The new American family
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ISR award winners
Supporting the Next Generation:
Faculty Research:
Mentally challenging jobs, marketing at schools, income inequality in China, giving ourselves advice and more
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This issue of the ISR Sampler is special to me for several reasons. First of all, this issue commemorates the completion of ISR’s major building expansion, supported by a generous grant from the National Institutes of Health. This project has done much to improve our out-of-date infrastructure. As you’ll see in the photos in this issue and in the online slideshow, the new space amplifies our ability to collaborate with colleagues from different disciplines and different nations as we reimagine social science in the public interest. This is an exciting time at the Institute – the revolution in social science is expanding ISR’s traditional observational and experimental data collections and analyses to include exo-environmental factors and biometric, physiological, and biological data. At the same time, we are forming new international partnerships around the world and new collaborations with colleagues across the University of Michigan campus. We have made major strides to consolidate our educational programs, streamline our administration, and build a sound foundation for our future. We continue to diversify our work force, increase the breadth of our funding sources, develop new outreach programs, and establish new relationships with non-traditional social science partners.

As we continue our capital campaign, one of our top priorities remains supporting the Next Generation of ISR researchers. With help from generous and far-sighted donors like Garth Taylor and Eugene and Martha Burnstein, profiled in this issue, we now provide financial assistance to more than 40 students every year. As you’ll see from the profiles of student award-winners in these pages and on our website, these individuals go on to become innovators and problem solvers prepared to make a difference in academia, business and the public sector. Their contributions will be essential in helping to solve the increasingly complicated problems society faces. Among these, as this issue’s cover story explores, is the meaning and function of families. As you’ll read, ISR is at the forefront in developing new ways of thinking about the changes and challenges America’s families face.

On a personal level, this issue of the ISR Sampler is special to me because this is the last time I will be speaking to you from these pages as ISR Director. As most of you know, I will be leaving my position this coming June at the end of my second five-year term as Director of the Institute. I look forward to working with all of you in the coming months, and beyond that, to help my successor continue to build for ISR’s future. To me, ISR will always be family.

The ISR Sampler is produced once a year by the ISR Office of Communications.

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Maintaining an equitable institutional environment is at the forefront in developing new ways of thinking about the changes and challenges America’s families face.

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The New American Family
BY SUSAN ROSEGRANT

All are welcome, and you don’t even have to get married

Picture a hypothetical parents’ night at Average Elementary School: A young couple, not married, looks at their kids’ art projects. A pair in their 30s, old enough to be grandparents, frets about their only child. A single mother jots down information about an after-school program. Two men approach a teacher to ask about their adopted son. The people in the room are white, Hispanic, Black, and Asian, and several of the couples are interracial.

This is the new American family. In ways large and small, the fundamental societal building block has morphed from the cookie-cutter norms of the last century to a vivid array of possibilities.

“I wouldn’t say the Ozzie and Harriet family is headed towards extinction, but it’s really a much much smaller slice of American life,” says William Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution and an ISR researcher, who adds that the American public—and employers and government—are still catching up to the new reality. “If you watch a lot of TV, there are certainly shows that highlight these different family arrangements, but I think a lot of people look at those and say, ‘Well, that’s Hollywood or New York or someplace like that. It’s not where I live.’”

All this is not to say that the old stereotype of family—a married man and woman, two kids, and a dog—is out. A recent study shows that 83 percent of young adults aged 20-24 still think it’s important to get married someday. And, in fact, most Americans do end up marrying eventually. But how they get there, when, and with whom, is a changing story.

For starters, the American family is not nearly as white as it used to be. Depending on which government statistics you believe, white babies may already be in the minority. The U.S. Census put minority births at just over 50 percent in 2012, while the National Center for Health Statistics says non-Hispanic black babies are still in the lead at 54 percent. Either way, we are a multicultural society and becoming more so each year.

Mixed race couples have become far more common, another sign of our increasingly inclusive culture. And more gay couples have started families. The number of unmarried households headed by same-sex couples increased 80 percent in the 2010 Census from a decade earlier to almost 650,000, and an estimated 25 percent of those households are raising children.

