CPRN DISCUSSION PAPER

Methodological Issues in Developing a Quantitative Approach to the Study of Family Transactions[1]

By

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CPRN Discussion Paper No. F|03

October 1998

[1] An earlier version of this text was presented at the workshop, "Social and Economic Dynamics of Families: Substantive and Methodological Challenges," sponsored by CPRN's Family Network, that was held at INRS-Urbanisation (Montréal) on May 5, 1998.

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Methodological Issues
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the Study of Family Transactions [1]

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SUBMITTED TO THE FAMILY NETWORK OF THE
CANADIAN POLICY RESEARCH NETWORKS

OCTOBER 1998

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FOREWORD

The research agenda for the Family Network of the Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) has been developed over the past four years through a series of consultations and workshops with stakeholders across the government, academic, and non-profit sectors. The first publication to emerge from these discussions was, Suzanne Peters' *Examining the Concept of Transactions as the Basis for Studying the Social and Economic Dynamics of Families*. It provided a comprehensive conceptual framework within which a variety of research projects could be conducted, and offered a fresh approach with which to observe recent changes that have transformed both the economy and family life.

The second step was to commission several agenda setting papers which identified what we know and what we need to know. They were written by scholars with different perspectives, and published earlier in 1998 under the title *How Families Cope and What Policymakers Need to Know*. The third step was a small qualitative study of 25 families living in the Lower Mainland of B.C. That work will be published early in 1999.

While the analytic works completed thus far have provided a great many insights summarizing what we already know about the social and economic dynamics of families, the evidence confirms that the data on transactions within households are particularly weak or incomplete. The stakeholder discussions coordinated by CPRN have identified a range of possible research options that might supplement empirical research already completed and, at the same time, might have more direct policy relevance. The existing qualitative research studies have provided some limited information about family transactions that might be built upon with additional research. There are several methodological issues, however, that must be considered in framing future research, especially projects with a more quantitative orientation to the subject matter.

Based on the experience with these studies, CPRN commissioned the following paper by Céline Le Bourdais (Institut national de la recherche scientifique (INRS), Urbanisation Centre inter-universitaire d'études démographiques) to examine key "methodological issues in developing a quantitative approach to the study of family transactions." LeBourdais presented her initial assessment at the workshop, "Social and Economic Dynamics of Families: Substantive and Methodological Challenges," sponsored by CPRN's Family Network and held at INRS-Urbanisation (Montréal) on May 5, 1998. She concentrates on the methodological issues associated with three options: a) the further methodological refinement and follow-up research on a small sample of families living in British Columbia, b) what relevant information might be gleaned from existing national data sets or what supplemental work might enhance the interpretation of quantitative findings from these surveys, and c) the advantages and disadvantages of designing another national or large-scale survey specifically focused on family transactions.

She concludes her paper by observing that family dynamics should be studied with at least three complementary approaches: by analysing data from the already numerous surveys that collect information on the family; by building on existing surveys through the addition of new sections or panels that address specific items; and by designing a new cross-sectional/retrospective survey that aims both to oversample given categories of respondents and families and to directly study family transactions.

Judith Maxwell
October 1998

Introduction

Suzanne Peters' paper, *Examining the Concept of Transactions as the Basis for Studying the Social and Economic Dynamics of Families* (1996), attempts to develop a broad analytical framework inside of which numerous research projects could be conducted in the coming years. Her rationale for developing such a conceptual approach in family studies stems from a recognition by researchers of the shortcomings of existing theories and of the necessity to adopt a more comprehensive framework, but also, and perhaps more importantly, from the profound and rapid changes that have transformed both the economy and family life. Her main objective, in order to help inform policy decisions, is to explore how the changing and diversified types of families operate in different "domains" and on different "levels", and to investigate in which situations and under which conditions families are better able to develop strategies and to cope with changes. In order to fulfill this objective, she introduces the concept of "transactions", borrowed from economics; the definition is broadened to encompass all "social interactions through which resources are transferred from one person(s) to other(s) to meet needs" (Peters, 1996: 7). The transferred resources are thus not limited to financial and material goods, but also include advice, assistance or caring activities. In her conceptual paper, Peters (1996) recommends adopting an empirical approach in which the definition of families will emerge from the arrays of transactions observed within and across households and from the meanings attached to these by individuals, rather than imposing an "a priori definition". She also argues for the necessity to adopt: a longitudinal approach in order to account for changes over time; a "multiple perspective" to take into account the viewpoints of different family members, thus recognising that families are not "unified wholes"; a linked quantitative-qualitative approach in order to enlighten the meanings that individuals attach to practices; and a multilevel analytic framework that recognises that individuals' actions and meanings are framed and constrained by the characteristics of the situational and systemic levels in which they operate.

