Life Course Centre

Supporting the Next Generation of Parenting and Family Science Professionals

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Research Summary

Why was the research done?

To reduce deep and persistent disadvantage across the life course, the workforce responsible for supporting families must itself be supported. This project investigates the experiences and support needs of emerging professionals in parenting and family science—a group that plays a key role in the design and delivery of family interventions but faces high stress, job instability, and limited access to coordinated support. Understanding how best to sustain and develop this workforce is essential to delivering effective services for disadvantaged children and families.

What were the key findings?

Emerging professionals (EPs) reported complex career pathways, driven by fragmented roles across academia, clinical work, and policy. Many struggled with job insecurity, high workloads, and inadequate support—yet expressed strong commitment to improving outcomes for families. Relational support from peers and mentors, access to meaningful professional development, and a sense of purpose were key protective factors. Existing supports were often inaccessible, generic, or disconnected from EPs' lived realities. Supports that are co-designed, embedded in routine work, and responsive to diverse contexts were seen as most valuable.

What does this mean for policy and practice?

To ensure the sustainability and impact of family support systems, greater attention must be paid to the early career workforce. Tailored, locally relevant, and human-centred supports are needed to enable EPs to remain engaged, effective, and well. Policies and institutional practices should embed training, mentorship, and networking opportunities into routine structures, reduce administrative burden, and promote wellbeing. Professional organisations and research centres—such as the Life Course Centre—have an opportunity to foster a connected, capable workforce, equipped to break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage through innovative research and practice.

Citation

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Supporting the Next Generation of Parenting and Family Science Professionals

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Statements and declarations

Abstract

Emerging professionals (EPs) play a vital role in the future of academia, yet they often face considerable challenges to their wellbeing, career performance, and job satisfaction. These challenges may be compounded in multidisciplinary fields such as parenting and family science, which span diverse sectors and lack a clear disciplinary home. This paper explores the experiences and perceptions of EPs working in parenting and family science in Australia, to inform more impactful support strategies. Using a human-centred design framework, we conducted semi-structured interviews with six EPs from diverse professional and cultural backgrounds. Interviews were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, generating three overarching themes: *Career Path*, *Values and Needs*, and *Barriers and Facilitators*. These themes captured the non-linear trajectories, personal and professional values, and structural, interpersonal, and internal factors shaping participants' experiences. Findings highlight the need for support structures that promote wellbeing, facilitate connectedness, and offer accessible and relevant professional development opportunities. Institutions and professional networks must therefore adopt a tailored and participatory approach to supporting EPs in multidisciplinary fields, such as parenting and family science, to enable their sustained contribution to research, policy, and practice.

Keywords: emerging professionals, parenting and family science, higher education, human-centred design, job satisfaction, wellbeing

Supporting the Next Generation of Parenting and Family Science Professionals

The field of parenting and family science explores the predictors and correlates of a wide range of health and wellbeing outcomes in childhood, adolescence and beyond; and seeks to develop, implement, and test parenting and family-based interventions to improve those outcomes (Krijnen et al., 2021). To support the ongoing quality of parenting and family science research and the wellbeing of the people conducting that research, attention must be paid to emerging professionals (EPs) within this field. The context of working in parenting and family science comes with its own unique challenges and opportunities, and the experiences and perceptions of EPs working in this context may differ from those in other fields. There is a growing recognition of the importance of engaging with stakeholders and end-users in order to inform the services and products that are provided to them, to ensure that those provisions fulfil their intended use and meet the needs of end-users (Kujala et al., 2022; Lyon, Brewer, et al., 2020). It is therefore important to understand the experiences and perceptions of EPs working in parenting and family science (Brindley et al., 2024; Cilli et al., 2023), in order to inform the supports provided to this group.

Early Career Challenges

The early-career phase presents a unique set of challenges for researchers (Andrews et al., 2020; Brown & Lund, 2024). The inherent pressures of beginning a career in research make these individuals up to six times more susceptible to anxiety and depression than the general population (Andrews et al., 2020). This issue is demonstrated through the 'publish or perish' phenomenon in which EPs endure an increased workload and pressure to generate publications in the formative years of their career in academia to ensure later success (Brown & Lund, 2024). EPs may also experience uncertainty around securing funding for their research, contributing to stress and anxiety regarding their ability to publish and retain employment (Andrews et al., 2020). Furthermore, EPs within universities often work in

multiple positions to satisfy the teaching needs of the university, which may come at the detriment to their mental health and wellbeing, as well as to their research commitments (Smithers & Gibbs, 2024; Turner, 2017). The culmination of these stressors results in a vulnerable group who are prone to decreased motivation and loss of career ambition (Andrews et al., 2020; Jackman et al., 2022).

EPs have reported receiving inadequate guidance on how to appropriately balance their personal and professional responsibilities in the field (Andrews et al., 2020; Ansmann et al., 2014; Aprile et al., 2021; Jackman et al., 2022). This guidance is critically important, as uncertainty around employment, and subsequently finances, may mean that EPs sacrifice the quality of their personal relationships due to the significant time commitment their career requires in order to succeed (Andrews et al., 2020; Aprile et al., 2021; Jackman et al., 2022). A lack of professional mentorship may also result in EPs facing a steep learning curve in their transition to academia. EPs who move to Western countries may experience additional difficulties around creating research relevant to Westernised societies, and learning new theoretical frameworks and approaches, which can result in increased stress (Andrews et al., 2020). Difficulties with balancing one's personal and professional responsibilities early in their career, while not uncommon, is concerning. Researchers have a responsibility to contribute to the betterment of society through their research (Andrews et al., 2020). If they are unable to manage their own mental health and current stressors, the quality of their research may decrease and they may be unable to develop their skills as researchers (Andrews et al., 2020). This highlights that EPs experience increasing pressures while adjusting to a new professional life, and insufficient support likely perpetuates negative consequences to their physical and psychological wellbeing.

