

UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTING FAMILIES OVER TIME

Queen Elizabeth Conference Centre, London, June 2011

This highly-successful two day conference was the result of a collaboration between SPA, ESRC Timescapes, and the Family and Parenting Institute. Its central purpose was to bring together academics, policy makers and practitioners to explore how they might better understand and support families over time.

On the first day the conference discussed the findings of Timescapes and recent studies of changing lives and times across generations, and debated the implications of those changes for family policies. Speakers included Fiona Williams, Paul Boyle, Kathleen Kiernan and Tess Ridge. The second day was introduced by MPs Graham Allan and Frank Field, and focused upon the different ways in which public and third sector initiatives are seeking to support families with complex needs, including those living in poverty.

Conference presentations, policy briefings, and other materials arising from the conference can be accessed via the events and dissemination link on the Timescapes website – www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk

Below, **Ruth Patrick** offers a personal reflection on the conference debates, and upon the broader lessons that emerged for policy, practice and research.

Gathering in Westminster for the conference, it felt both exciting and energising to watch academic researchers, practitioners and policy makers coming together to explore and discuss how best to support parents and families across the life course. The opportunity to share and exchange knowledge, experiences and insight was extremely valuable, as was the scope to hear from others working on similar themes and issues albeit from the other side of the practitioner / researcher picket fence. The conference helped collapse often artificial barriers between the academy and practice, and led to rich sharing and mutual learning amongst delegates. If we took one thing from the conference (and I imagine most people left with notebooks stuffed with reflections, thoughts and areas to follow up when back in the office), it is the necessity of bringing research, policy and practice into conversation with one another much more often. This is particularly important if we are to work towards well-informed and feasible policy solutions to often challenging areas around supporting families and increasing life chances.

After the presentations of research findings on the opening day, day two of the conference started with impassioned keynote addresses from first Graham Allen MP and then Frank Field MP, an opportunity to hear both outline the key arguments and rationale of their recent government-commissioned independent reports on early

intervention and life chances respectively. Both Graham Allen and Frank Field place emphasis on the importance of early intervention to provide better outcomes for all, with Frank Field also asking that we begin to accept that poverty is about more than income by also focusing on the practices and traditions of parenting in some families. Perhaps reflecting the age of austerity, Graham Allen stressed the importance of interventions being able to demonstrate results if they are to attract funding, while he also sought to make an economic case (in terms of future monies saved) for early intervention. In a similar vein, Frank Field argued that more interventions should be paid on the basis of the results they achieve, with welfare-to-work programmes an early example of this kind of approach. Both keynotes provoked lively discussion, with many practitioners posing pertinent questions around the politics of life chances and the difficulty of measuring the impact of complex interventions on lives which are often far from straightforward.

In parallel sessions that afternoon, common themes emerged, some of which echoed those that had been raised the previous day. Notable amongst these is the messiness of people's lives and the reality that individuals rarely follow a straight linear line through the life course, with lives often becoming increasingly complex as the challenges and difficulties that families face also increase. This lived reality shone through from both academic papers and presentations from practitioners, with conference presenters consistently noting the many twists, turns, setbacks and advances made by individuals and families researched or supported. Whether speaking from research or from practice, speakers often employed case studies to develop their arguments and present their key findings, reinforcing and reminding us of the rich potential in utilising case studies to give real depth and meaning to the reality of family life in 21st Century Britain.

Given the messiness of individual lives, policy makers seeking the 'magic policy bullet' which will solve all problems and lift the life chances of all are likely to be disappointed. Instead, we heard a great deal about the importance of innovative and flexible forms of intervention and support, with those tailored to the particular needs of individual users often those with the most likelihood of succeeding. Indeed, it was uplifting and invigorating to hear about the many varied and flexible forms of support currently being provided across the UK.

Despite the importance of providing a range of supportive interventions, there is nonetheless an inevitable trend for certain forms of support to be highlighted as particular success stories and to become somewhat in vogue, with policy makers and (often) researchers channelling resources into these areas. Current examples might include the Family Nurse Partnership Programme, while the model of Family Intervention Projects (now rebranded as Family Intervention Services (FIS)) has also been lauded by politicians and found to be particularly successful in research evaluations. In an effort to capitalise on the success of the FIS model, they are being extended and remodelled in order to apply the formula to a broader target group including efforts to tackle intergenerational worklessness via Emma Harrison's

(of welfare-to-work provider, A4E) Working Families Everywhere programme. Some questions were raised about the possibilities and limitations with this attempt to maximise the results possible from the FIS model, and this relates to broader issues which return us to the importance of looking beyond a 'one size fits all' model of intervention.

The complexity and range of interventions provided to support families is also an inherent challenge to efforts to evaluate impact and measure results, particularly given that families are often receiving support and interventions from more than one organisation or support worker. This reality was highlighted by a number of the practitioner speakers, and perhaps poses an implicit challenge to Graham Allen's stress on making sure that services can always demonstrate results and impact, particularly if they want to secure funding in tough economic times. Some practitioners spoke of their imaginative and creative responses to the attempt to measure results, while also seeking to ensure that administration, outcomes checking and form filling did not in themselves start to undermine the important work of direct support provision. Elizabeth Young outlined Home Start's development of the 'real-time family journey', a model which they use to explore the impact of their services on the supported family. Interestingly, this evaluation tool was also integrated into practice and employed as a way for families themselves to explore both positive steps forward, ongoing challenges and areas where more help was required. The real-time family journey tool showed research and practice coming together, and certainly suggested potential for more efforts to integrate evaluation, research and practice.

Taken as a whole, this conference reminded us all of the importance of getting away from the coalface (whether that be a practitioner or an academic setting) and taking the time to listen to the reflections, experiences and even advice of others. In her summing up of the discussions, Bren Neale, Director of Timescapes, highlighted the lessons that had come out of the conference, lessons which have applicability and relevance for research, policy and practice. These are the importance of our interventions, be they academic or supportive ones, being person-centred, holistic, flexible and time-sensitive, such that professionals can intervene at the times of most critical importance to the families themselves. The very fact that these broad lessons cut across our different areas of work reinforces the sharing and mutuality possible, as well as implying much more scope for promoting engagement and discussion between research and practice in the future.