Peters'comprehensive framework has been welcomed by family researchers and has proven useful in stimulating the development of new avenues of research (see, for instance, Cheal, 1998; Luxton, 1998; Woolley, 1998). Due to the breath of its scope, however, this framework is raising important methodological difficulties, both in terms of data collection and data analysis. Some of these difficulties are discussed briefly in the Peters' paper. A qualitative study of *Labour Market Changes and Family Resiliency*, commissioned by the CPRN and conducted in British Columbia in 1996, addresses more directly these issues (Wason and Michalski, 1998). Beyond pursuing the objectives of documenting the key transactions that families make both within and outside of the household and the strategies that they develop to cope with changing employment situations, this study more specifically aims to develop formalised questions for potential use in quantitative surveys and to test the methodology for further research (Wason and Michalski, 1998). The British Columbia study uses an original design combining various data collection techniques (questionnaires, individual interviews, family interviews and focus groups) that proves useful to the analysis of family transactions, but that also raises methodological questions that need to be addressed before launching large quantitative surveys. Many of the reflections that follow stem from the methodological implications raised in this study. Before addressing the latter, however, this paper first briefly presents certain conceptual issues on transactions that have been raised by Cheal, Luxton and Woolley in their papers published in *How Families Cope and Why Policymakers Need to Know*. This detour appears necessary in order to stimulate reflections that go beyond the approach taken by the British Columbia study and that more broadly address issues put forward in the Peters paper.

1. Conceptual issues

The Cheal, Luxton and Woolley conceptual papers, which rely on critical reviews of the existing literature on the exchange of resources within and across families, raise several important questions that deserve further research in Canada, considering the changing socio-economic and political contexts. The current paper does not attempt to provide a full account of these authors' broad works, but rather concentrates on some issues that are particularly stimulating and which deserve further methodological consideration.

All three papers examine to some extent the impact of the changes observed in the labour market and in social policy programs on families. While Cheal concentrates on the effect that new policy directions are likely to exert upon economic conditions and income transfers among family members, Woolley and Luxton examine more specifically how individuals and families manage to balance the contradictory demands (time, finance, caring) of jobs and home in the new economy. As Woolley (1998: 30) points out, Canadian families are now either "time crunched" or economically pressured. In one case, certain family members (e.g., parents) might be in no position to respond to the needs of other family members (e.g., children); in another case, they might not have the financial or material means to do so. This tension is further reinforced by the new trends in employment. As mentioned by Cheal (1998: 14), the traditional or "tripartite model" of the employment life course is breaking down: at one end of the spectrum, young adults are now facing increasing difficulties to gain secure employment, while, at the other, older workers are leaving the labour force prematurely. Moreover, the labour market has become more volatile. It is now more difficult to find and keep a decent job, both for men and especially for women, who have registered a drop in employment during the 1990's. These changes are not without consequences for families, many of which are witnessing the returns of young dependent adults or coping with the needs of economically dependent and frail elderly. As a consequence, many families are forced to develop two-earner employment strategies in order to ensure a decent income to the family to respond to these new and increased demands.