Parenting and Family Science Challenges

In addition to the challenges faced by all EPs, those who are working in parenting and family science are faced with specific field-related challenges and opportunities. For example, as they work in diverse contexts, there is no natural community to which they belong. While EPs in other fields such as the natural sciences may work entirely within the one field and within one setting (e.g., university, industry), parenting and family science EPs may come from disciplines such as psychology, psychiatry, criminology, social work, sociology, and medicine. At any given time or across their career, they may work in universities, government, or non-government organisations, and in private or public clinical practice, researching and implementing a range of parenting programs and theories. This dispersal and variation across the parenting and family science workforce can negatively impact EPs' sense of identity and belonging within the field (Brindley et al., 2024; Empson, 2013), and create perceptions of isolation (Belkhir et al., 2019). Those who work or study remotely may be at further increased risk for isolation and loneliness (O'Hare et al., 2024). Academic isolation is problematic for researchers at any career stage, but especially for EPs due to the additional pressures inherent in beginning a career in research (Belkhir et al., 2019; Fien et al., 2022). It can negatively affect their wellbeing and productivity (Ashforth et al., 2024), and impede them from obtaining the networking opportunities and training required to carve out a successful career in academia (Belkhir et al., 2019). For EPs living and working in the global south (e.g., in Australia), it may be additionally difficult to collaborate and gain support from potential peers and mentors located in the global north, due to cultural differences and logistical barriers such as differing time zones (Tang et al., 2011). Parenting and family science EPs in Australia may therefore require long-term support from institutions and mentors to establish themselves within the field (Browning et al., 2017), and may benefit significantly from accessing a like-minded group that can help them to feel like they belong

(Empson, 2013). Meaningful support and resources are therefore crucial for fostering EPs' wellbeing, performance, and job satisfaction (Baker & Lattuca, 2010; Sweitzer, 2009).

Current Supports

It may, however, be difficult for EPs in Australia to engage with the supports offered by major organisations in their field, which tend to be located in the global north (e.g., American Psychological Association, British Psychological Society). The events and courses offered by these organisations are often held at hours that are unsociable for those living in Australian time zones, which may create a feeling of "otherness" among Australian EPs, perpetuated by a perception that the minority group (i.e., those in the global south) are expected to adapt to accommodate the majority (i.e., those in the global north), with little reciprocation (Tang et al., 2011). Localised supports may therefore be more effective, but there currently exist few organisations that aim to provide support and networking opportunities for parenting and family science EPs in Australia. One current example is the Growing Minds Australia (GMA) Clinical Trials Network, whose Early and Mid-Career Researcher Network provides opportunities for EPs within the child and youth mental health space to collaborate and share opportunities for professional development and training (Growing Minds Australia Clinical Trials Network, 2025). Additionally, some tertiary institutions have implemented support networks and policies to that aim to provide training and networking opportunities to support EPs (e.g., The University of Queensland, 2025; University of New South Wales, 2022). While these policies may be advantageous, they differ between institutions, and EPs may gain more or less support depending on their workplace. For example, rural universities may struggle to attract and retain senior researchers, which is detrimental to the networking and skill development opportunities for EPs (Smithers & Gibbs, 2024).

Informing Supports with Human-Centred Design

To ensure that the supports delivered to EPs in parenting and family science are meaningful, it may be helpful to adopt a human-centred design approach to their development, implementation, and evaluation. Human-centred design provides a scaffold for stakeholder engagement, with a focus on ensuring that what is provided to an end-user is effective in meeting their needs (Lyon, Koerner, et al., 2020). It calls for in-depth understanding of the relevant users, tasks, and environments; involving users throughout an iterative process of design, development, and evaluation; and drawing on multidisciplinary skills and perspectives (Harte et al., 2017). One of the primary methods of initiating and maintaining user engagement throughout the design process is through semi-structured interviews (Melles et al., 2021). This interview process is crucial to generate rich insight into the needs of the user that facilitate effective design (Melles et al., 2021). By engaging the users early and continuously throughout the design process, all stakeholders have the opportunity to educate and influence each other regarding what is considered meaningful design solutions (Carstens, 2015). Additionally, this collaborative and iterative design approach allows for critical reflection and evaluation regarding how the user's feedback can be addressed (Carstens, 2015). By employing a human-centred approach to their design, supports are likely to be more useful in helping EPs' wellbeing, job satisfaction, and performance, in ways that are important to them.

The Current Paper

It is apparent that EPs are a vulnerable group who experience numerous challenges (Mula et al., 2022). Exploring the perceptions and experiences of this population can enable future supports to be developed and provided in a way that meets their needs. However, a significant gap exists relating to understanding the specific support needs of parenting and family science EPs. Hence, this project adopts an explorative, qualitative approach to

understand the experiences and perceptions of parenting and family science EPs in Australia to inform recommendations to better support this group.

Method

Participants

Due to the idiographic nature of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2008), a small sample was employed in this study to explore participant accounts in greater depth - allowing for a more detailed understanding of their experiences and perspectives. Participants are six EPs who self-identified as working within the field of parenting and family science in Australia. At the time of the interviews, all participants were undertaking a postgraduate qualification or had completed their postgraduate study in Australia within the past five years (or equivalent, accounting for interruptions). Half the participants are males without children, and half are females with children. One participant was born in Australia, while the others have relocated from various international locations, including Asia, Europe, North America, and South America. Note, participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

Kirsten is undertaking her PhD while working in family safety services in government. Joshua is undertaking an Applied Masters of Behavioural Analysis and working in clinical practice. Zahra is undertaking a PhD while on secondment from a government role administering family support services. Jessica completed a combined Clinical Masters and PhD program before taking her current teaching and research role at a university, and working in private practice. Li is undertaking a PhD while working as a research assistant at a university. Jose completed PhD and Clinical Masters programs before taking his current role as a research practitioner in a community health service.