Although gay marriage is now legal in 19 states and counting, it’s still barred in many parts of the country. And for all couples, gay or straight, marriage increasingly is a luxury beyond the reach of the very young, most available to those with money and education.

Still, waiting isn’t always that bad.

First comes love, then comes…?

Many couples aren’t in a hurry to tie the knot because they’re living together first, sometimes for many years. Remember the shotgun wedding: Pregnant girl, angry father, married life started under a shroud of shame?

That sense of shame is gone, and ready birth control and changed sexual mores have removed the stigma attached to living together—and even having kids—outside of marriage. “People weren’t opposed to cohabitation because folks were cooking together or doing laundry together,” says ISR sociologist Pamela Smock. “They were opposed to it because people were having sex outside of marriage. Once premarital sex became something people approved of, cohabitation started to escalate.”

And escalate it has. Today about two-thirds of young adults live with a partner at some point, and three-quarters of first marriages are preceded by cohabitation, Smock says. In part because of cohabitation, the median age at which women and men marry for the first time has been creeping up—now at 25.8 for women and 28.3 for men. The good news is that divorce rates have plateaued or dipped slightly to 40 to 50 percent since peaking in the early 1980s.

But averages only tell part of the story. The less education people have—and limited education generally equates with lower salaries—the more likely they are to cohabit for long periods of time without marrying, and the more likely they are to divorce. Data from the National Survey of Family Growth shows that during the 2006-2010 period, 1 in 5 women who didn’t have a high school diploma or GED reported living with someone, but only about 1 in 14 women with a bachelor’s degree or more were cohabiting. And only a third of women with college degrees get divorced, compared to 60 percent of women who didn’t finish high school.

The baby carriage

As people take longer to get married, they’re also waiting longer to have kids. This is partly because—more good news—teen pregnancy rates have plummeted, dropping 40 percent from 1990 to 2008. Credit better sex ed and readily available birth control. Women in their early 20s also are becoming pregnant at the lowest rate in more than 30 years. The group having more babies: women over 30, and, particularly, women aged 40-44.

As how couples come together changes, these babies are being born into different kinds of families. Specifically, a wedding ring is becoming less likely to precede a stroller. More than 40 percent of births occurred outside of marriage in 2009, compared to 28 percent in 1990. That’s a fundamental change. And sixty percent of those babies born to unmarried mothers are born to cohabiting parents.

Why are so many couples waiting to marry, and having kids before marriage, when marriage is still the avowed goal of the vast majority of Americans? Research has shown that many cohabiting couples won’t consider marriage until they have enough money to have a “proper” wedding, and to feel economically secure. In fact, for some, getting married has become a symbol of achievement not linked to setting up a household or having children. “In our culture, marriage is the desired capstone for having already achieved economic well-being,” says Smock, “not something you do on the path to getting there.”

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“I wouldn’t say the Ozzie and Harriet family is headed towards extinction, but it’s really a much much smaller slice of American life.”

—William Frey
And, as ISR researchers Arland Thornton, William Axinn, and Yu Xie note in their 2007 book, Marriage and Cohabitation, the connection in the West between earning capacity and the ability to marry “leads to the expectation that young people with high skill levels, extensive training in educational programs, high-quality jobs, and good long-term job prospects will be able to marry and establish independent households earlier than those with fewer of these resources.”

Ideas about when and with whom to have sex have changed. But the sense of what it takes for a couple to be ready to marry can be surprisingly old fashioned. It’s not unusual, research shows, for both members of a man-woman couple to believe that the man must have a solid job and be earning more than the woman before they’ll consider getting hitched. This despite the fact that as women earn more college degrees than men, more women are becoming the primary breadwinners. So while marriage seems to confer benefits and those who are married tend to do better economically than couples who aren’t, that may partly be the result of a process of self-selection that keeps economically precocious households from taking that step.

This rings true for ISR sociologist Paula Fomby. She cites research by sociologist Andrew Cherlin at Johns Hopkins who, she says, “has done work to describe this strivings population, aiming for marriage, aiming for home ownership, aiming for stable employment, and starting a family together and kind of missing the boat on all those economic markers.”