One assumption that has been commonly made in the past is that families are "co-operative pooling sharing units" (Luxton, 1998: 63). This assumption is now increasingly questioned, as studies have documented existing income or resource inequalities among family members. One can thus no longer assume that families will necessarily pool all their temporal, financial and other types of resources in order to take charge of their members who have been temporarily or permanently left out of the labour market. At best, as Cheal (1998) observes, income pooling for couples and between generations should be treated as an hypothesis and should thus become a prime focus of future research. The issue deserves growing attention in the actual context of conjugal instability and in accordance with the ongoing process of income policy restructuring which, in several instances, exacerbates the existing tensions between the individual and the family. On the one hand, there is, for instance, a "developing policy tension between the desire of strengthening economic and social equality of women as independent persons, and the trend toward targeting benefits on low income family groups" (Cheal, 1998: 7) that might continue to reinforce their economic dependence upon their spouse. On the other hand, the rising rates of cohabitation and of union dissolution bring to the forefront the question of pooling resources within families. How are resources pooled and allocated within married and cohabiting partners? How are they distributed, once the couple parts, especially among cohabitors who are not constrained by a legal contract? How are they shared across different households comprising the biological and the step-children of a separated father living with a new partner?

Clearly, the three conceptual papers reviewed all point to the need to question the definition of the family (where does it start? where does it end?), to look at the changing types and forms of families (through the life course phases of a given family and through the series of family episodes that one experiences), and to place individuals' attitudes and behaviours within the context of their family life course.

2. Methodological Considerations

2.1 Building on the British Columbia Survey

The research program envisioned by Peters and other researchers is vast and ambitious. It is highly unlikely that the development of a single methodological tool could at once capture the multiple dimensions in which family transactions take place. Moreover, the development of a unique survey would be extremely costly; it would also run the risk of duplicating existing surveys and of being too demanding of respondents' time and level of involvement. As an example, the British Columbia survey, which did not focus on all dimensions of family transactions (see below) and whose sample was small (25 families that included 91 individual respondents), required on average fifteen hours of interview per household (interviewing individuals and holding a household/family interview) and turned out to be costly with trained interviewers to carry the data collection and the fee of $25 given to individuals for each interview given. For practical reasons, all aspects of family transaction cannot be approached at once and priorities need to be established.

The British Columbia study, conducted by Wason in 1996, had several specific goals and a methodological approach designed to achieve these goals. One such goal was to focus on family dynamics, i.e. to open the "black box" of families (Wason and Michalski, 1998: 3), in order to examine how resources are divided among family members and to analyse the process (circumstances and conditions) under which family transactions are decided and organised. To do so, Wason adopted a "multiple perspective", i.e. used a multiple methodology of data collection, combining individual interviews, family/household interviews and focus groups. All members of any given household, and possibly members of other households, were interviewed in order to reveal the specifics of family transaction dynamics (who, what, where, when, why) and the meanings underlying these dynamics.

Another goal consisted of adopting a longitudinal approach to study the effects that changes in employment exert on family dynamics and family resiliency (i.e. "ability to bounce back from stress or crisis") (Wason and Michalski, 1998: 22). Particular attention was given to the selection of families who had experienced (or not) certain labour market changes within the previous eighteen months. The focus of the research was to measure the impact of changing employment conditions on families.

Finally, another objective of the survey was to adopt a quantitative-qualitative approach in order to delve further into the meanings of behaviours and to confront the validity and reliability of both methods of data collection.

Wason and Michalski's (1998) paper on *Labour Market Changes and Family Resiliency* is an interesting study that sheds some light on the ways in which family/household members interact in changing employment situations. The research verifies the notion that resources are not necessarily divided equally among household members. Although supporting most hypotheses, the study reveals some puzzling results, namely that families with constant unemployment can achieve a high level of resiliency, and, conversely, that families with at least one member employed continuously during the 18 months preceding the survey could be poorly equipped to cope with adversity.

The British Columbia study has the advantages of being well defined in terms of time and costs, and with clear objectives. It is not, however, without limitations. As mentioned in Wason and Michalski's (1998) report, the small size of the sample and sampling procedures do not allow for generalisation of the results across the whole population. The selection process, through newspaper advertisements and posters, also probably contributed to recruiting only literate respondents who were used to reading such materials and people concerned with the objectives of the survey.

Another study limitation rests in the cross-sectional design of the survey, and especially in the lack of attention given to the changing aspects (or temporal dimensions) of all processes or situations under consideration, except for those experienced in the labour market. But, as Wason and Michalski (1998: 3) point out, "family composition tends to change over time as well, as a result of births/adoptions, deaths, marriages, divorces". Therefore, it is surprising to find that almost no information was collected on the retrospective family history of respondents and that no effort was made to take family duration and past experience into account.

