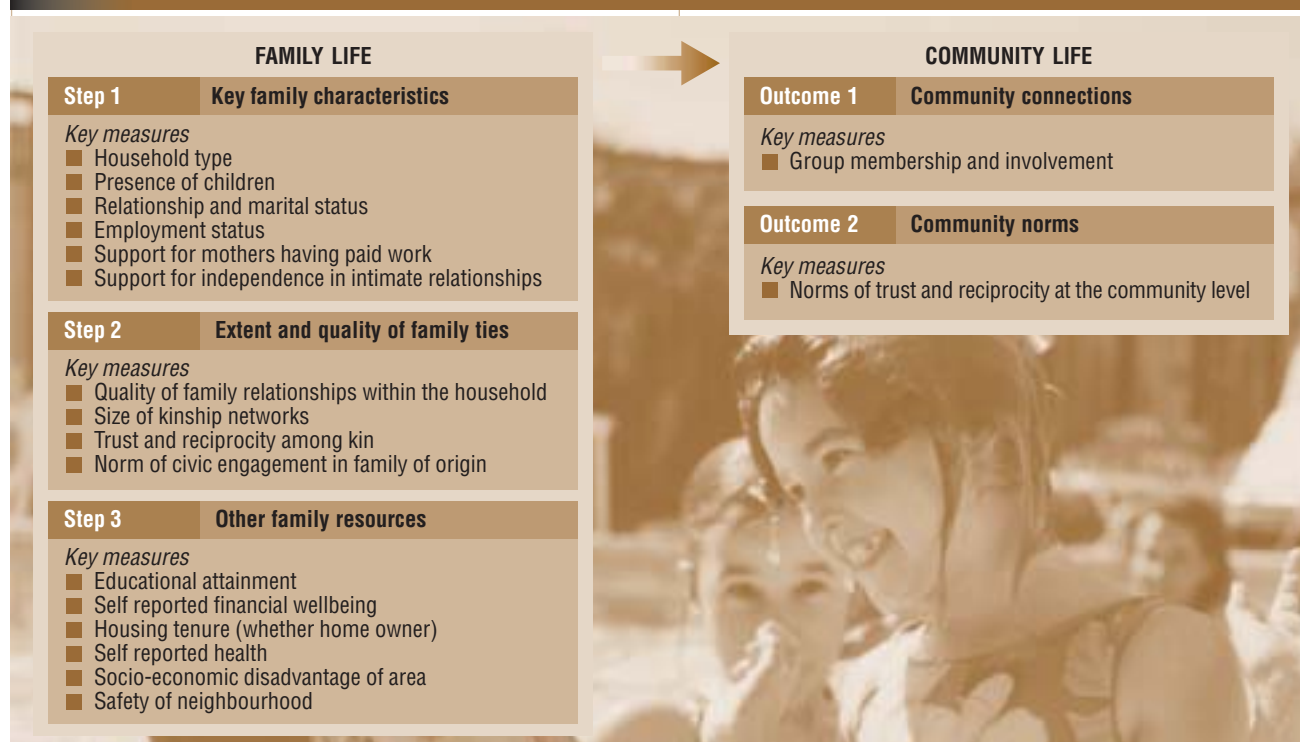
children. And while divorce may involve the weakening of some bonds, it may strengthen relationships between other family members, and open up opportunities for new relationships to be formed.

Furthermore, others have argued that, rather than modern relationships being defined by an amoral individualism, trust, reciprocity and equality are defining characteristics of modern relationships (Giddens 1992). If relationships are no longer held together by law, tradition or financial necessity, individuals must take seriously the needs and desires of the other. The increased level of negotiation required in modern relationships can be seen to reflect the rise of democracy within intimate life, and this should play through to wider debates about morality and ethics (Smart and Neale 1999: 11).