Procedure

The research was conducted with university ethical clearance (2022/HE002299, "Supporting the Next Generation of Parenting and Family Science Professionals") and in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki (2024). Participants were recruited through the professional networks of the authors, with full consent obtained via email. All participation was voluntary. Individual, one-hour semi-structured interviews were conducted by author 1 via videoconference. Interview transcriptions were created by the videoconferencing software, and manually cleaned and deidentified by humans.

Analysis

Transcripts were analysed using IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2008) by authors 1 and 3. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used as it allows for the explorations of participants' experiences from their own perspective, while acknowledging the researcher's role in interpreting that perspective (Willig, 2021). In following the IPA method, the authors analysed each transcript individually, through a process of careful reading, re-reading and note taking, before identifying and labelling emergent themes that were then structured according to their relationships with one another. The themes developed from the first case helped to orient the analysis with subsequent cases; revealing certain patterns across the accounts while allowing for new themes to develop as the analysis progressed across each of the cases. Themes were then organised into meaningful clusters – which produced a hierarchical structure comprised of superordinate (core) and subordinate (supporting) themes.

Reflexive statement

As early-career researchers working in parenting and family science, the authors share many professional experiences and concerns with the participants in this study. This positionality offered valuable insight into the context of their reflections and facilitated rapport during interviews. Risk for significant distortions of the interpretation of interviews

was reduced through iterative and collaborative analysis of the transcripts, and maintaining a focus on foregrounding participants' voices. This approach aimed to balance empathy with critical distance, and ensure transparency and rigour in the research process.

Results

The analysis identified three superordinate themes (each with corresponding subordinate themes) that capture the experiences and meaning making of EPs: "Career Path," "Values and Needs," and "Barriers and Facilitators." The first theme, Career Path, focused on EPs' career trajectories, including their education and work experiences, roles and responsibilities, and future aspirations. Values and Needs centred on the goals of EP's work, and their experiences of purpose and reward in their career. Barriers and Facilitators highlights the factors that can hinder or support EPs' wellbeing and performance, including those pertaining to the individual, their job, training, experience, and support from people, workplaces, and professional organisations. The connections between superordinate and subordinate themes are represented in Figure 1.
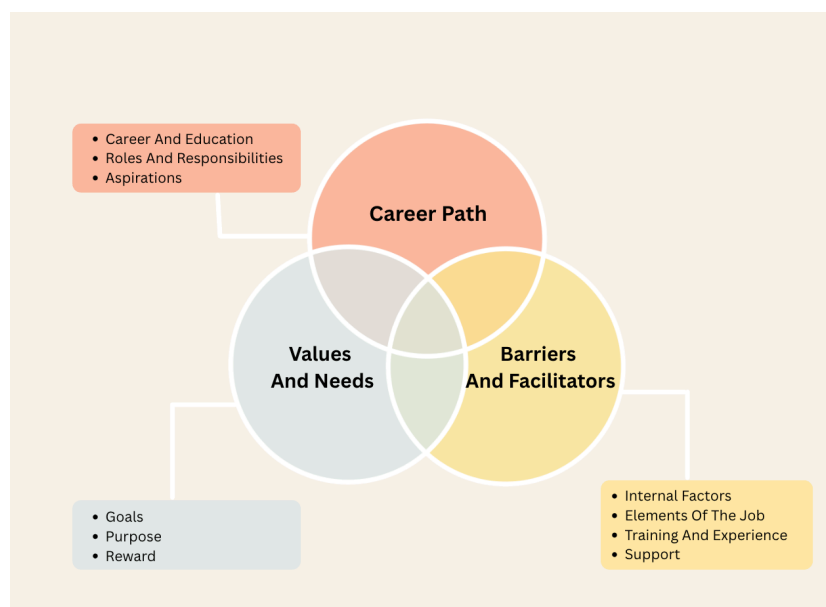
Figure 1.

Superordinate theme and subordinate theme relationships and connections

Superordinate Theme 1: Career Path

Across the accounts, there was evidence that despite being considered as "emerging" professionals, many of the participants already had varied experience. Often they had worked across teaching, research, policy, clinical psychology, and aged care; and they had been exposed to a variety of disciplines, workplaces, and clients. For example, Joshua noted that, "I think it's been non-stop opportunities for me…. I don't just work with, you know, ASD, or ID, but [with] schizophrenia as well as borderline personality disorders, [so] a kind of diverse group." The opportunities to work and learn across a broad range of areas was often positioned as being a positive experience, for example Kirsten described her experiences of working in a residential care setting, explaining that despite not being an area she expected to work in "I actually kind of enjoyed aspects of it. So, that was good, and it gave me a little bit of insight into something completely different." Similarly, Joshua claimed "I never thought I'd be working with people with intellectual disabilities, and I've just found I love it, and yeah, that's pure luck at the end of the day."

Further influencing the participants' experiences of work and study were limitations of the job market, geographic factors, and the need to take career and study breaks. As outlined by Jose, being an international student in Australia impacted the pathway he took - due to limits around the cost of doing a Master's program and amount of time that was stipulated by his scholarship to complete his PhD:

> Being a migrant, you can't do the course work part of it because it's so expensive. And so that's why I had to wait and do a PhD first, and then become an Australian citizen and then go back into the Masters.

