9. Family and community life

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Well functioning families are vital to the wellbeing of individuals, their immediate communities, and broader societal groups. The ability of families to function well depends not only on their individual members, but also their physical and social contexts, including communities and wider organisations.

The 2002 NATSISS survey provides information on family and community life for the Indigenous population. It is one of the few nationally representative surveys of the Indigenous population that provides this kind of information and thus makes an important contribution to our understanding of these important aspects of the life of Indigenous Australians.

Collecting information in surveys on family and community life is always a challenge but is particularly difficult for some sections of the Indigenous population. This is in part because of the lack of congruence between the kinship terminology and concepts of local kin systems and those of the mainstream Anglo-Celtic system for many 'tradition-orientated' Indigenous people. [1] It is also a result of many Indigenous households and families being larger and structurally more complex than for the non-Indigenous population. There are also differences in the dynamics underlying the structure and composition of households in mainstream and local Indigenous societies.

At the outset, it is important to keep in mind that virtually all measures examined in the 2002 NATSISS that relate to living standards or wellbeing are highly relevant to family and community life or wellbeing. Personal heath status and health risk behaviours are prime examples, since family and community wellbeing is strongly linked with the wellbeing of individual family members.

Housing quality is another example of a variable that has a big impact on family and community wellbeing. As Taylor & Kinfu (in this volume) indicated, family needs represented one of the most commonly mentioned reasons for moving that respondents provided in the 2002 NATSISS. The fact that 52 per cent of respondents lived in houses needing 'more bedrooms' reveals the inadequate living conditions experienced by the majority of Indigenous families (see Sanders in this volume).

Despite the relevance of so many measures to family and community life, this chapter restricts attention to the more direct measures of family and community

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[1] We have borrowed the term 'tradition-orientated' from Morphy (2004a: 3) who used the term to refer to Indigenous people who live in discrete remote communities on or near their traditional country, with limited access to the economic mainstream.

contained in the survey. In this chapter we first discuss the reasons for collecting data on family and community life. This is followed by an outline of the measures of family and community life used in the 2002 NATSISS. Examples of the utility of two of these measures (child care use and the incidence of 'stolen generation' experiences) are then discussed. The final section discusses aspects of family and community life that may be valuable additions to future social surveys of the Indigenous population.

Why study family and community?

As a basic unit of society, families have the key responsibility of caring for their members. This includes helping children and adults alike to be—or become—healthy, well adjusted and productive members of society and supporting elderly, infirm or disabled members. Such functions are complex and multi-faceted and involve the meeting of basic needs of family members, as well as the transmission of pro-social values. While there is no universally accepted definition of healthy functioning, it tends to be linked to meeting needs:

• of a physiological nature
• for educational/cognitive development (e.g. achievement, competence, mastery, independence)
• relating to psychosocial wellbeing (e.g. development of a sense of acceptance, belonging, trust and love, self-esteem, concerns beyond the self), and
• that have a spiritual dimension, including the development of a sense of purpose and meaning in life.

Communities are higher-order systems whose responsibilities also lie in promoting the wellbeing of individuals within them, both directly and indirectly, through supporting families to fulfill their responsibilities and providing opportunities for all members to participate in community life. Fulfilment of these responsibilities is important not only for the wellbeing of individuals and their families but also for national and international wellbeing. At the same time, family and community wellbeing depends on the wellbeing and contributions of their members, as well as those of higher order systems.

Clearly, then, research into family and community life is important for the identification of potential or existing resources and deficits or challenges confronting these social units, their individual members, and broader social systems. Ultimately, such research is important for the development and monitoring of the effectiveness of policies that are directed towards ensuring that individuals live in safe, supportive environments that enable them to reach their potential, adopt health-promoting lifestyles, participate in community life, and develop or maintain a sense of purpose and meaning in life.

Family and community life domains

Given the close interdependence between families and their communities, some measures in the 2002 NATSISS can be treated as indicators of either family or community life. The choice seems arbitrary at times, so we have listed in this section the measures covering either or both of these two domains.