Finally, even if these changes in family life have “weakened” the internal life of families, it is questionable whether “weak families” necessarily translate into “weak communities”. An alternative perspective on the relationship between family and community life highlights the possible tensions between the two. From this perspective the family can in fact be oppositional to community. In circumstances of “familism”, family and kinship ties and obligations are elevated above other sorts of social ties and obligations and allegiance to the family “crowds out” the weaker ties of community (Winter 2000). This was a key concern of Fukuyama (1996, 1999) and relates to the idea that the same strong ties that bring benefits to members of a group can also exclude others from those benefits, a theme that is also developed in the work of Portes (1998), Putzel (1997), and in Australia by Cox (see Cox 1995; Cox and Caldwell 2000).

In circumstances of “familism” we would expect to find that strong bonds of trust and reciprocity inside the family co-exist with weak bonds of trust and reciprocity outside the family. In these circumstances the breakdown of the family may have an upside in respect to community life in that it may lead to *greater* levels of association, trust and reciprocity outside the family. This is recognised as a

Figure 1 Explanatory variables community measures



potential positive spin-off of family breakdown by Fukuyama (1999).

In sum, while the dominant interpretation of change in family life and its implications for community life is one of family and community decline, the relationship between family and community life has rarely been the focus of empirical scrutiny. The remainder of this article reports on the results of analysis of survey data from the Australian Institute of Family Studies *Families Social Capital and Citizenship* project, which explores this link.

In this article we look at whether the experience of divorce and separation, life in lone-parent family households, the employment of women, and individualism in intimate relationships, are associated with low levels of community group membership, trust and reciprocity. We then explore two possible explanations for why this might occur.

The first explanation is that these family characteristics are associated with a weakening of relationships within families, which in turn weakens community (the decline thesis). The second explanation is that these family characteristics are associated with decreased access to other resources such as human and financial capital, and that these resources are in turn related to the strength of communities (an alternative interpretation).

We also examine the possibility that these family characteristics are not directly associated with community life; or are in fact positively associated with community life; and the possibility that “too much family” has negative consequences for community life, as discussed above.

The following sections outline the data and method used to explore these questions; the findings are then presented in summary form.

Families, Social Capital and Citizenship study

The data used in this paper are based on a random national telephone survey of 1506 Australian adults, collected in 2000–2001, for the *Families, Social Capital and Citizenship* project conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. The survey included a wide range of questions about the extent and quality of family and community ties and relations.

To explore the links between family and community life, the relationship between various family factors and community measures was examined. Two key measures of community life were used. These were feelings of trust and reciprocity in the community, and levels of community group membership, respectively.

Both community trust and reciprocity were measured on a scale of 0 to 10 and were based on respondents' level of agreement with the following two statements: “Generally speaking, most people can be trusted”; and “Generally speaking, most of the time people try to be helpful”. These were combined to form a single measure.

The measure of community group membership was based on respondents' reports of the total number of groups and organisations they belonged to, where the types of groups ranged from parent–teacher groups to sporting groups to professional groups and organisations.

At the family level, three different sets of explanatory variables were examined. These, along with the two community measures, are presented in Figure 1.

The first set of explanatory variables (on the left of the diagram) included key family characteristics associated with “family change”, such as family type, marital status, household employment, and attitudes about relationships and gender roles.

The second set of explanatory variables included measures of the extent and quality of family relations, including relationships with family members who live in the same household; with kin beyond the household, and within the respondent's family of origin. The quality of relationships within the household was a composite measure based on levels of trust, reciprocity, closeness, shared interests and hobbies, and knowledge of one another's close friends. For kinship networks a measure of the total number of relatives (including in-laws) was included, as well as a composite measure of the level of trust and reciprocity that exists among those relatives. Finally a measure of civic engagement within one's family of origin was included as a way of examining the transmission of norms among family members.

The third set of explanatory variables included measures of other individual and family resources such as health, education and financial wellbeing, as well as the social and economic circumstances of the localities in which respondents lived (for details see the full research report titled *Family Change and Community Life: Exploring the Links*, Research Paper No. 32, by Hughes and Stone (2003)).

A series of hierarchical regression models were used to examine the relationship between these three sets of explanatory variables and each measure of community life. Hierarchical regression allowed us to examine the unique contribution of each predictor variable, controlling for the effects of the other variables in the models; and introduce the sets of explanatory variables into the analysis in three steps, at each step assessing what the new set of variables added to the models, and the effect it had on the relationships already observed in the models (Tabachnik and Fidell 1996: 149–150).