Other life events and contextual factors such as moving country, working part-time, the COVID-19 pandemic, financial limitations, as well as having children also played a prominent role in EPs' career pathways. As an example, Jessica reflected on her experiences

of having to take breaks due to pregnancy and caregiving, claiming that: "I have had some career disruptions pretty early on in my career ahead of my second child…like some pretty big chunks of leave early on, post my PhD."

These factors also meant that some of the participants' career pathways took a direction away from their original interests, or away from their original plans, or meant that they needed to engage in a combination of diverse types of work. This is evidenced in Li's account, where he described his need to engage in work as a "research assistant…or a summer research scholar" during his PhD studies. Similarly, Jessica explained how she had to engage in "part-time" work and Kirsten outlined how she had to take on work as a "casual teacher" and "various other sort of little part time roles" and that she only "recently started more of a career-type job." Zahra's career path since her Masters had "unfortunately" taken her to industry, before a move to government that she described as a return to her original "calling," "because parenting actually was my interest topic, since I was in university".

It was clear from the participants' accounts that a large component of their work was dedicated to research, involving a wide variety of tasks from inception to completion and applying for a large number of grants. For example, Jessica outlined that, "I'm working towards trying to submit grants. Oh, I'm always working on a grant." She went on to explain that her current work is comprised of "40% research" whilst also needing to maintain her "registration as a psychologist", meaning that she is only working with "about a half a day of clients right now". While Li outlined how research comprises much of his work: "There will be tons of legwork, like ethics applications, and also some project management… I need to write up papers, get it submitted, do the revisions."

Aside from research work, EPs often spend a significant amount of their workload delivering or learning about parenting programs, including both branded and unbranded programs, in a range of settings such as community-based settings, behavioural clinics, and

child and youth mental health services. In the case of Zahra, she conveyed a desire to be more involved in the development of such programs, stating that: "I hope I can go into a higher-level position to produce the program and policy" rather than just being restricted to "kind of just deliver what they're instructing us to do".

In terms of EP's aspirations, although some participants expressed uncertainty as to which direction their career will take, most participants expressed an intention to continue on the path they were currently on. These pathways tended to expand certain aspects of their current role, such as doing more research, gaining more skills and responsibilities, increasing the alignment between their research and clinical work, and obtaining more grant funding. The variety of pathways available to EPs was highlighted by Zahra:

> Even though it's very tempting for me to work directly with parents and child, and then to be like a clinician, to maybe give them psychotherapy, or maybe educate them with a range of variants of [parenting programs], but for now I think I need to dedicate myself to the government, just in my scope, to research more, and then I hope I can go to program and policy making.

Participants' reasons for staying with their current pathway included a sense of obligation to finish what they had started, workplace requirements, a desire for stability, and enjoyment or passion. As outlined by Jessica, it is important to be realistic about one's aspirations: "I didn't see myself being able to piece together post docs forever, because it didn't give me continuity and longevity, like it meant that I was always trying to think of the next job and the next contract, whereas now I feel like I can relax a little bit."

Superordinate Theme 2: Values and Needs

It was clear from the participant's accounts that EPs working in the field of parenting and family science were doing so with the aim of helping and supporting families. The EPs reported that achieving the goal of helping people was through varied means including

education, programs, and policies, and across varied outcomes, such as family functioning, child development, family violence, emotional socialisation, and psychopathology. As reported by Kirsten, her primary goal is to help families and children through both research and practice:

> I feel like the compelling nature of that research is quite positive, in terms of just making research available that can guide our practices, our attitudes, our behaviours; that can help children and parents and families in the long run, to hopefully work more harmoniously together and to help understand each other. And that can help children in the long run to be set on potentially better trajectories and better long-term outcomes.

As conveyed by some of the participants, critical to the objective of 'helping' is working effectively with families who have diverse backgrounds and needs, by targeting relevant outcomes and being a skilled clinician. For example, Kirsten expressed the idea that it is critical to ensure programs are meeting the needs of clients, and that includes ensuring programs are suited to a wide range of people: "We need to emphasise or to normalise the cultural differences, for example, when I [use] Triple P…my part as the facilitator to kind of adjust to the to the audience".

Further to this, being able to measure the outcomes of programs implemented with parents and families, and to determine their benefits to clients, and guide tailoring and improvements to programs and services was also highlighted as being important. For example, Joshua stated that:

> You can see it [results] quantitatively in front of you, and that has been the most motivating thing for me, because I feel like the work I do in the science, I know it works. It's true and it works, and it helps people, and it changes lives.

It was clear that the participants primarily found a sense of purpose from helping others in tangible ways, and that this purpose was often stronger than their desire to make money or to have job stability. This was demonstrated within Jose's narrative in particular, in which he stated that: "I want to have a stable job and make money like everyone else, but I think what I'm really looking forward to is making a cool difference to the way that the [state] public health system works". Similarly, Zahra reported that purpose is critical to her work: "I need to be in love in that position, because I have a passion in family empowerment."

Overall, there was a sense that having purpose, and feeling as though they were making a difference in the world, was extremely rewarding for the EPs. As highlighted by Kirsten: "It's super rewarding to really feel like you're having, even in a very indirect way, at times a very real sort of impact on people's lives, hopefully in a positive way." Additionally, there was evidence that engaging in a broad range of work, including work with students as well as collaborating with colleagues, can also be rewarding as it fulfils their curious nature, their desire to keep up with developments, and their drive for personal improvement. For example, Zahra noted that undertaking her PhD gave her the opportunity to gain "better perspective, and then I also have better knowledge… that's also rewarding for me. If I just stay in my job, I don't think I have time to learn". Similarly, Jessica stated that "there's a lot of opportunities to learn," and "it's really rewarding to train the next generation of psychologists, because we know that we need them and usually have a crew that are pretty motivated to learn, and that's rewarding as well."