Household and family type

The 2002 NATSISS provides detailed information on household type, family type and social marital status. Information on all the people living in the household was collected from a responsible adult. The survey excluded visitors to the dwelling, and those who stayed in the dwelling the previous night were defined as visitors if they would be staying for less than one month. An important feature of many Indigenous households is that there is a significant amount of mobility through the household, resulting in very complex and dynamic household structures (Morphy 2004a; Smith 2000b). The 2002 NATSISS survey provides virtually no information about such dynamics surrounding household composition. It is difficult (and perhaps not feasible) to collect this information using a cross-sectional survey for households that have a high turnover of people.

The categories and terms used to describe kin relationships are those that apply to the standard Anglo-Celtic system. Although the standard Anglo-Celtic system will be clearly understood and relevant for much of the Indigenous population, many traditionally-oriented Aboriginal people have kinship systems which differ markedly in their structure to the Anglo-Celtic system. For many of these respondents, the 2002 NATSISS questions very likely resulted in incoherent and uninterpretable data (Morphy 2004b).

While the complex familial structures of Indigenous societies are most pronounced in 'traditionally-oriented' communities, Smith (2000b) has shown that they persist in 'settled' Australia. Martin et al. (2004) conclude that, when this household information is used to construct measures of family type, the resulting 'family types' do not coincide with those found in many Indigenous communities (Martin et al. 2004: 95). A further issue is that the 2002 NATSISS survey does not provide any information on linked households, yet linkages between households represent an important feature of Indigenous family and community life.

The main point to be taken from this discussion is that care needs to be taken when interpreting the household composition, family type and social marital status information from the 2002 NATSISS given that, for a proportion of the sample, this information will have little relationship to the family circumstances in which the respondent lives. A detailed discussion of these issues is provided by Martin et al. (2004).

Information on the relationships amongst people in the family or household is obtained by asking the reference person (the person providing information on all household members) the relationship of everybody else in the household to themselves. Although the reference person model works well for simpler household and family structures, it only provides a very partial and potentially misleading picture for more complex family arrangements (particularly multi-generational families) which are so common in Indigenous Australia.

One possible way of improving the quality of this information is through using a household grid to collect information on the relationships amongst members of a household or family (see Brandon 2004). Relationship grids, which obtain information on the relationship of every household member to every other household member (i.e. not just the household reference person), are used in the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey.

Although the household grid has many advantages, it can be quite time-consuming to collect for larger complex household structures. Its inclusion would therefore require the omission of other questions. Furthermore, the grid would involve the use of kin relationship concepts that, as noted above, appear to be inappropriate for *some* Indigenous people.

An important issue in studying Indigenous families concerns 'mixed families' and 'mixed households'. These are families or households in which not all members are of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin. One strength of the 2002 NATSISS survey is that it allows mixed families to be identified and outcomes for Indigenous families without any non-Indigenous members to be compared to those of families comprised solely of Indigenous people.

Fertility and child survival

Female respondents were asked to indicate how many children they had given birth to, how many were living with them, and how many were living elsewhere. These measures enable an estimate of the number of children who had not survived, although there will be some error in this derived variable (see Kinfu in this volume). While a direct question on child mortality can be extremely stressful for those who have experienced this event, it is noteworthy that HILDA introduced such a question in Wave 5.

Removal from natural family

Given that questions on removal from family could be highly stressful for respondents, interviewers first asked respondents whether it was 'alright' to ask questions on this issue. In total, 4 per cent of respondents indicated a preference to skip these questions (9% in remote areas and 3% in non-remote areas). All other respondents were asked, firstly, whether they had been taken away from their natural family by a mission, the government or welfare, and

secondly, whether any of their relatives had had such an experience. Those who indicated that one or more relatives had been removed from their natural family were asked to indicate which relative(s) experienced this. Once again, the terms used to indicate kin relationships were those applicable to the standard Anglo-Celtic kinship system (e.g. parents, aunts, uncles, brothers or sisters, children). The resulting data must therefore be interpreted with caution.