In the first step we established whether there was a relationship between community life and the key family characteristics associated with family change. That is, whether the experience of divorce and separation, life in lone-parent family households, the employment of women, or individualism in intimate relationships, were associated with levels of community group membership, trust and reciprocity.

The breakdown of the family may have an upside in respect to community life in that it may lead to greater levels of association, trust and reciprocity outside the family



In the second step we established whether community group membership, trust and reciprocity were related to the extent and quality of family relationships. In addition, we examined whether this might be the reason that the above family characteristics may be related to community group membership, trust and reciprocity. That is, whether the experience of divorce and separation, life in lone-parent family households, the employment of women, or individualism in intimate relationships, may be associated with levels of community group membership, trust and reciprocity because they are associated with changes in the extent and quality of family relationships.

In the third step we established whether community group membership, trust and reciprocity were associated with other individual, family and neighbourhood resources such as education, health, household financial wellbeing and the relative socio-economic status of the neighbourhood. As in the second step, we also examined whether varying access to these resources might explain why the above family characteristics may be related to community group membership, trust and reciprocity. That is, whether divorce, lone-parent family households, household employment, or individualism in intimate relationships, may be associated with community group membership, trust and reciprocity because they are associated with resources such as income, education and the neighbourhood in which one lives.

At each step we also controlled for other variables which were not of specific interest in the paper but which the literature suggests might also be important predictors of community group membership, trust and reciprocity, including respondent's age, whether the respondent spoke a language other than English at home or with their family, and locality type (rural or remote area indicator).

We examined men and women separately. We also ran an additional set of models for the sub-sample of women with dependent children, because only respondents with dependent children were asked about the quality of family relationships within the household, and there were few men in these circumstances included in the study. Thus how the quality of family relationships within the household relates to community group membership, trust and reciprocity was only examined for women with dependent children.

The main findings, along with policy and research implications, are presented below in summary form (The full research report is available from the Australian Institute of Family Studies, or the Institute's website).

Seven key findings

Overall, we found support for some aspects of the decline thesis, but also several important variations and qualifications to the thesis that need to be highlighted.

First key finding

Our first key finding was that marital status is a powerful predictor of community outcomes for men. In the first stage of

analyses, when only the key family characteristics were included in the regression models (along with the three control variables), married men were estimated to have significantly higher levels of community trust and reciprocity than unmarried men (that is, higher levels of trust in people generally, including strangers, and confidence that people try to be helpful). In addition, men who were divorced or separated were estimated to have significantly lower levels of group membership, trust and reciprocity than men in any other relationship situation. These findings are consistent with previous research that has found the highest levels of trust and civic activity among those who are married (Putnam 1996; Hughes and Black 2003). However, we found no evidence that marital status was associated with community group membership, trust or reciprocity for women (when the other key family characteristics, and control variables, were taken into account).

Including measures of the extent and quality of family relationships in the models in the second stage of the analyses modified the effect of marital status on community trust and reciprocity for men. The estimated effect of being in a defacto relationship was reduced by about 14 per cent, the estimated effect of being divorced or separated was reduced by about 17 per cent and the estimated effect of being single and never married was reduced and no longer statistically significant. This suggests that one of the reasons married men have higher levels of trust and reciprocity than unmarried men is that they have more extensive and supportive family relationships, and these family relationships can be an important source of community connection and trust (a finding discussed further below). Thus we found some support for the decline thesis among men. Marital status may not be as relevant for women possibly because women have traditionally placed more emphasis on fostering and/or maintaining family relationships than have men, regardless of their relationship status, age or stage in the life course (Finch and Mason 1993).