Superordinate Theme 3: Barriers and facilitators

Across the accounts it was evident that there were range of barriers and facilitators experienced by the EPs including "inequity in working conditions" (Jose), a need for "more resources" (Joshua), and an emphasis on "having more support" (Li). Indeed, participants expressed the idea that "there's lots of barriers" (Jose) involved in their work which can be

difficult to manage, "exhausting" (Joshua) at times, and even involving issues that "consumes you" and "keeps you up at night" with "many frustrations along the way" (Kirsten).

Within this context, it was clear that training and education was a key factor shaping the experiences of EPs. Being willing to learn and adapt was positioned as being critical for emerging professionals, and a desire for continuous learning and improvement was positioned as being able to help EPs to persevere through arduous work, and flexibly apply solutions to the varied tasks and circumstances therein. For example, Joshua reported the need to "have a very open mind" and "learn from experience," claiming that "at the end of the day, it's your enthusiasm to learn, which is so obvious. But it's so important, you know." Similarly, Li claimed that "you have to be open to learn new things and to move outside of our comfort zone, because there will always be more to learn, more to do than what you can see at the moment, and things are always more complicated than it sounds or looks like".

The participant's accounts also illuminated how attributes such as conscientiousness may be supportive in the research environment, as it can help EPs to take an intentional and deliberate approach to their work; for example, Li stated that "I like to just think that there's, you know…a little bit of a small impact that can come from some of the research that I do, or from some of the work that I do…I think that it's a very valuable contribution, and I think that it's very rewarding". However, other individual factors such as personality type combined with the nature of the work can also lead to difficulties such as EPs feeling lonely or drained. As outlined by Jose: "I'm a people person, and sometimes research… it's just gonna be a bit lonely." In contrast, Zahra noted that she had to overcome her introversion, "because my job demands me to do that, I need to be able to interact with a lot of people… even though after meeting them, I'm so tired, I need to just go to my room alone."

It was also evident across the accounts there was a sense of overburden in participants' careers underpinned by high workloads and increased pressures to perform.

According to Joshua, the workload is demanding, and he recognises the importance of managing his work effectively:

> At the moment, it [work] is a little stressed, and it has been [like this] for a little while, but I'm quite good at managing myself, and knowing that I'm taking too much on. I know it sounds like I am taking a lot on, but I've made it so I'm not burning out. Once 6 p.m. comes around, I'm finished working, I exercise and [have] dinner, or hang out with friends, and it's not creeping into my weekends… So, I'm forcefully keeping those checks there.

Aside from the issues surrounding managing boundaries between work and life, many participants expressed the idea that they are not achieving their desired career performance and progression, citing the exhausting nature of their work, and the associated cognitive and emotional demands being central to this issue. Many reported the need to do work outside of their main focus area, such as administrative work, or work not directly contributing to their career progression, as problematic. For example, Joshua explained that he had "spent hours…every week, just going through data and putting it up and having a look at it" suggesting that such work would be better conducted by an administrative assistant; however, his workplace does not have such assistance available. Joshua went on to explain that "I don't want to spend a long time doing that kind of stuff. I want to spend my time working on reports or therapy, or [things] I care about." Similarly, Jose stated that much of his time is engaged in "navigating bureaucracy" and other "barriers" including ethics processes in the research and health systems – delaying his ability to carry out his work. Such barriers were often in the context of EPs not having access to administrative support or funding that would enable them to be more efficient in their research, and to produce more, and higher quality outputs.

There was a sense from the participants that the significant demands placed on them had the potential to impact on their wellbeing, impeding their enjoyment of their work and placing them at risk for burnout. Indeed, Jessica highlighted the need for EPs to focus on "self-care" and the need to "ensure that you don't run your tank down too far", and Li claimed that "sometimes it is impossible to say no," and that "I'm pretty sure some people will just burn out". Time management, self-care and the various strategies EPs use to balance their work tasks and their personal lives were positioned as being key to sustaining themselves and their career. Strategies highlighted by the participants include the use of technology such as "apps" and "systems" to do things "automatically" (Joshua), streamlining work processes, carefully planning work tasks, having structured daily schedules, and maintaining strict boundaries between work time and personal time - so that it is possible to maintain "balance" (Jessica).

Compounding some of the pressures felt by participants was the idea that academic careers are highly competitive and insecure, due to short-term contracts that are scarce and often dependent on obtaining competitive research funding. For example, Jose stated that:

> You figure out that actually you're just a project manager with a really unstable contract, and that's the way that it's going to be for the next 20 years or something, until you can have publications and everything, too. And then that's just like misery. I don't know anyone who was in early or mid- career research, who was completely happy about their life choices. I mean, that's really sad.

While Jose's comment highlights the instability of academic careers, it also illuminates the pressure for EPs to publish in order to obtain funding, positions and promotions - a pressure which can create a culture of comparison and competition that is not conducive to collegiality or satisfaction with one's own performance, and contributes to significant job instability.

Where EPs encountered shared interest in their work, there was evidence that their career satisfaction and performance were bolstered. Indeed, outside interest in one's topic area (e.g., from policy makers) was cited by some participants as having the potential for impact and a sense of working towards something important. As outlined by Kirsten, interest from policy makers gave her confidence that her work could contribute to real world changes: "Because this [topic] is so front of mind for policy makers, who are really listening in terms of what some of the precursors and the drivers of family violence are, I feel like… there's a potential for policy to change." Shared interest with other researchers was also positioned as providing opportunities for building community and collaboration. The variety of pathways available to EPs can support them to craft a career that fits with their talents and aspirations. As an example of this range of options, Jose stated that, "There's lots of other disciplines that end up doing more or less the same job. So, it doesn't have to be the clinical psychology title for you to feel like you're helping people that way, or for you to be part of this world." Jose's comment is underpinned by the notion that there is a degree of flexibility in the field that allows early career professionals to find the pathway that suits them best.