Being a kid in the new American family

As couples shake things up, the landscape for children growing up can be downright tumultuous. Forty percent of young adults have lived with cohabiting parents. Fewer than half of young adults reach age 18 in a family headed by their married biological parents. And more than half experience a change in their family structure, such as a mother divorcing or changing partners.

What does all this mean for kids? First of all, with something as complicated and nuanced as a family, each situation is unique, and that step.

The mass imprisonment spurred by the decades-long War on Drugs is one such structural change that has had major consequences. African-American families have been hit particularly hard, in part because of the large numbers of Black men arrested for minor drug infractions. Research shows that one-third of African-American men are now in prison, on probation, or on parole. And kids with at least one parent in jail are more likely to be poor, to have a broken family, and—according to the research of Yale sociologist and former ISR post-doc Christopher Wildeman—to be at risk of homelessness.

Sociologist Fomby found that nearly one in five children today lives with a half- or step-sibling at age 4. Doing so raises by 14 percent the chance that the child will act out when they start school, Fomby says. And kids who live with both a step-parent and step- or half-siblings show an almost 30 percent increase in aggressive behavior on entering school.

Fomby says kids may act out because their attachment to the custodial parent—typically the mother—suffers when families reconfigure. Mothers may have to work more hours, or be distracted by a new relationship, or have more commitments. And, once again, women who have had children with more than one father are more likely to be poor and not to have a college degree. All these changes may be hard on children, but Fomby is quick to note that parents aren’t to blame for somehow being feckless and subjecting their kids to harmful churn.

Families end up in complicated relationships largely because of macroeconomic forces that are well beyond their control,” she stresses. “There are disincentives to get education as the cost of education goes up. There are diminished labor force opportunities in a lot of low income neighborhoods, so it’s hard to find a partner who is stably employed. These are the sort of on-the-ground consequences of huge structural changes that have had serious consequences for social organization.”

The challenge for society is how to make the new family or new families something that’s beneficial for kids.

A slight bright spot: Kids with close ties to a grandparent, family friend, or others outside the household will likely weather changes—from step families to a jailed parent—more easily. “Residential stability, school stability...these are all places that are familiar when other things might be changing at home,” Fomby says. And, in fact, African-American children often do better in these situations than white kids, she adds, perhaps because they tend to stay in the same neighborhoods and to maintain relations with extended kin.

There is also the potential benefit of ending up with an expanded network of relatives and caregivers that transcends a single house. A father may live elsewhere, but still be involved. A step-sister may move away but still be emotionally close. “Kids growing up don’t necessarily have their family in one household living with them,” Smock says. “They may have ties to several different groups of relatives. The challenge for society is how to make the new family or new families something that’s beneficial for kids.”

Percent of all births that are to unmarried women

Source: Pamela Smock

UP AND OUT... OR NOT

Adults these days are waiting longer to get married and longer to have kids. So maybe it’s no surprise that many young adults are taking longer to leave home and launch independent lives. Indeed, children and parents today often remain intertwined in ways that would have seemed uncommon or even unhealthy just a generation ago.


Pictured on the right, Anna Briggs honed waitressing skills, substitute teaches, and makes student loan payments while living at home and searching for the teaching job she hopes to land soon.
Celebrating ISR’s New Wing

This summer ISR celebrated the opening of the newest wing of our Thompson Street building with a ribbon-cutting ceremony in the elegant and spacious atrium. The event featured remarks by University of Michigan President Emerita Mary Sue Coleman and Lawrence Tabak, Principal Deputy Director of the National Institutes of Health. It also included tours of the bio-specimen laboratory and other features of the new addition that will enhance our ability to reimagine social science in the public interest.

The objective of the new “circulation system” linking Wing 4 to the existing building is to enhance collaboration, creative discovery and productivity. As an integral part of this system, the four-story atrium functions as a centralized hub, visually connecting units and floors while serving as a lobby, gathering space served by a new café, and welcome area for visitors.