Including the resource variables in the models in the third stage of analysis further modified the effect of marital status on community trust and reciprocity for men, and also modified the effect of marital status on group membership. For community trust and reciprocity, the estimated effect of being in a defacto relationship dropped by about 8 per cent and the estimated effect of being divorced or separated dropped by about 38 per cent; and for group membership the estimated effect of being divorced or separated dropped and became non significant. This suggests that part of the reason married men have higher levels of community group membership, trust and reciprocity than men who are not married is that married men have higher levels of human and financial capital, and these resources are in turn related to community group membership, trust and reciprocity (another finding discussed further below). That is, married men have greater levels of income, health and home ownership, and are more likely to live in safe and well resourced neighbourhoods, and these conditions appear to facilitate high levels of community group membership, trust and reciprocity. However, even when the extent and quality of one's family relationships and

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other resources were taken into account, married men still had higher levels of trust and reciprocity than unmarried men. Thus neither the more extensive family bonds nor other resources of married men can fully explain why they have higher levels of trust and reciprocity than unmarried men.

Future research could explore *how* marital status is linked to men's broader family and community connections – or the mechanisms and processes by which these variables are entwined. This could inform a policy focus on helping men to build and/or maintain strong family and community relationships regardless of their marital or household circumstances.

Second key finding

Our second key finding was that men with children reported lower levels of community trust and reciprocity than men without children. This finding is not consistent with well known research by Robert Putnam (1996) who found that trust and civic engagement were highest among those who were both married and had children – research which lent support to the view that marriage and family formation are the foundation of strong communities.

However this finding is consistent with more recent Australian research by Hughes and Black (2003) that found community trust to be lower among people with children, particularly pre-school and primary school age children. Hughes and Black (2003) interpret this finding as suggesting that the vulnerability of young children may make parents feel more cautious about, or wary of, strangers. Similarly, we found evidence in our own analyses that low levels of community trust and reciprocity among men with children may in part be explained by greater concern about community safety. When men's perception of the safety of their neighbourhood was included in the models in the final stage of analyses (along with other individual, family and neighbourhood resources) it emerged as a significant predictor of community trust and reciprocity, and there was no longer any apparent difference between men with and without children.

Our findings also suggest that low levels of trust and reciprocity among men with children may be explained in part by the resource constraints associated with having children. Our indicator of poor health was also an important predictor of community trust and reciprocity in the final models; and both poor health and unsafe neighbourhoods are in turn associated with other resources such as income, education, and the relative socio-economic status of one's neighbourhood. In addition, men with children are more likely to be "time poor" than men without children, having less time to engage in their communities and build relationships outside their families.

While having children was not related to levels of group membership for men or women in this study, having children may be related to *particular types* of group membership and engagement. Previous research has found that those with children in the family are more likely to be involved in voluntary activities than those without children, but that people without these commitments of family life have much higher overall levels of social participation than those involved in couple relationships and with children (Hughes and Black 2003).

These findings suggest that safe neighbourhoods and adequate levels of resources may be important conditions for fostering community engagement and trust among those with young children.

Third key finding

Our third key finding was that there appears to be a tension between family and community life for lone mothers. For partnered mothers, the quality of household relationships was positively associated with membership in community groups and organisations. That is, the more close, engaged, trusting and reciprocal their household bonds, the higher their levels of group membership. In contrast, for lone mothers the quality of household relationships was unrelated to community group membership and was negatively related to trust and reciprocity at the community level. That is, the stronger their household bonds the *lower* their reported levels of community trust and reciprocity.

One possible explanation for this pattern is that for partnered mothers, the quality of family relationships in the household reflects the support provided by their partners at home, and the more cooperative their relationship with their partner the more they are able to pursue interests outside the home. In contrast, for lone mothers the quality of household relationships reflects the quality of their relationships with their children and between their children (levels of closeness, trust, reciprocity, shared activities and knowledge of each others' friends) and a focus on family relationships may be something of a trade-off with community engagement because of the time and resource constraints they face.

These findings suggest that if we want to foster high levels of community engagement, trust and reciprocity among those with responsibility for the care of young children, we need also to support their caring responsibilities at home.