Training and experience (or a lack thereof) was also constructed as a key barrier or facilitator for EPs. Qualifications and training in clinical skills were positioned as important, to enable EPs to have a deeper understanding of the lived experience of families, and more opportunities for employment. This is in part because teaching positions in psychology often require a clinical background or registration. Qualifications such as the Master in Clinical Psychology tend, however, to not include a lot of content on parenting and families, which may limit their applicability to work in this field. Zahra acknowledged gaps in her training around parenting advocacy specifically, stating that, "If there's any training that I need to join, probably [it is] to learn about parenting as public health or in the population level, or maybe how to conduct [a] policy brief."

The notion that training or skill development were lacking was expressed by a number of the participants. For Joshua this occurred as a result of limited employment options, leading him to teach himself the skills he felt he was lacking in:

I never had any opportunities for work placements and that's something I regret a little bit. So, when I was thrust into the field, I didn't have much experience, obviously, so I kind of do that myself and learn myself.

According to Li there is a need for EPs to "know more about the intervention side" as well as having strong research skills across a range of areas in the discipline of psychology, he claimed that, "I'm pretty sure this field needs more research methods training, and even keep people updated with the current knowledge of methods in the field of psychology, or clinical psychology, not just parenting."

Another key barrier and facilitator highlighted by the participants was the level of support EPs received. Within this context, other people were positioned as a significant source of support for EPs. This included mentors, supervisors, colleagues, and peers. As reported by Joshua, other people are critical to his experience of work:

I have the best supervisors at uni and at work, and peers as well. So, I rely heavily on my peers and my supervisors mostly for their experience. They all have a tremendous amount of experience, and as someone who's new in the field, [if] you have any problems, it can be overwhelming to know how to approach it.

Support from people was often positioned as more important than other supports from workplaces and professional organisations. Many of the participants reported that they have a good relationship with colleagues, who they sometimes view as "friends" that they can "count on" (Li), and they emphasised how support from "peers and supervisors" (Joshua) and mentorship (Jessica) is critical to their work. As highlighted by Li, "I think that's crucial, for

the people to not work in silos with just one or two people, but to work with a diverse range of people."

 In relation to supervisory and managerial support, participants expressed the importance of supervisors or managers providing knowledge, differing perspectives, feedback, praise, encouragement, monitoring their progress and wellbeing, assisting with tasks, and guiding expectations and career pathways. There was evidence of some supervisors being more likely to provide high quality support than others. As outlined by Zahra, in her current role there is a lack of support from her manager, leading her to feel "unclear" at times about her work:

> I don't think I get sufficient support - other than the financial support, but, for example, from my boss, from my office, maybe they are busy with their own things, and they are not really monitoring what I'm doing here, or maybe they just have [a lot of] trust in me, probably.

Similarly, Jessica reflected on a need for more mentorship in relation to her work, claiming that "sometimes I can get a bit discouraged...I wish I had a I had more mentors" and according to Jose, "there's a long way to go in terms of research supervision. Because it doesn't feel anywhere near as kind of supportive [as clinical supervision]." According to the participants, this lack of support from supervisors sometimes derived from factors such as time and capacity constraints, organisational structure (i.e., it is not part of a supervisor's role to provide various types of support), outdated or limited knowledge, and a lack of value placed on the EP.

Workplaces may provide further support to EPs, in the form of access to staff who can provide technical support (Kirsten), provision of training courses (Jose), and funding for conferences and training (Zahra). This can provide new opportunities for EPs to build their

skills and employability, and enhance their efficiency, productivity, and research quality. For example, Kirsten reflected on the value of statistical support provided by her workplace:

> I just don't have the statistical expertise to be able to analyse a big data set. So, the statistician was supplied as a help to be able to do that. So that was brilliant. I certainly couldn't have done it without him. Or, it would have taken a lot longer.

Workplaces may also support EPs' wellbeing by providing access to mental health services such as "counselling and psychological supports" (Kirsten) and being supportive of caring responsibilities through workplace policies- as the nature of the work is not particularly "conducive" to parenting (Jessica). Some EPs may, however, receive inadequate levels of support from their workplaces, such as by not having access to staff to help with "administrative tasks" (Joshua), or having to organise their own professional "development" and "training" activities rather than having them be provided by their workplace (Kirsten).

A further source of support that EPs drew upon was from professional organisations, which provided them with a sense of community, skill development, and opportunities for learning. Participants reported this form of support as useful "because from that affiliation you feel that you're not alone" (Zahra), providing a sense of belonging. For example, Kirsten explained that being in contact with other people who work in a similar domain and share the same passion provides her with opportunities for community, learning from one another, reducing loneliness, increasing motivation, and collaborating:

> I've met some very some like-minded people who are out to inform and to improve things. And I think that that motivates me, and it enables me to kind of go, "I'm not in a silo here" and "I'm not the only person thinking about these things and wanting to change things." And it's very empowering to know that there are some very smart, very passionate people around me who want to change things as well.

Similarly, Jessica claimed that:

> I've always found it really helpful to get emails of, you know, "these are some new grants that have come up", especially when they're tenders, or one-offs that aren't regular funding schemes, you won't know about them. So, it's nice when people share that knowledge with you.

It was clear from the participants' accounts that both formal and informal mentorship and networking through professional organisations can increase EPs' access to diverse perspectives, feedback, guidance, and skills that complement their work, as well as offering a sense of "camaraderie" (Jose) and opportunities for collaboration and progress on important problems. Participants indicated that professional organisations are therefore more likely to deliver benefits to EPs when their membership comprises a diverse group of capable and motivated people (e.g., from a variety of disciplines, sectors, stakeholder groups, career stages), coming together for specified purposes. One participant, Li, highlighted the importance of a diverse and supportive professional organisation:

> It would be a good if a friendly, supportive, or knowledgeable environment, [where] people can get exposed to diverse perspectives, experience, and knowledge or methodology. I think that's crucial, for the people to not work in silos with just one or two people, but to work with a diverse range of people.

