

**‘FAMILIES AT RISK’ –
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF IMPLICATIONS FOR
POLICY AND SERVICES**

A Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|--------|--|
| AHMAC | Australian Health Ministers Advisory Council |
| ARC | Australian Research Council |
| SACOSS | South Australian Council of Social Service |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| UNICEF | United Nations Children's Fund |
| USA | United States of America |
| WHO | World Health Organization |

THESIS SUMMARY

This thesis examines policy and service delivery issues in the development of health and support for ‘families at risk’. The research focuses on families with children less than 7 years of age living in some of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods of metropolitan Adelaide. The thesis draws on evidence of (a) barriers to service support perceived by these families and (b) their strengths and resources in order to identify and develop arguments related to key issues of policy and service delivery.

The thesis was developed using data from two sources: survey interviews with a research population of 500 families and in-depth qualitative research conversations with a subset of fourteen mothers and their front-line service providers. The largely quantitative survey data enabled a detailed local picture of associations between social disadvantage, support and service use, and family health and well-being to be drawn. In addition, the ‘lay knowledge’ of mothers and their service providers gathered in the qualitative research, extended and in some instances challenged, the large-scale survey data by providing:

- ‘thick’ descriptions related to the strengths and resources of mothers of young children and of their experiences of service support;
- insight into the dynamics of ‘helpful help’ and the potential of service relationships and practices to challenge social health inequalities.

The doctoral research was one part of the Australian Research Council (ARC) funded *Linkages* project - *Families at Risk: their strengths, resources, access to services and*

barriers. The author was a member of the collaborative research team responsible for this project and has been centrally involved in the conduct of the quantitative field research interviews and in the drafting of key reports produced by the project team. At the same time, the author worked independently in conducting the qualitative research conversations and in developing and writing this thesis.

The thesis research framework is drawn from critical population health and feminist perspectives. People's strengths and resources are understood to be (re)produced by fundamental societal processes which shape the relationships between them as individual 'agents' and the socioeconomic, cultural, living environments and political landscapes they inhabit. The first three chapters of the thesis are devoted to the research literature and the policy and service contexts within which research questions about how best to support 'families at risk' are being asked.

Both quantitative and qualitative research evidence have been employed in the second part of the thesis to examine the ways in which the unequal distribution of health-determining conditions and unequal social relations fundamentally determine parents' and children's health and well-being. From this, the need for a paradigm shift from one focused primarily on parents' (mothers') individual strengths or deficits to a focus on redressing social health inequalities, framed the thesis argument regarding implications for services. In these chapters, theory and practice issues which constitute these different problem understandings and more equal social power relations are examined.

In summary, the thesis contributes to the body of knowledge about the mechanisms which link structure and agency to reproduce or challenge social health inequalities and, in particular, the potential of family support services to contribute to achieving health equity.

Statement of Sources

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text and as noted below.

.....

Data, mainly in the form of figures and tables, which were developed by other members of the *Families at Risk* research team, have been reproduced in this thesis and are specifically acknowledged:

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¹ The project's website can be viewed at:
<http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/education/FamilyNeeds/index.htm>.