Child care

Although there are some differences in child care questions between the non-remote and remote area questionnaires, the questions on child care use are broadly comparable. These questions were restricted to respondents who had the main caring responsibility for any child living in the household who was aged 12 years or less. In both remote and non-remote areas, access was measured in terms of experiences in the previous four weeks and included questions on the use of formal and informal child care, unmet desire for using any (or additional) formal care, the main reason for not having wanted any (or any additional) formal care, and the main reason for any unmet desire to use such care during the four-week period.

More specifically, respondents who were interviewed using the non-remote questionnaire were asked whether they had used formal child care in the previous four weeks and, if so, the different types of formal care they had used. [2] Respondents were also asked whether they needed any—or any additional—formal child care during this four-week period. Those who answered in the affirmative were asked to indicate the main reason for not having used such (additional) care. Finally, those who had not wanted to make any—or any more—use of formal child care in the previous four weeks were asked to indicate the main reason for not having wanted such (additional) care.

An important difference between the child care data collected using the remote and non-remote questionnaires is that, in remote areas, the respondent was asked whether there was a child care service in the community and, if there was not, whether they would use a service were it available. Those in remote areas which offered such a service were asked questions about their use of this service in their previous four weeks, aspirations regarding usage, and reasons for not having wanted to use the service or for having experienced unmet aspirations regarding service use. (These questions were essentially the same as those asked of respondents in non-remote areas about the use of formal child care.)

A key difference between the data collected in the 2002 NATSISS on child care and many other surveys is that the 2002 NATSISS questions are based on the person primarily responsible for the child(ren) in the household (i.e. an adult)

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[2] The categories are: before and/or after school care, long day care, family day care, occasional care, pre-school, kindergarten (excluding NSW and ACT), or other formal care (excluding vacation care).

whereas as other surveys provide information on the use of child care for each child (or the study child). Other relevant studies are the ABS Child Care Surveys and the HILDA survey. Thus, caution needs to be exercised in comparing the information on child care from NATSISS with estimates from other sources which are often child-based.

Further discussion of some of these issues appears later in this chapter.

Support in time of crisis

This question tapped the respondents' perceptions of their ability to ask for support from people outside their household in times of crisis and the sources of any such support. The sources included individual acquaintances (e.g. friend, neighbour, family member, work colleague), as well as organisations, professionals and local council or other government services. [3]

It is important to note that, while some potential sources of support are more 'approachable' than others, some people are more confident than others in requesting assistance. Furthermore, some people may be prepared to approach family members and friends, but consider professionals or organisations as 'out of bounds', while the opposite may apply to other people. In other words, reports on support should not be treated as objective measures of the social environment, but rather as perceptions that are likely to be shaped not only by the existence and characteristics of potential sources of support but also by characteristics of the respondents themselves. Nevertheless, a sense of social support is an important aspect of personal wellbeing, and has obvious flow-on effects for the family and community.

Stressors experienced

Respondents were asked about whether they, or a close family member or friend, had experienced various stressful events over the previous 12 months. For respondents in non-remote areas, the events were subdivided into three groups:

• health issues (serious illness—including mental illness, accident, death of family member or close friend, or serious disability)
• relationship breakdown, employment problems and 'risky' behaviour (alcohol or drug-related activities, witness to violence, abuse or violent crime, trouble with the police or a gambling problem), and
• imprisonment, overcrowding at home, pressure to fulfill cultural responsibilities, and discrimination or racism.

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[3] Respondents in non-remote areas where shown a list of types of support (for example, emotional support, provide emergency accommodation, advise on what to do), while those in remote areas were simply asked whether they could ask somebody who does not live with them for help if they were having 'serious problems'.