The structure of professional organisations may influence the type of support derived by EPs. While large organisations can provide valuable access to a broad network, smaller organisations or sub-groups may better facilitate the development of relationships and have a more targeted focus. Organisations that are geographically specific may be more successful in articulating and achieving their purpose and desired actions. For example, Kirsten reflected on her involvement with a state-based sub-group within a larger professional organisation:

> They're a more targeted group, that are familiar with the [state] legislation and maybe have their finger on the pulse in terms of who the right people are to talk to

and get on board… we're in a pretty good position because the [state] tends to look favourably on progressive type policy such as this. So, there's a feeling in the group that that we have quite a good shot at maybe making some things happen here.

Localised professional organisations may also make it easier for EPs to attend events without difficulties around time zone differences (Jessica). In-person events can also provide additional benefits around meeting people, particularly for EPs who work or study remotely, to reduce feelings of isolation (Joshua).

Although there was agreement that such organisations and memberships were important, there was evidence that EPs find professional organisations to be of variable benefit. This may be due to a dearth of support for indicated needs, such as peer "supervision" (Joshua), more equity in "working conditions" (Jose), and collaboration between diverse stakeholder groups including "policymakers" (Kirsten). Other important contributing factors highlighted by participants include their career stage (e.g., deriving more benefit earlier in their career; Jose), and their high workload and competing demands (e.g., difficult to find the time to engage, having a high bar for what is a worthwhile use of their time). For example, Jose reflected on the additional burden of engaging in professional organisations:

> I think that's where it [engaging in professional organisations] becomes difficult too, because we feel so overwhelmed with our real and imagined work that the prospect of engaging in more work. It's like full. That's just you're just adding things to my to do list.

Benefits may also be limited where there are overlaps between the offerings of various professional organisations and EPs' workplaces - especially where there is a "cost" of joining to consider (Jessica). One participant, Li, highlighted the importance of proactivity among EPs, stating, "[EPs] need to be brave enough and be prepared to get involved in

different organisations' activities, to know different people, to talk to different people… to ask or to think ahead". In order to feel adequately supported by professional organisations, participants indicated that the type of opportunities offered needs to be tailored to their needs, and the barriers to engagement need to be remedied.

Discussion

This study sought to explore the experiences and perceptions of emerging professionals (EPs) working in the field of parenting and family science, to inform recommendations for how this group may be supported to have good wellbeing, job satisfaction, and career performance. Through a human-centred design approach and qualitative analysis, three interrelated themes were identified: *Career Path*, *Values and Needs*, and *Barriers and Facilitators*. These findings shed light on the complex professional identities, motivations, and challenges of EPs in a multidisciplinary and fragmented field.

Consistent with previous research (Andrews et al., 2020; Mula et al., 2022), participants reported significant structural and emotional burdens, including high workloads, funding and job insecurity, and pressures to publish. However, this study contributes uniquely by situating these experiences within the specific context of parenting and family science, where EPs often navigate intersecting roles across research, clinical practice, policy, and education. This diversity offers opportunity, but also complicates identity development and a sense of belonging, which are known to support researcher wellbeing and retention (Ashforth et al., 2024; Empson, 2013).

The value of purposeful work emerged as a potentially strong protective factor against this and other stressors, which supports literature emphasising the importance of meaningful contribution to wellbeing and motivation (Archer, 2008; Sweitzer, 2009). Participants expressed a deep commitment to improving outcomes for families, even where career uncertainty or competing responsibilities posed challenges. This underscores the protective

impact of having an internal sense of purpose that aligns with one's professional activities, particularly where the positive outcomes of one's work are observable. This alignment may help to buffer against the negative effects of stressors that are common among EPs (e.g., job insecurity, high workloads), that may significantly impact their wellbeing, motivation and ambitions (Andrews et al., 2020; Jackman et al., 2022; Smithers & Gibbs, 2024; Turner, 2017). Based on the participants' accounts, it may therefore be important that EPs be supported to develop a clear sense of purpose, engage in work that aligns with that purpose, and be able to see the positive outcomes of that work towards its intended purpose.

Findings also highlight the importance of tailored and integrated supports. Importantly, support efforts may have limited benefit to EPs if their engagement with those supports is hindered by competing priorities and limited capacity. As highlighted by the participants, EPs often have an overwhelming workload, thus, support may be better provided if integrated into their workload, rather than being seen as an additional task - reflecting findings from other studies (Smithers & Gibbs, 2024). This includes structured supervision, cross-disciplinary collaboration, and clearer pathways to career progression. While formal mentorship and institutional offerings are valuable, EPs emphasised the role of relational support from supervisors, peers, and professional networks in fostering development and wellbeing. Support from other people was often positioned as more important than other supports from workplaces and professional organisations. Indeed, the participants reporting feeling especially supported when the people in their work environment made themselves available for help when their skill sets complemented each other. This ties in with previous research that shows the importance of EPs having robust networks in order to facilitate a successful academic career (Belkhir et al., 2019), and the negative impact that academic isolation can have on wellbeing and productivity (Ashforth et al., 2024). Seeing as EPs working in dispersed and varied fields such as parenting and family science may have

impeded senses of identity and belonging (Brindley et al., 2024; Empson, 2013), and be susceptible to feelings of loneliness and isolation (Belkhir et al., 2019), particularly when working remotely (O'Hare et al., 2024), it appears to be of crucial importance that they be supported to develop strong professional networks of collegiate, collaborative, and mentorship relationships in order to foster their wellbeing and performance.