Fourth key finding

Fourth, we found that working full-time was associated with low levels of community trust and reciprocity among women with dependent children. While this finding may also be seen as providing support for the decline thesis, it did not appear to be explained by the impact of women's work on the quality of family relations (and in turn impacting on community life). Rather, it is likely that long hours spent in paid work are not conducive to community engagement where one also has primary or sole responsibility for the care of young children, because of the time constraints and pressures associated with parenting and full-time work.

These findings suggest that if we want to foster high levels of community engagement and trust we need to pay attention to issues of work and family balance, particularly for women. It may be unrealistic to expect high levels of community engagement and workforce participation from those who have primary responsibility for the care of young children.

Fifth key finding

Our fifth finding was that non-traditional attitudes to relationships and gender roles – including support for maternal employment and support for personal autonomy in intimate relationships – were associated with high levels of community group membership, trust and reciprocity.

This finding is not consistent with the decline thesis. Rather this finding gives credence to Giddens' (1992) view that the increased respect for personal autonomy and equality that exists in modern relationships should carry through to public life, fostering broader democratic practices and ideals. However, it is also possible that causality operates in the opposite direction – that the experience of being involved in community groups and organisations, and/or a tendency to think the best of others (that people

are trustworthy and generally try to be helpful) may foster non-traditional attitudes to relationships and gender roles, or counter conservative ones.

This finding suggests that attitudes and values play an important role in shaping how people interact with their communities, and in building community trust. This further suggests, in conjunction with our other findings and findings of previous studies (Hughes, Bellamy and Black 2000), that a liberal education – particularly one that fosters broadmindedness and values of tolerance and equality – may foster community engagement and trust.

Sixth key finding

Sixth, we found that “good quality” family relationships relate to community group membership, trust and reciprocity, but not in clear or consistent ways. High levels of trust and reciprocity within families were related to high levels of community group membership, trust and reciprocity in some circumstances, but in other circumstances appeared to limit possibilities for community engagement and activity (in a way that is characteristic of “familism”). As outlined above, high levels of trust and reciprocity in the household were associated with high levels of group membership for partnered mothers, but low levels of community trust and reciprocity for lone mothers. In addition, high levels of trust and reciprocity among extended family networks were associated with high levels of community trust and reciprocity for men and women, but low levels of group membership among men (when other variables were taken into account). These findings suggest that it is not only lone mothers who may experience a tension or trade-off between family and community life. Men appeared to invest in either kinship relationships or civic engagement, but not strongly in both, on average, when other variables were taken into account.

In contrast, we consistently found that respondents who grew up in families where there was a high level of community involvement and/or civic activity were more likely to belong to community groups and organisations as adults.

These findings suggest that high levels of engagement, trust and reciprocity within families do not necessarily translate into broader forms of community engagement and trust (although this assumption underlies the decline thesis and is common among policy makers and the popular media). However, children who grow up in families with high levels of community activity are more likely to become engaged and active citizens.

Seventh key finding

Our seventh and final key finding was that resources such as human and financial capital, and the socio-economic circumstances of localities, are also strongly related to levels of community group membership, trust and reciprocity, among men and women. Being in good health and living in a safe neighbourhood were key predictors of community trust and reciprocity in the final models (when all the variables were taken into account), and both were associated with high levels of trust and reciprocity. In addition, being tertiary qualified, in good health, a home owner, financially comfortable and living in a socio-economically advantaged neighbourhood were associated with high levels of group membership.

Overall, access to these resources appeared to account for more variation in our community measures than did the key family characteristics associated with family change, or the extent and quality of family relationships. Resources clearly accounted for the most variation in levels of group membership, which we can conclude is essentially a middle

class phenomena. Resources also appeared to explain more overall variation in levels of community trust and reciprocity among women than did the other family characteristics. However this can not be said of men for whom variables such as marital status were equally powerful predictors of community trust and reciprocity.

These findings suggest that at least a minimum level of financial and human capital resources as well as time are likely to be necessary for the translation of strong family relationships into community engagement and trust. And that more broadly speaking, social connections and trust between families and their communities may be enhanced through access to other resources such as money, education, public health, and safe, resourced neighbourhoods.

