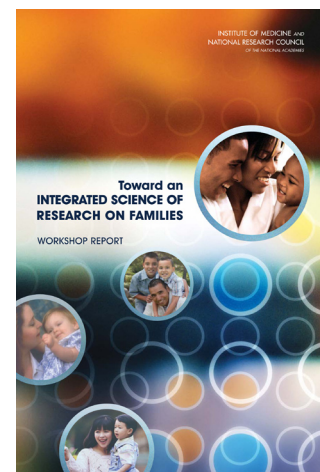


Toward an Integrated Science of Research on Families

Summary of a Workshop



Complex and rapid changes in families in the United States have important implications for the development of children. Researchers who study these trends draw on a wide range of disciplines and methodological approaches, including survey designs, structured interviews, and observational studies. Each approach has certain strengths and limitations: surveys can provide quantitative data about large numbers of families, for example, and interviews and observational studies can provide more detailed information about smaller samples. In some cases, these methods can be combined in innovative ways to improve the understanding of family structures, processes, and relationships.

In July 2010, the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council convened a workshop, sponsored by the Office of Behavioral and Social Science Research and the National Institute for Drug Abuse at the National Institutes of Health as well as the Administration for Children and Families. The workshop participants explored the broad array of methodologies used to describe and assess the impact of families on children's health and development. They considered the theories, methods, and data sources in terms of individual disciplinary contributions from the social, behavioral, and biological sciences as well as the opportunities and challenges associated with collaborative approaches to combine these efforts. The following highlights are drawn from the report of the workshop, which was organized by a planning committee chaired by Hirokazu Yoshikawa of Harvard University.

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Changing Family Demographics

Recent demographic trends in the types and stability of family structures require new approaches to data collection and analysis. Susan Brown of Bowling Green University reviewed recent trends that reveal the changing nature of families, including later age of marriage, more unmarried cohabitation, and greater number of births to unmarried women, and she identified particular measurement challenges associated with these changes. Kelly Raley from the University of Texas at Austin focused her presentation on issues around cohabitation, an increasingly common living arrangement. She indicated that the reasons for cohabitation appear to differ by social class, and more nuanced methods are necessary for studying change and variability in these relationships. In the context of adolescent health, Kathleen Harris of the University of North Carolina presented data showing the impact of family structure on child outcomes in early adulthood. Such influences may emerge from an adolescent's family, as well as those of friends' and neighbors' families. Daniel Lichter of Cornell University described how changes in immigration patterns are driving the need for more detailed data about particular features associated with specific ethnic groups of families. The impact on child and family well-being of the level of "busy-ness" of families today was presented by Sandra Hofferth from the University of Maryland.

Family Poverty and Stress

Several presentations examined how quantitative and qualitative methods have been used separately or combined to study the impact of poverty and stress on families. The speakers considered the benefits gained from the integration of methods as well as the lessons learned from the challenges they faced. Rashmita Mistry of the University of California, Los Angeles, described benefits gained from the mixed methods employed in the Child

and Family Study component of the New Hope Program evaluation, which included an embedded qualitative study of a subsample of families. Rebekah Levine Coley of Boston College offered lessons learned from the use of mixed methods in the ethnographic research that was embedded in the larger Three City Study, an intensive study of the well-being of low-income children and families in the post-welfare reform era. Paul Spicer, an anthropologist from the University of Oklahoma, emphasized the importance of collaborative relationships with American Indian communities in understanding how individuals construct the meaning of their experiences with stress and trauma, processes that cannot be fully conveyed through survey measures. Finally, Heather Bachman of the University of Pittsburgh described certain family socialization practices, identified through qualitative methods, that are associated with higher achievement among children from low-income backgrounds.

Mixed Methods in the Prevention and Treatment of Psychopathology

William Beardslee of Harvard University stated that researchers "who engage in risk research are ultimately interested in doing interventions that will better the lives of children." In this spirit, several presentations focused on the use of mixed methods in conducting research in clinical settings on the treatment of psychopathology, including parental depression, trauma, and substance abuse. In working with families experiencing significant trauma, Chandra Ghosh Ippen from the University of California, San Francisco, combined personal interviewing with testing and questionnaires as part of the assessment process. Thomas McMahon described how evolutionary theory can contribute to conceptual models and qualitative techniques for research with substance-abusing fathers. Beardslee discussed the use of two-generation parent-child models as a valuable approach

to reaching families in the prevention and treatment of parental depression.

Examples


Although the workshop focused on the challenges and benefits of combining research approaches, several presentations highlighted the unique contributions of certain methods. Darlene Kertes of the University of Florida described the need for multiple levels of data collection and analysis involving the biological stress response system in children in striving to capture the effects of family life on individual behavioral and health outcomes. Barbara Fiese described her research on the often hidden aspects of family life, including routines and planning, that affect child health outcomes related to asthma. Finally, Betsey Stevenson illustrated the utility of quasi-experimental analysis in family research to uncover causal mechanisms from an econometric perspective.

Funding and Training Support for Integrated Family Research

Representatives from the sponsoring agencies, including Cheryl Anne Boyce of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, Wendy Nilsen of the Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research, and Susan Jekielek of the Administration for Children and Families, emphasized their support for family research studies that employed

mixed methods. In addition, Jeffery Evans of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development observed that collaborative teams are a necessary part of the movement toward “big science” to answer major translational and policy questions. Given the challenging nature of team-based, interdisciplinary work, two members of the planning committee, Andrew Fuligni of the University of California, Los Angeles, and Sally Powers, of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, had ideas for creating interdisciplinary training programs for graduate students and for developing institutional support for this type of research.

For More Information

This brief is based on the workshop report *Toward an Integrated Science of Research on Families: Workshop Report* (National Academies Press, 2011). The responsibility for the published workshop summary rests solely with the rapporteur and the institution. 



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