Work and family in the context of community and the wider society

Research on work and family over the past few decades has highlighted the complex relationship that exists between work and family demands and has informed policy and practice in both arenas. The value of this research cannot be understated; however it presents only a partial picture of the role work plays in the lives of workers and their families, in terms of their communities, and of the societies within which they live.

The impact of work on partners and children of workers has also not been adequately addressed in work-family research to date, with a focus primarily on workers and their ability to function effectively in their role as partners or parents. The views of partners or their children are rarely sought. Nor has adequate attention been paid to the views of a variety of community members, including non-working adults or retirees, community service providers, and those who serve the community in a voluntary capacity.

This paper reports on the findings of The Work, Home and Community project which explores work, home and community interactions in terms of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. This theoretical approach acknowledges the influence of multiple contexts and the relationships between them, and enables an understanding of the impact of work on a person's life not only within the family context, but within the context of the local community as well as broader contexts such as social and cultural norms and also economic and legal structures.

The Work, Home and Community Project used qualitative and quantitative methods (surveys, focus groups and interviews) to collect data from men and women (workers, non-workers and other community members), and also children living in 10 urban and suburban communities across Australia. The primary aim of this project was to explore how work, home and community factors are configured in contemporary suburban Australia, with particular attention to differences according to various household life-stages and also between master-planned and traditional suburbs. This paper explores how work, home and community factors interact to provide resources and create demands in these three arenas; it highlights their interconnectedness, while at the same time acknowledging other contexts, such as school, and broader societal norms and structures.

In analysing the data on work, home and community this paper draws on concepts of Social Capital as developed by Putnam, while also incorporating Voydanoff's model of Demands, Resources and Strategies.