The nature and ordering of some items differed slightly for those in remote and non-remote areas. The main question – whether the issues have been a problem for the respondents, or for their family or close friends – does not fit well with some of the actual problems listed for those in remote areas (for example, 'member of *your* family sent to jail or in jail') (emphasis added). In non-remote areas, respondents were asked about 'member of family sent to jail/currently in jail'. In other words, such respondents could include such events in the lives of their close friends' families. This adds to the difficulty of comparing the experiences of respondents in remote and non-remote areas.

It is also important to point out that, given that 'one person's cup is another's poison', the population of stressful events is huge, and any sample from this population is likely to be an inadequate representation of potential stressors in a person's life. Furthermore, non-events can be extremely stressful but there is no attempt to measure these (e.g. failure to obtain the expected promotion, failure to see one's child achieve some strong ambition, failure to establish an intimate relationship with a much admired potential suitor, and so on).

Another difficulty with this measure is that it relates not only to personal experience of events that are typically seen as stressful, but also to the exposure of family or friends to such experiences. While difficulties faced by other people can be personally stressful, it would have been useful to be able to identify whether the experience applied to the respondent, a close family member or friend). It would also have been useful to identify the stressfulness of such events for the respondents. For instance, it appears that, compared with men, women tend to be more emotionally involved in the lives of those around them, more reactive to the moods and experiences of other family members and close friends, and more prone to mention interpersonal difficulties, including family-related concerns, in response to questions about the problems in their lives (see Cross & Madson 1997; Larson & Richards 1994; Thoits 1995). Under these circumstances, the questions about disruptive events experienced by close family and friends may tend to have a greater impact on women than men. It may also have a greater impact on some cultures than others.

It would have been extremely useful to compare the experiences of Indigenous respondents regarding the events listed with those of the non-Indigenous population. As is discussed in chapter 4 of this volume, the GSS is designed to be comparable to parts of the 2002 NATSISS. Unfortunately, while the GSS asks about stressors, the questions in the latter survey focus on stressors experienced by respondents or 'anyone else' close to him or her rather than 'close family member or friend' as is asked in the 2002 NATSISS. This difference may contribute to any systematic variation in reporting that may appear. Nevertheless, it will be possible to compare differences in reports within the Indigenous population—for example, men versus women, those with lower versus higher

educational attainment, and, where the stressful events described are identical in the two questionnaires, those in remote versus non-remote areas.

Neighbourhood problems

Respondents were asked about the existence of a series of neighbourhood problems, mainly covering property theft or damage, assault/violence, and neighbourhood conflict.[4] These measures refer to respondents' perceptions and should not be interpreted as objective measures of problems in the neighbourhood. They are relevant to a personal sense of safety and security and views about the safety of family members and others living in the locality—issues that are clearly important aspects of individual, family and community wellbeing.

It would be also useful to include perceptions of neighbourhood wellbeing (as well as ill-being), for example, beliefs about the extent to which people in the neighbourhood are trustworthy, vigilant about each other's wellbeing and property, and generally willing to help each other out.

Voluntary work

Voluntary work represents an important indicator of engagement with society as well as a contribution to community life. It is worth noting, however, that the question focuses on work with organisations and does not capture more informal activities, such as helping an elderly neighbour or friend.

The question taps the type of organisations and number of different organisations to which respondents contribute on a voluntary basis. It should be noted that some respondents may contribute a great deal of time to one organisation or to several organisations of the same type (e.g. welfare/community), while others may contribute time to several organisations. Caution needs to be taken that those who work voluntarily for several organisations are not seen as spending more time in voluntary activities than those whose activities target one or more organisations of the same type.

These two issues outlined above point to the fact that the breadth and amount of voluntary community work are not tapped in this questionnaire.

Two illustrations of the value of the 2002 NATSISS data

In this section, the value of the 2002 NATSISS data for two areas of family life is illustrated. The first is use of child care and the second, removal from natural family.

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[4] One item in the list is 'Level of personal safety day or night'. This does not seem to fit well with the others that refer to specific problems (theft, gangs, vandals, assault, etc) Perhaps it should be rephrased (for example, 'Concerns about personal safety day or night').