The composition of the family (one-parent versus two-parent families) was used as a criterion for selecting respondents. "Intact families" and "step-families", however, were not distinguished within two-parent families. Yet, as pointed by Cheal (1998) and as other studies have shown, intact families and step-families differ in many respects. Often formed after a separation or divorce, step-families imply the introduction of new actors (step-parents, step-brothers and sisters, step-grand-parents) within the family life of individuals, whose roles and responsibilities may not be clearly defined. Furthermore, the organisation of life in such families is often more complex than in intact families, due to the back and forth movements of children between the households of their two biological parents. These dynamics are more likely to give rise to conflicting feelings and behaviours. Finally, the financial transactions occurring in step-families are also likely to differ from those of intact families and to cut across households through, for example, the payment of child alimony (for a review, see Bernier et al., 1994).

Family composition is treated as a fixed, static category in the British Columbia project. The cross-sectional design does not take into account the temporal dimension of families. One-parent families, for instance, are implicitly treated as permanent situations. Yet, most individuals who experience life in lone-parent families do so for only a given period of time that often marks the transition from an intact family to a step-family (for an example, see Desrosiers et al., 1993). The dynamics at work in any given type of family should thus vary according to the duration spent in that family. Consequently, one could expect family resiliency to vary not only according to changes experienced on the labour market, but also according to the family histories of each household member. Equal attention should thus be devoted to capturing the changing processes of both work ***and*** family. Surprisingly, this dual approach has rarely been adopted in the literature. The analysis of the effect of changing employment conditions on family well-being has received far more attention than the study of the impact of family transformations on either labour force attachment or individuals' well-being.

Family dynamics and the ability to cope with stress or crisis are probably linked to the stage reached in the family life cycle and to the location of the family episode within the family trajectory of each individual. Hence some of the results found in the British Columbia study, namely that families experiencing different employment situations can achieve similar levels of family resiliency, could in part be attributed to the various stages of family development. Indeed, it makes sense to argue that family resiliency is not a fixed attribute of families, but one that varies along the different phases of growth or conflicts that each of them experiences.

2.2 Building on existing surveys

Another strategy to develop quantitative studies of family transactions is to build on existing surveys. Many of the surveys currently carried out by Statistics Canada collect information that are relevant to the study of family transactions and that could be used more widely if some modifications or new questions were introduced in these surveys. This is more or less the strategy that the CPRN decided to follow. As a result, one of the main objectives of the British Columbia project was "to provide a basis for the development of more formalised issues and questions for potential use in future General Social Survey performed by Statistics Canada" (Wason and Michalski, 1998: 4).

The following section proposes different ways in order to maximise the utility of four existing surveys. Several of the suggestions stem from the *Family Workshop*, organized by Statistics Canada in collaboration with the Institut national de la recherche scientifique (Urbanisation), held in December 1996. Gathering academic researchers, survey managers and analysts at Statistics Canada, this workshop aimed to identify the emerging issues in research on family and to examine the needs for new data in view of the existing surveys.

The Family Expenditures Survey (FES) - This survey provides detailed data on the expenses of families, but more limited information on income and family composition. Its utility for the analysis of family transactions could be increased considerably with the introduction of a limited number of modifications (some of which are already in process of being done). In particular, the survey needs to provide the detailed composition of the family, i.e. to collect information on the existing relationships between all members of the household. To better take into account women's rising participation to the labour market and their increasing contribution to the family financial situation, the FES could examine in greater detail the pooling of resources within the family/household (spouses, children and other members of the household) and the expenses to which men's and women's incomes are allocated. Special attention should be given to the study of financial transactions among step-families and especially to the obligations and expenses assumed by step-parents. The FES would also need to "break its residential constraints", i.e. to collect data related to expenses occurring outside of the household in order to capture the proportion of the family income that is devoted to support children born from a previous union and who are living in another dwelling. With the actual level of conjugal instability, the proportion of children and parents who are likely to live (at least on a part-time basis) apart from one another is on the rise, and the economic transfers taking place between lone-parent or step-parent families can no longer be ignored.