Most ISR projects are national or international in scope, involving colleagues, industry partners, and peer organizations from around the globe. To facilitate ongoing communication, the first level of Wing 4 houses a large configurable conference room that offers a well-equipped space for meetings, workshops, seminars, presentations and teleconferences, as well as other virtual collaborative spaces.

The lower level of Wing 4 houses secure data enclaves that enable researchers to analyze confidential, restricted-use data. The Michigan Census Research Data Center, created in 2002 as a joint project of the U.S. Census Bureau and the University of Michigan, provides researchers with access to non-public microdata from federal statistical agencies as well as data from around the world. About 150 researchers are using these data to study a wide variety of topics.

Several ISR projects collect biological specimens as part of their surveys. The Wing 4 addition houses a secure laboratory where biological specimens will be processed and analyzed to support these ongoing data collections. The lab has eight -80°C freezers, which allow processing and holding of 250,000 samples at one time.

Installed in October 2013, the green roof on ISR’s new addition provides many benefits to the Institute and the surrounding community. It improves energy efficiency, roof membrane durability and fire retardation. The roof also improves air quality, moderates the urban heat island effect, and aids storm water retention and filtration. Planted with seven different types of plants, including Bidenoell’s sedge, stonecrop and nodding onion, the green roof is one way ISR is contributing to a sustainable future.

To see more photos of the grand opening and the new addition—as well as the construction that preceded it—watch a photo slideshow at http://bit.ly/new-wing.
Marketing at Schools

Most students are exposed to some kind of commercial marketing efforts at their schools, according to a study conducted by researchers at ISR and the University of Illinois at Chicago Institute for Health Research and Policy.

ISR researcher Yvonne Terry-McElrath and colleagues surveyed administrators from 2,445 elementary schools, 816 middle schools, and 802 high schools around the country to measure commercial activity related to food and beverages in the schools.

Nearly a quarter of middle school students and slightly more than half of high school students attended schools where fast food was available at least once a week.

“Although there were significant decreases over time in many of the measures we examined, the continuing high prevalence of school-based commercialism supports calls for, at minimum, clear and enforceable standards on the nutritional content of all foods and beverages marketed to youth in school settings,” the authors conclude.

The study, published in JAMA Pediatrics, was based on data from the Food and Fitness Study conducted at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the Youth, Education, and Society Study, conducted at ISR. Both studies are part of the Bridging the Gap research initiative funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Genes amplify environmental impacts

Genes amplify the stress of harsh environments for some children, and magnify the advantage of supportive environments for others, according to a study that’s one of the first to document how genes interacting with social environments affect biomarkers of stress.

“Our findings suggest that an individual’s genetic architecture moderates the magnitude of the response to external stimuli—but it is the environment that determines the direction,” says ISR researcher Colter Mitchell, lead author of the paper.

The study, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, used telomere length as a marker of stress. Found at the ends of chromosomes, telomeres generally shorten with age, and when individuals are exposed to disease and chronic stress, including the stress of living in a disadvantaged environment.

Funding for the study was provided by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, and by the Penn State Clinical and Translational Science Institute.

Giving ourselves advice as good as we give others

Most of us find it easier to be wise about other people’s problems than our own. But a study identifies a simple way to close this gap: consider your problems from the perspective of an outside observer.

“When people self-distance, they are capable of reasoning as wisely about their own interpersonal problems as about the problems of others,” said ISR’s Ethan Kross, who conducted the study, published in Psychological Science, with Igor Grossmann of the University of Waterloo.

According to Grossmann, who won a Daniel Katz Dissertation Fellowship in Psychology at U-M in 2009, the results clearly show that when people think about problems in the first-person, they are wiser when reasoning about others’ problems than their own. The researchers call this tendency “Solomon’s Paradox,” after the Old Testament king known for his wisdom but who still failed at making personal decisions.

Grossmann and Kross also examined how age affects people’s ability to make wise decisions.

“The belief that with age comes wisdom is not true when it comes to reasoning about our own personal problems,” Kross said. “Older people may be wiser in giving advice to others, but not necessarily in deciding what to do themselves. But if they adopt self-distancing techniques, they can be as effective as younger people in closing this wisdom gap.”