Summary

This paper has set out the dominant thesis about how the changes that have occurred in family life may be linked to the quality of community life. This thesis – which we have called “the family decline thesis” – suggests that the changes that have occurred in family life have led to the breakdown of community life, including levels of group membership, trust and reciprocity in communities. The second part of this paper has described findings from analyses of survey data which examined how levels of community group membership, trust and reciprocity relate to some of the key family characteristics associated with family change including family type, marital status, household employment, and attitudes about relationships and gender roles.

These findings showed that some of the family characteristics associated with family change were related to community group membership, trust and reciprocity in a way that is consistent with the decline thesis. In particular, divorce for men and full time employment for women were associated with low levels of community group membership, trust and reciprocity. This appeared to be in part accounted for by how these variables relate to levels of connectedness within families (most notably for men) as well as levels of resources including time (most notably for women with children).

However, some of these family characteristics were also associated with community group membership, trust and reciprocity in a way that challenged the decline thesis. In particular, we found no evidence that children are a conduit to community attachment and trust, for men or women. In addition, we found no evidence that non-traditional family values or increased levels of individualism in intimate relationships are a threat to community life. In fact, the opposite may be true. We found that men and women who support maternal employment and individual autonomy in intimate relationships have higher levels of community group membership, trust and reciprocity than men and women with more traditional attitudes to relationships and gender roles.

In addition, our findings make clear that a focus upon “maintaining” family relationships alone will not always result in improved outcomes for communities. Resources are equally important if not more important predictors of community group membership, trust and reciprocity, than the structure or quality of family relations.

As well as challenging some of the dominant assumptions about family and community life that exist in academic and policy discourse, these findings provide some clues about how to support the diversity that exists in family life with the broader aim of strengthening communities. In particular, it suggests that supporting positive family relationships for men, ensuring adequate resources for families, and helping

families to balance their work and family commitments, will foster greater levels of community trust and engagement. The findings also suggest that other policies, such as education and regional development policies, need to be an important part of any thrust to improve broader community outcomes.

Finally, the analyses described in this paper explained only some of the variation in levels of community group membership and levels of trust and reciprocity (6 to 12 per cent and 22 to 24 respectively). This means that there are other important explanatory variables left to be examined. Future avenues of research could explore how community group membership, trust and reciprocity relate to individual personality characteristics and demographic factors such as cultural background or ethnicity, which the literature suggests may be important correlates of community group membership, trust and reciprocity (De Neve and Cooper 1998; Fukuyama 1999; Hughes, Bellamy and Black 2000).

While this paper has focused on "family" ties, networks of friends, neighbours and/or workmates may also be conduits to broader forms of community engagement, trust and reciprocity. If the move away from traditional patterns of partnering, marriage and family formation is associated with the elevation in importance of informal ties outside the family (Pahl 2000; Budgeon and Roseneil 2002; Monti et al 2002), it is possible that some of these non-family relationships substitute for, or take on the function of, family relationships as theorised at the beginning of this paper – providing trust and support and a basis for building broader community ties and trust. The changing nature and function of these relationships, and the extent to which they provide links to broader forms of community engagement, may be a fruitful source of future research.

Endnote

- 1 Although family decline theorists emphasise the negative impact of changes in family norms and behaviours, some recognise that decreased resources associated with family decline may also relate to declining community engagement (see, for example, Fukuyama 1999). However, economic resources are not prioritised in the explanations provided by the decline thesis generally.

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As "strong families" are seen as the cornerstone of "strong communities", the breakdown of family life is thought to lead to the breakdown of community



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The survey data used in this paper were collected in 2000-2001 as part of the Institute's *Families, Social Capital and Citizenship* project. A total of 1506 respondents participated in the survey. These were drawn from a national random sample of households (with at least one person aged 18 years or older). Interviews were conducted via the telephone using the Institute's Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing system (CATI), and averaged 32 minutes duration. For more information on survey methodology and fieldwork outcomes see the *Families Social Capital and Citizenship Fieldwork Report* (Hughes and Stone 2002) available on the Australian Institute of Family Studies website at www.aifs.gov.au/