Child care

As discussed above, the 2002 NATSISS survey contains questions on the use of child care in the previous four weeks by respondents who had the main responsibility for children in the household aged 12 years or under. There is relatively little data available on use of child care by the Indigenous population and how it compares to that of the non-Indigenous population.[5] Thus the 2002 NATSISS survey is a valuable new source of information on use of child care by the Indigenous population.

The use of child care by Indigenous people with primary responsibility for children (described as primary carers) by employment status and region of residence (remote compared to non-remote) is outlined in Table 9.1. Some comparisons with the use of child care by the total Australian population (i.e. predominantly non-Indigenous) are made. Comparable estimates for the total Australian population in non-remote areas of Australia were constructed using the HILDA Survey.[6] Although the HILDA estimates are for non-remote areas, given that only a small proportion of Australian children live in these areas, there would be relatively little difference between the non-remote and the total Australian estimates.

Of the Indigenous primary carers, child care was used by a lower proportion who lived in remote rather than non-remote areas (56.7% versus 69.9%). It is interesting to note that Indigenous use of child care in non-remote areas is greater than non-Indigenous use, with 55.6 per cent of the non-Indigenous population using child care.

While similar proportions of the Indigenous population in remote and non-remote areas used informal care (39.7% and 40.9% respectively), those in remote areas were less likely than their counterparts in non-remote areas to have used formal services (15.9% versus 28.9%).

Differences are apparent between the non-remote Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in their patterns of use of informal care. While for both these populations, the rate of use of formal care was around 28.8 per cent, the non-remote Indigenous population was more likely than the non-Indigenous population to have used informal care exclusively (40.9% versus 26.7%).

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[5] The Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) Census of Child Care Services provides important comparative information regarding the use of child care by the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population. However, this Census restricts attention to services that are approved and funded by the Australian Government and does not obtain the breadth of socioeconomic information derived in the 2002 NATSISS.

[6] The ABS periodically conducts surveys on use of child care. However, there are several difficulties in using data from the ABS Child Care survey. First, the Child Care Survey covers children aged 12 years, whereas the 2002 NATSISS survey focuses on children aged under 13 years. Second, the ABS Child Care survey is child-based rather than carer-based. That is, information is collected about the child care use of each child in the family. While a carer-based data set can be developed, this is a time-consuming and complicated exercise.

The lower use of child care by Indigenous primary carers in remote than non-remote areas applied to both those who were employed and those who were not employed. However, the difference was particularly marked for those who were employed: 63.1 per cent of employed Indigenous primary carers in remote areas and 80.8 per cent of their counterparts in non-remote areas used child care. This is probably a consequence of the higher rates of part-time CDEP employment in remote areas (Altman, Gray & Levitus 2005). Amongst the total Australian population in non-remote areas, 70.2 per cent of employed primary carers used child care. The pattern of use of formal and informal care differed, with the Indigenous carers being substantially more likely to use informal care compared with the non-Indigenous carers.

There was a large difference in the use of child care by non-employed Indigenous and non-Indigenous primary carers. For example, in non-remote areas, 64.2 per cent of non-employed Indigenous carers used child care compared with just 37.9 per cent of the non-employed non-Indigenous carers. This difference is largely due to a higher rate of use of informal care by Indigenous than non-Indigenous populations (39.9% versus 16.9%). This is a reflection of the extensive kin-based networks that many Indigenous people have.