When people self-distance, they are capable of reasoning as wisely about their own interpersonal problems as about the problems of others.”

—Ethan Kross
Consumers worry about energy’s impact on the environment

Rich, poor or in-between, American consumers express an equal degree of “personal worry” about the impact of energy use on the environment, according to the January 2014 University of Michigan Energy Survey.

“The fact that U.S. consumers care as much about the environmental impact of energy as they do about its affordability was a surprise finding from our first round of data, collected in October 2013,” said John DeCicco, U-M Energy Institute research professor and survey director.

Conducted while parts of the country were experiencing frigid weather and regional increases in energy prices, the January survey found that consumers consistently expressed at least as much concern for the energy’s environmental impact as they did for its affordability.

The U-M Energy Survey will be administered four times a year through a set of questions added quarterly to the Thomson Reuters/University of Michigan Surveys of Consumers, conducted by ISR since 1946. Energy data will be made available through public archives generally less than a year after each new sample is analyzed.

Income inequality in China and the U.S.

Income inequality in China is among the highest in the world, according to ISR sociologist Yu Xie. Xie and U-M graduate student Xiang Zhou analyzed data from a variety of Chinese surveys, including the Peking University’s China Family Panel Studies, started in 2010 in collaboration with ISR.

They found that the Gini coefficient, an internationally accepted measure of income inequality, in China is now around 0.55 compared to 0.45 in the U.S. Generally, when the coefficient reaches 0.5, it indicates that the gap between rich and poor is severe.

“The rapid rise in income inequality in China can be partly attributed to long-standing government policies that effectively favor urban residents over rural residents and coastal, more developed regions over inland, less developed regions,” Zhou said.

The research, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, was funded by the Natural Science Foundation of China, Peking University, and the ISR Population Studies Center, which receives core support from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

GROUP DYNAMICS SEMINARS TACKLE

One of the longest running seminar series in the social sciences is back this fall examining “Social Psychology in the Era of Social Media.” Organized by Scott Campbell, Ethan Kross and Jerome Johnston of ISR’s Research Center for Group Dynamics, the series will describe the contours of social media use (texting, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) and ask whether human behavior is essentially different in a world of social media. Are human relationships different when the face-to-face component is reduced? Do social media promote different beliefs and behaviors than traditional media? The series will look at dimensions of social psychology such as personality, impression management, privacy, and habit and ask whether our understanding of these behaviors is different when the behaviors are moderated by virtual encounters. The aim of the series is to bring interdisciplinary perspectives to the phenomenon and consider new directions for research on social media.

Last fall’s series, titled “A Social Science Perspective on Aggression and Violence,” presented 12 talks on the causes and consequences of violence. The presentations revealed that there is no single cause of an individual becoming aggressive or violent, so reducing and preventing violence in society will require very complex interventions. For more information about the Group Dynamics Seminar Series, visit http://bit.ly/RCGD-seminar.
Pickin’ and Givin’: The retirement of pollster Garth Taylor

When Garth Taylor retired in 2010 from running a polling company in Chicago, he wanted to live life right. After peeling away things that didn’t really matter, what was left was music. “I recorded an album,” he says. “And then I got the idea of starting a music school.”

Taylor did that, forming the School of American Music in the southwestern Michigan town of Three Oaks, near where he and his wife and son had kept a cottage for years, and where they now lived year-round.

During those years, Taylor and his family retreated on weekends to Berrien County, Mich., where he played in a jug band and taught guitar. So starting a music school in retirement wasn’t too much of a stretch.

Now when he’s not teaching or playing music, Taylor looks forward to meeting each year’s recipient of the Garth Taylor fellowship. “Public opinion was always the most interesting to me,” he says. “I just felt like I was reading the Book of Revelation when I was reading survey code books. Someone else is going to have that same experience.”


The Polish connection: Eugene Burnstein secures a link

Eugene Burnstein’s parents were born in the once fluid border region of Poland and Ukraine. But Burnstein, a social psychologist and senior research scientist emeritus at the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research (ISR), says that, except for family left behind, there was little nostalgia for the old country.