The General Social Survey (GSS) - The 1990 GSS on Family and Friends collected some information on the extent of social and financial assistance provided to and received from people outside the family. Though limited, the information gathered on family transactions can be analysed in relation with the family life course of individuals on which the 1990 GSS provides rich information. One disadvantage of this initial survey was the impossibility to identify at the time of the survey all step-families among two-parent families, but the problem has been corrected in the 1995 GSS. Five years later, it was decided to split the content of the 1990 GSS into two surveys in order to collect more information on individuals' family and work histories (the 1995 GSS) and on social support (the 1996 GSS). Originally, the aim was to interview the same respondents in both surveys, in order to increase the richness of the collected data, while keeping the survey content manageable in a telephone survey. Although difficulties in tracing respondents the second year could have arisen, the problem did not appear insuperable given the experience of Statistics Canada with panel surveys. Unfortunately, the original project was abandoned, and the 1995 and 1996 GSS are based on two separate samples. It is thus not possible to study the extent and nature of family transactions in relation to the family and work histories of individuals. The strategy of linking the samples of two GSS could be re-examined eventually.

The Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics (SLID) - SLID is an ongoing panel survey that attempts to collect highly detailed information on employment and income dynamics from a large sample of respondents. SLID follows any given individual during a six-year period; during this period, data on family changes (marriage, separation, birth of a child, etc.) are collected, but very few retrospective data on family life are collected at the first interview. Consequently, as it now stands, SLID is of little utility for a study interested in the longitudinal aspects of family dynamics. One easy way to remedy this situation would consist of adding a retrospective family history section to the questionnaire addressed to the new sample of respondents entering the panel survey every three years. This approach was used in the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) and proved to be quite conclusive. Finally, the relevance of SLID for the CPRN on family could be increased significantly by the addition of questions on family transactions in a given wave.

The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) - The NLSCY is a panel survey that started in 1994. The original sample consists of approximately 23,000 children, aged 0 to 11 years, who are followed every two years. In the first wave, the survey collected the complete conjugal and family histories of both biological parents of all children. The NLSCY adopted a multiple-perspective approach: questionnaires are filled out by sampled children when they reach the age of 10, by the person who best knows the child (generally the mother), by teachers and school principals. In case of parental separation between waves, the NLSCY follows the child through the most knowledgeable person or the guardian parent. The possibility of interviewing more than one individual is built in the NLSCY approach; it would thus be quite simple to introduce a supplement on family transactions at any given wave in order to gain information on more than one family member. The introduction of a separate section on the costs and expenses incurred by children, and on the ways in which these costs are shared among household members or with parents outside of the household in all types of families, (intact, single-parent, step-families) could also be extremely useful. Another strategy to improve the NLSCY data would consist of interviewing both parents after a separation (instead of only the most knowledgeable person, as it now stands). Such a strategy would permit a more thorough examination of the details of custody arrangements adopted by parents after the disruption of the family, as well as the financial transactions that are made to meet children's needs. There is no reason to collect only data pertaining to financial transactions. In following both separated parents, it would be possible to understand better how intergenerational support evolves once the separation occurs. When the parents part, do the grand-parents maintain close contacts with their grand-children or do they progressively lose contact with them, especially if their sons or daughters do not have the children's custody? Do children living in step-families gain access to a whole "new" set of relatives (grand-parents, aunts, uncles) from their step-parents' family, in addition to the relatives from their "original" family? Or are they losing on both ends, by progressively losing touch with involved grand-parents and gaining step-grand-parents who are not much committed to their step-grand-children?

2.3 Designing a new survey

As shown by the four previous surveys considered, much research on family transactions could be conducted if certain modifications were introduced into these surveys. Consequently, are the needs for new data sufficient to justify the development of a whole new and independent survey?

My first answer to this question would be that there is no need, at this point, to launch a new panel survey for many reasons. First, several panel surveys have been initiated almost at once by Statistics Canada in the mid-1990's. The experience shows that the process of producing the longitudinal micro-data files is far more complex and costly than it was previously assumed. Second, the on-going surveys contain a mass of information that has only slightly been exploited by researchers up to this point. In fact, only a limited number of researchers are accustomed to the longitudinal methods of analysis required to take advantage of the richness of these data, and efforts should be made to increase training in these methods.[2] Other difficulties (e.g. the problem of data confidentiality) have also been encountered. I thus think that we cannot at present launch a new panel survey without jeopardizing the existing surveys. Consequently, I would argue for finding a way to work with the latter, without increasing too much the respondents' burden.