Table 9.1. Use of child care by persons with primary responsibility for children according to employment status, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, 2002

	Indigenous (NATSISS 2002)		Australian population (HILDA 2002)
	Remote	Non-remote	Non-remote
	%	%	%
Primary carer employed			
Used child care	63.1	80.8	70.2
Formal	19.5	37.9	35.4
Informal only	42.4	42.9	34.8
Did not use child care	36.9	19.2	29.8
Primary carer not employed			
Used child care	50.4	64.2	37.9
Formal	12.4	24.4	20.9
Informal only	37.1	39.9	16.9
Did not use child care	49.6	35.8	62.1
Total			
Used child care	56.7	69.9	55.6
Formal	15.9	28.9	28.8
Informal only	39.7	40.9	26.7
Did not use child care	43.3	30.1	44.4

a. For the Indigenous population, the estimates include persons with primary responsibility for children aged 12 years or under who did not state the kind of child care used. The figures for formal care may include persons who also used informal child care. The total proportions who used child care were derived by subtracting the proportions who did not use child care from 100. For remote areas, the latter estimates differ from those derived by summing the proportions who used either formal or informal care.
Source: ABS (2004c: Table 17) and HILDA Wave 2 (details of data release version)

Lack of access to formal child care is often discussed as an issue for remote areas of Australia. It is interesting that, according to the NATSISS 2002, the majority of people in remote areas who had primary responsibility for children indicated that they had access to child care if needed (69.4%). In other words, just under one-third (29.6%) reported that they did not have access (ABS 2004c).

Removal from natural family

Estimates based on the NATSIS 1994 and NATSISS 2002 data sets of the proportion of the Indigenous population who had been taken away their family are very similar. Both surveys suggested that 8 per cent of the population aged 15 or more years (at the time of each survey) had been removed. Furthermore, the 1994 survey suggested that 10 per cent aged 25 years or more had been removed. This proportion is the same as that derived in the 2002 survey for those aged 35 years or more (who would have represented roughly the same cohort). [7]

To measure the number of Indigenous people potentially affected by the removal of children from their families, the 2002 NATSISS asked Indigenous people aged 15 years or over whether they or any of their relatives had been removed from their natural families. As noted above, about 8 per cent of Indigenous people reported that they themselves had been removed (see Table 9.2).

Perhaps the most significant point to be taken from these figures is that, even though a relatively small proportion of the Indigenous population were themselves removed from their natural family, about one-third of the Indigenous population had a relative removed. Indeed, 38 per cent indicated that they and/or at least one of their relatives had been taken from their family (ABS 2004c: 6).

When interpreting the data from the question on removal of relatives from natural family it is important to note that the question had a high rate of 'not known' and 'not stated' responses (20%) (ABS 2004c: 58). This high rate of non-response is not surprising given the sensitivity of this issue to some families. It is probable that the respondents not wanting to discuss this issue disproportionately had relatives removed and so the estimates may be under-estimates.

[7] Statistics from ABS (2004c).

Table 9.2. Removal from natural family

	Remote	Non-remote	Total
	%	%	%
Removal of person from natural family			
Person removed	6.0	9.4	8.4
Person has not been removed	85.0	88.0	87.2
Didn't want to answer	9.1	2.6	4.4
Removal of relative(s) from natural family			
Relative(s) removed	28.1	38.5	35.6
Relatives have not been removed	52.8	41.2	44.4
Didn't know	10.0	17.3	15.3
Didn't want to answer	9.2	3.0	4.7

Source: ABS (2004c: Table 12)

Concluding comments

Family and community life is multi-dimensional and complex. This makes it difficult to design questionnaires that can adequately capture the different dimensions of family and community life.

Overall, the NATSISS 2002 survey does a good job of measuring a range of aspects of family and community life given that these domains are only two of the many domains that a general social survey of the Indigenous population needs to cover. In this chapter we have outlined the measures of family and community life included in the survey and have attempted to highlight some of the issues which need to be taken into account when analysing the data generated by these questions.

Second, the measures focus on the individual, with no information gathered on the quality of relationships, parenting behaviour, family functioning, and so on. Given the crucial importance of such issues for wellbeing, some measures on these issues should be considered for future surveys. The Longitudinal Survey of Australian Children may provide a useful source of questions on some of these issues.

Third, the measures of household structure and composition are problematic for a proportion of the Indigenous population, given the complex and multi-generational nature of many households. The use of a household grid to gather information on family composition is worth considering.