Still, a connection seemed determined to out. When Burnstein came to the University of Michigan (U-M) in 1954 to pursue a Ph.D., he soon ran into Robert Zajonc, a Polish-born social psychologist. Zajonc became an important mentor, particularly after Burnstein joined the U-M faculty in 1964, teaching and doing research at ISR’s Research Center for Group Dynamics (RCGD).

Burnstein’s work—for example, analyzing the polarization of opinions in groups—dovetailed well with that of Zajonc. So when Zajonc couldn’t make it to an international psychology meeting in Warsaw in 1991, Burnstein went instead.

The meeting celebrated the establishment of the University of Warsaw’s Institute for Social Studies (ISS), a research unit with close ties to ISR. Burnstein liked the feeling of Poland and he liked the people. When ISS started a summer school about six years later, Burnstein taught there, often accompanied by his wife, Martha. When he retired in 2002, he kept teaching at ISS.

As the ties strengthened, Burnstein encouraged Polish students to come to ISR. But the annual scramble for funds and the unpredictability of the opportunity struck him as problematic. “It’s not formal and there’s always a struggle—do we have enough money?”

So Burnstein and his wife decided to change that. This past summer, 50 years after Burnstein started teaching at U-M, the Eugene and Martha Burnstein University of Warsaw Social Science Scholars Exchange Fund brought its first Polish student, Anna Kuzminska, to Michigan to study at one of ISR’s summer programs.

Creating the fund just felt right to Burnstein and his wife. The exchange is good for both sides, he says. Besides, “I like the idea of it. I have some affection for that part of the world.”

What it means to be a family: Job migration and land use in Nepal

Nell Compernolle’s interest in gender, family dynamics, and “what it means to be a woman” isn’t hard to understand. The doctoral student in sociology and demography at the University of Michigan (U-M) grew up in a close family outside of Chicago as a twin, one of five siblings, and with about 30 cousins nearby. “Family was always present for me,” she says.

After getting a bachelor’s degree in psychology from Northwestern, Compernolle worked as a paralegal in San Francisco, traveling periodically to Southeast Asia to teach English. “It opened my eyes,” recalls Compernolle. “What does it mean to be a family, a woman, in contexts other than a safe place in Chicago.”

Compernolle is now digging deeper into some of those questions with the help of the Institute for Social and Environmental Research-Nepal, a research and development institute in Chitwan, Nepal, that is a close partner with U-M’s Institute for Social Research (ISR). Government instability, a stagnant economy, and falling crop yields have driven many Nepalese men to pursue work outside Nepal, particularly in Qatar and other Persian Gulf countries. Compernolle wants to understand the impact that’s had on marriages, household dynamics, and land use.

Last summer, with funding from the Marshall Weinberg Population, Development, and Climate Change Fellows Program, she interviewed women in Chitwan whose husbands had migrated, husbands working in the Gulf region (interviewed by phone), as well as non-migrant husbands and wives.

Compernolle guessed that women—suddenly in charge—would feel more empowered, that conflict would decrease, and that wives would find daily disagreement between husbands and wives charged—would feel more empowered, that conflict would decrease, and that wives would find daily disagreement between husbands and wives charged—would feel more empowered, that conflict would decrease, and that wives would find daily disagreement between husbands and wives charged—would feel more empowered, that conflict would decrease, and that wives would find daily disagreement between husbands and wives charged. Compernolle guessed that women—suddenly in charge—would feel more empowered, that conflict would decrease, and that wives would find daily disagreement between husbands and wives charged. Compernolle guesses that women—suddenly in charge—would feel more empowered, that conflict would decrease, and that wives would find daily disagreement between husbands and wives charged. Compernolle guesses that women—suddenly in charge—would feel more empowered, that conflict would decrease, and that wives would find daily disagreement between husbands and wives charged. Compernolle guesses that women—suddenly in charge—would feel more empowered, that conflict would decrease, and that wives would find daily disagreement between husbands and wives charged. Compernolle guesses that women—suddenly in charge—would feel more empowered, that conflict would decrease, and that wives would find daily disagreement between husbands and wives charged. Compernolle guesses that women—suddenly in charge—would feel more empowered, that conflict would decrease, and that wives would find daily disagreement between husbands and wives charged. Compernolle guesses that women—suddenly in charge—would feel more empowered, that conflict would decrease, and that wives would find daily disagreement between husbands and wives charged. Compernolle guesses that women—suddenly in charge—would feel more empowered, that conflict would decrease, and that wives would find daily disagreement between husbands and wives charged.