However, there remains perhaps some room to conduct a cross-sectional/retrospective survey. A possible avenue would be to redesign a new GSS aiming directly at the study of family transactions. That survey could adopt a multiple approach (i.e. interview more than one respondent per household) in order to provide a better understanding of family dynamics. One could hope for an enlarged sample or for an oversampling of given categories of respondents/families (e.g., step-families) in order to allow for a detailed analysis of given situations. I would suggest following a strategy in two steps, as it was originally planned for the 1995/1996 GSS. Finally, such a quantitative survey could be followed by a qualitative survey that would investigate in greater detail the given practices and meanings in particular family settings.

2.4 Other Considerations

Other methodological issues also need to be considered before developing a quantitative approach to the study of family transactions. Among these, the operationalization of a definition of "family" is crucial, if we aim to gather "representative" samples of families. Are families to be restricted to blood or legal relationships, or to vary according to the social ties that individuals consider to be "family like"? How are we to sample families (either step or multi-generational families) that cut across households and that cannot therefore be recruited using standard selection procedures?

The British Columbia Study pointed to the need of oversampling certain categories of families (e.g., male lone-parent families, step-families) which experienced given changes in employment. This strategy is not without several difficulties if we want to take into account more than one changing dimension of individuals' lives. How can we define the oversampling categories without unduly multiplying their numbers, if we want, for example, to take into consideration not only changes experienced on the labour market but also those affecting family composition and duration?

Information on the characteristics of the situational and systemic levels (neighbourhood, labour market) in which individuals and families operate should also be collected if we aim to contextualize the experiences of individuals and families, and allow for multilevel analyses. An indirect way to achieve this goal is to follow the approach developed recently by Statistics Canada, which consists of merging data from the census with those of existing surveys. For example, in order to allow for a contextual analysis of children's development, aggregate level characteristics attached to given geographic areas

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[2] Both Statistics Canada and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council undertook such an effort by creating a joint working group, whose mandate is to increase the capacity of social research using large quantitative data bases.

have been calculated from census data and then matched to the individual information collected by the NLSCY.

There is also a need to replace individuals’ life histories within the groups or family contexts in which they occurred. The development of "event history analysis" has allowed a multivariate approach to the study of the transitions experienced by individuals in the course of their lives. However, this method applies solely to *individual* longitudinal data. Ideally, one would like to study the interactions between an individual's transitions in relation to those of other individuals, i.e. to move from the individual to the kinship level. Such a perspective necessitates the adoption of a different approach in collecting and analysing data. A team of researchers from the *Institut national d’études démographiques* (Lelièvre, Bonvalet and Bry, 1997) has recently started working on such a project and to develop new data collection strategies. Special attention should be given to the future work of this team.

Issues of validity and reliability of data remain central to quantitative survey analysis. In order to test for the reliability of any measure, a useful strategy consists of collecting the same information across surveys and across time periods. Another strategy would be to follow Wason and Michalski’s (1998) suggestion of framing main questions with a number of smaller questions in order to increase the reliability of data collected in standardized questionnaires. Finally, one could also resort to the use of probing questions in order to get responses concerning infrequent events (such as giving money to others).

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No magic or unique solution exists for developing a quantitative approach to the study of family transactions. Our understanding of family dynamics is probably to gain from pursuing a variety of alternatives that consist of the following: 1) analysing data from the already numerous surveys that collect information on the family; 2) building from the existing surveys by adding to them new sections or panels that address specific items (such as documenting financial transactions within the NLSCY); 3) designing a new cross-sectional/retrospective survey that aims both to oversample given categories of respondents and families, and to directly study family transactions. Efforts will also be required to increase training in longitudinal and multilevel methods of analysis, and to facilitate researchers’ access to the richness of the original data files, without breaching the confidentiality clause by which Statistics Canada must abide. Many methodological refinements are still required for studying the social and economic dynamics of families, but future avenues of research look exciting and promising, given the conceptual and methodological tools (in terms of data and methods) that now exist.

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