

Family Policies and Social Science

On 23 February 2010, the British Academy Policy Centre launched its first report, 'Social Science and Family Policies'. At the launch, there was a lively debate, chaired by Polly Toynbee of the 'Guardian', on the respective roles of politicians and social scientists. Dr Simon Griffiths and Lili Hoag offer a flavour.

Professor Sir Michael Rutter FBA, who had chaired the report's working group, argued that good social science is needed by policy-makers for a variety of reasons:

- to check the validity of observations to see if they are representative
- to reveal the ways in which different individuals respond to similar causes
- to indicate which associations are likely to reflect causation
- to reject the fallacy that it is possible to find a single cause for complex situations or conditions
- to measure whether policies are getting to grips with problems that have been identified

The report itself set out a variety of examples of what the research into families showed policy-makers, and made a case for social scientists and politicians to work together better on their distinct, but equally important, roles in order to create better policies for families and young people.

Putting the debate into a wider public policy perspective, Sharon Witherspoon, Deputy Director of the Nuffield Foundation, reflected on her position as someone who both commissions and 'uses' research. She showed up the dangers of bad research, citing a survey from a leading divorce firm last year. The survey claimed that just over two-thirds (68%) admitted indiscriminately using their children as 'bargaining tools' when they separated. Further, 'a staggering 20% admitted that they had actively set out to make their partner's experience "as unpleasant as possible" regardless of the effect this had on their children's feelings.' This kind of claim tells us more about the



Figure 1. Michael Rutter, who chaired the report's Working Group. Photo: David Graeme-Baker.

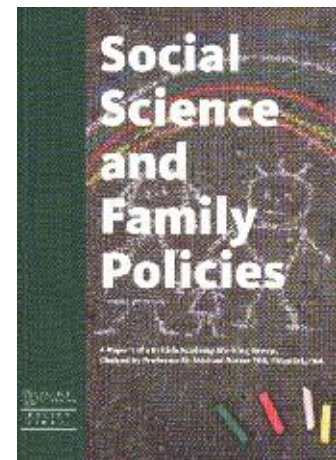
survey than society, and reflects deep biases. Bias, she noted, can be caused by the choice of a bad sample, self-selection into a study, or many other factors. In this case, the results did not provide descriptive accuracy. In the sample cited, half of respondents had been to court, whereas the true figure of separating couples who go to court is between 5 and 10%. Perhaps a fairer conclusion from this survey would have been to say something about the unhappiness of families who do go to court, compared to the 90–95% who muddle through without following that route.

Later in the discussion, Jill Kirby, Director of the Centre for Policy Studies, reflected on the family as a contemporary party political issue. She pointed out that family policy has become 'second only to the economy' for David Cameron and the Conservatives. She also raised the difficulty of separating values from social science.

This discussion garnered questions from academics, civil servants, and people working in the third sector as to what the interface between social science and policy currently is and what it should be. In particular, there was a focus on the tensions between those who argue for a 'parent-centred' or a 'child-centred approach', based on changing ideas as to what is best for children in the long term. This binary opposition was criticised by Jill Kirby, who argued for a more holistic approach. She argued that the Government has focused too much on early childhood

intervention, for instance in initiatives such as Sure Start, without taking into account family structure as a fundamental launching point for a good childhood and a positive future. What ensued was a lively debate on the issues around social science and family policy, to which this report makes an important contribution.

Dr Simon Griffiths is Senior Policy Adviser in the British Academy Policy Centre. Lili Hoag was a researcher on the *Social Science and Family Policies* report. The Policy Centre oversees a programme of activities, including reports and events, which aim to engage expertise within the humanities and social sciences to shed light on wider public policy issues. It was launched in October 2009, with support from the Economic and Social Research Council.



Social Science and Family Policies: Report of a British Academy Working Group, chaired by Professor Sir Michael Rutter, was published in February 2010. Sir Michael is Professor of Developmental Psychopathology, Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London; he is an Honorary Fellow of the British Academy.

A copy of the report, together with more information about the British Academy Policy Centre, can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/policy/