But the 17 interviews produced unexpected findings. Most poor couples had to take out loans to pay for the men to fly to the Gulf, diminishing the financial benefits. And while many women felt more empowered, they were also working harder than before. Only the households that were wealthier to begin with were reaping the expected rewards of the demographic rejiggering.

Compernolle is using the interviews to inform a survey of 600 respondents, split between migratory and non-migratory husbands and wives. The results should shed light on the economic, social, humanitarian, and environmental impacts of international job migration.

Understanding how to bring out the best in disadvantaged students

W hen George Smith was a University of Florida undergraduate, he worked every semester with struggling middle schoolers. Smith was well aware of the theory that underprivileged students often falter in high school and give up on college because they don’t care. But Smith, who recently completed his doctorate in social psychology at the University of Michigan, didn’t buy it. “When we ask students where they would like to be, they have the same aspirations,” as their wealthier peers, he says.

Smith and his five brothers and sisters grew up in Memphis; their parents regularly told them that “education is number one.” But many students don’t have role models like that to keep them inspired, he says. When they confront difficult tasks in school, as all students do, they may shut down.

To explore this dynamic, Smith and two other U-M graduate students worked with more than 200 at-risk minority 6th, 7th, and 8th graders in a school in Romulus, a Detroit suburb. They randomly assigned students to one of three groups and had them complete problems and write better essays. Related studies at other schools are reinforcing these results.

But there was a discouraging side, as well. There was no performance difference between middle-school students who received the message that difficult equals impossible and those who got no message at all. In other words, the natural mindset of the students was to give up when faced with a difficult task. “It’s what we expected,” Smith says, “but it’s a little depressing.”

The upshot: If teachers know how to prep students for difficult work, it can be the difference between success and failure. “The big takeaway is that how students interpret these experiences they have in the classroom matters,” Smith says.

Smith conducted the research with support from the Daniel Katz Dissertation Fellowship in Psychology and Survey Methodology. Now he has accepted a job as a Fellow with the Strategic Data Project, a Harvard University program that partners with school districts and other educational groups to bring high-quality research methods and data analysis to strategic management and policy decisions.

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But the 17 interviews produced unexpected findings. Most poor couples had to take out loans to pay for the men to fly to the Gulf, diminishing the financial benefits. And while many women felt more empowered, they were also working harder than before. Only the households that were wealthier to begin with were reaping the expected rewards of the demographic rejiggering.

Compernolle is using the interviews to inform a survey of 600 respondents, split between migratory and non-migratory husbands and wives. The results should shed light on the economic, social, humanitarian, and environmental impacts of international job migration.

The Weinberg grant, she says, made both the in-formation and hire workers, or if they’d be using increased income to buy more land and hire workers, or if they would say, “Forget it, let’s buy things from the market, instead.” Compernolle says.

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Raghunathan directs ISR Survey Research Center

Trivellore Raghunathan began a five-year term as director of the Survey Research Center (SRC) at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research (ISR) on September 1, 2014.

“I feel extremely honored that faculty and staff have chosen me to be the Director of the best survey research institution in the world,” said Raghunathan. “I am looking forward to working with James and other Center Directors to reach new heights with social science modeling of Big Data. It is also daunting to know that I am following intellectual giants who have served as Directors—Jim House, Bob Groves and Bill Axinn.”

Raghunathan is a research professor at ISR, a professor of biostatistics at the U-M School of Public Health, where he also serves as chair of the Department of Biostatistics, and Associate Director of the Center for Research on Ethnicity, Culture and Health. He is also a Research Professor at the Joint Program in Survey Methodology, University of Maryland.

His research interests span several areas in statistics including Bayesian methods, survey design and analysis, and analytic techniques for handling missing data. He developed a widely used open-source software program called IVEWARE for handling multiple imputation analysis.

He is the author or co-author of more than 175 publications in peer-reviewed journals on statistical methodology and subjects including cardiovascular health and cancer prevention.

Raghunathan joined U-M in 1994. He received a Ph.D. in Statistics from Harvard University in 1987, and was a faculty member in the Department of Biostatistics at the University of Washington before coming to the U-M.

He served as Director of the Survey Methodology Program at ISR from 1997 to 2001, and continues to serve on the faculty of the Joint Program in Survey Methodology at the University of Maryland.

Raghunathan was born in Nagpur, India, and received bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Nagpur University. He came to the U.S. in 1982, receiving a master’s degree in Statistics from Miami University in Oxford, OH.

He is a fellow of the American Statistical Association. Raghunathan was named the Richard D. Remington Lecturer by the American Heart Association in 2012.

“I look forward to continue developing a strong working relationship with Raghu in his challenging position leading ISR’s largest Center,” said ISR Director James S. Jackson. “And I also want to extend my sincere thanks to former SRC Director Bill Axinn who has worked tirelessly over the last 5 years to provide outstanding leadership to the Center, and to the entire SRC Situational Review Committee under the very able leadership of Jim House.”

Members of the SRC Situational Review Committee were Kirsten Alcser, Charlie Brown, Fred Conrad, Rich Gonzalez, Steve Heeringa, Vince Hutchings, Erik Kreps, Ken Langa, Maggie Levensstein, Megan Patrick, Narayan Sastry, Jacqui Smith, David Weir, and Cheryl Wiese.

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HONORS & AWARDS

Martha J. Bailey, ISR research associate professor and U-M professor of economics, won the 2013 Young Labor Economist Award, along with her co-authors Brad Hershbein and Amalia Miller.

Frederick Conrad, Director of the ISR Program in Survey Methodology, received the Mitofsky Innovators Award from the American Association for Public Opinion Research, with collaborator Michael Schaber of the New School for Social Research.

Arlene Geronimus, ISR research professor and professor of health behavior and health education at the U-M School of Public Health, has been elected to the Institute of Medicine, one of the nation’s highest honors in health and medicine.

James S. Jackson, ISR Director, was appointed to the National Science Board of the National Science Foundation. The 24-member Board advises NSF, Congress and the President on science and engineering policy.

Robert W. Marans was named a 2014 Fellow of the American Institute of Certified Planners. Marans is professor emeritus at the U-M Taubman College of Architecture & Urban Planning and a research professor at ISR.

Elizabeth Moje was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, received the 2013 National Council of University Science Teachers (NCUST) Outstanding Teaching Award, and was named a 2014 Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). Moje is professor emeritus at the U-M School of Education and is also affiliated with the U-M Institute for Research on Women and Gender.

James D. Morrow was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2014. A professor of political science in U-M’s LSA and a research professor at ISR, Morrow has pioneered the use of non-cooperative game theory, drawn from economics, in international politics.

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Susan Murphy was named a 2013 MacArthur Foundation Fellow. This prestigious award, with its no-strings-attached stipend of $625,000, supports the work of “creative individuals with track records of achievement and the potential for even more significant contributions in the future.” Murphy, who is a research professor at ISR in addition to appointments in the U-M College of Literature, Sciences and the Arts, and the U-M Medical School, was cited for her work developing new methods that evaluate treatment courses for chronic conditions and that allow researchers to test the efficacy of adaptive interventions in clinical trials.

Family reunions play an important role in the Black community, so it was fitting that the University of Michigan Program for Research on Black Americans called its June 20 event a family reunion rather than an academic conference. In fact, it was a bit of both.

Established in 1976 at the U-M Institute for Social Research, the Program was one of the nation’s first university-based research and training programs to focus on the real-life needs of the Black community, with ideas developed in collaboration with that community and studies conducted by and for Black Americans.

Alumni from around the country and the world have stayed in touch with each other for nearly 40 years now. Like many families, they shared laughter and tears at the gathering, as well as memories, accomplishments and dreams for the future.

Read more about this event and see other photos at http://bit.ly/prba-reunion.