It was also clear participants were aware of the role of training and skill development in their career trajectory, and how being inadequately prepared for their job could impact them negatively, and at times led to self-perceptions of poor job performance. The accounts revealed that many of the participants felt a need for more training and skills development, and they demonstrated an awareness of how learning and development is a critical enabler for them in the long term. Support for learning and development was often provided by EPs' workplaces, in the form of staff provision, funding, and training opportunities. This reflects the policies regarding supports for early career researchers in place in many workplaces (e.g., The University of Queensland, 2025; University of New South Wales, 2022), however when situated in a context of overwork and poor work-life balance and subsequent poor wellbeing, these workplace initiatives may not translate into adequate skill development among EPs (Andrews et al., 2020). In order to facilitate high quality outputs and career progression among EPs, workplaces therefore also need to provide substantial support in the form of reducing workloads, enabling better work-life balance, and promoting wellbeing.

Professional organisations may provide additional support to EPs. Although the value of membership and engagement with professional networks was varied among the current study's participants, overall, EPs derived benefits from their association with these groups. It was evident that there is particular potential for organisations that are geographically specific to be successful in articulating and achieving their purpose and desired actions, and make it easier for EPs to attend events that are in their time zone. A stronger local presence and

network within Australia may help EPs to feel less "othered" and more connected than when engaging only with organisations based in the global north (Tang et al., 2011). Localised organisations may also be better able to arrange in-person events to foster connectedness among EPs, particularly for those who are working and studying remotely and may thus be at greater risk of loneliness and isolation (O'Hare et al., 2024).

In addition to these extant benefits, professional organisations may be able to provide additional support to EPs by advocating for better work-life balance and working conditions for EPs, and provide opportunities for networking and collaborations that embed EPs within the broader landscape of stakeholders, including policymakers. As participants highlighted these two domains as particularly lacking in the current offerings, this represents an opportunity for the supports offered to EPs to be improved, and thus increase: their wellbeing (Smithers & Gibbs, 2024; Turner, 2017), their capacity for engagement in skills development (Andrews et al., 2020), their potential for high-impact collaborations (Belkhir et al., 2019), feelings of belonging (Brindley et al., 2024; Empson, 2013), and their overall job satisfaction and progression (Andrews et al., 2020; Jackman et al., 2022).

It is clear from the findings of this research that having variety in support enables EPs to derive benefit from varied sources, such as supervisors and colleagues, workplaces, professional organisations and industry. Having a diverse range of professional experiences and networks can also help EPs to build their skillset and their confidence. To gain the most benefit, however, it is key that EPs can and do take advantage of the supports on offer. While they may have opportunities to join professional organisations, learn from colleagues, access their supervisor's professional networks, and attend events and training courses, these opportunities can only benefit EPs if they engage with them. Factors that may hinder this engagement include EPs' high workloads, competing demands, and lack of confidence, as well as perceptions of irrelevance, costliness of the offerings, and barriers to access (e.g.,

funding, time zone differences). It may be that for some EPs to be better supported, further opportunities are not only what is required, but critically, these barriers need to be remedied.

Supports should therefore be responsive to EPs' lived realities, including their diverse roles and career pathways, and they should be shaped iteratively through ongoing dialogue and feedback (Harte et al., 2017; Melles et al., 2021). Without such attention, even well-intentioned interventions may fail to meet the needs of this group. A human-centred design framework, such as is used in the current study, may therefore be valuable for co-designing supports with EPs. By focusing on the actual perceptions and experiences of EPs, this study contributes to a growing recognition that EPs are not a homogeneous group. In fragmented and interdisciplinary fields like parenting and family science, the variability in EPs' roles, contexts, and goals necessitates nuanced, flexible support structures that attend to wellbeing amidst the realities of academic and clinical work.

Strengths

A key merit of this study is the representative nature of the EPs interviewed. Whilst participation was limited to individuals residing in Australia, the diverse backgrounds of the EPs interviewed reflected the non-linear pathways that are common in the field of parenting and family science. Additionally, the EPs interviewed worked across a range of professional contexts and roles, including research, clinical practice, education, and policy. This diversity captures the fragmented and interdisciplinary nature of the parenting and family science field, offering a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by EPs. Another strength lies in the use of qualitative interviews and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This methodological approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences and perceptions of EPs, enabling the identification of complex, nuanced, and interrelated themes. By prioritising participants' own meaning-making, IPA allowed for insights that may not be captured through standardised survey methods. This approach is

particularly valuable in an under-researched area, where existing evidence is limited. The study thus provides an important foundation for future research and for the development of supports that are attuned to the realities of emerging professionals in this field.

Limitations and future research

This study offers valuable insight into the experiences and perceptions of EPs in parenting and family science; however, some limitations indicate the need for further research in this area. First, the study involved a small number of participants, which may limit the generalisability of the findings. While the in-depth, interpretative approach enabled a rich understanding of participants' experiences, future research would benefit from involving a larger sample. A quantitative survey could be used to test the generalisability of the current findings, explore additional perspectives, and empirically examine the relationships between EPs' experiences and key outcomes such as wellbeing, job satisfaction, and performance. Second, as the current research focuses only on primary users, future research should consult other relevant stakeholders. As human-centred design places emphasis on consulting widely to identify 'what matters' (Lyon, Koerner, et al., 2020), it would be pertinent to talk to secondary users of supports, as well as others close to the EPs. For example, supervisors and mentors of EPs may offer novel insights, and allow for trends in support to be explored. It would also be pertinent to examine the perspectives of those in mid or late career stages regarding how support needs have evolved over time, and how researchers in parenting and family science can be supported across the career spectrum. Lastly, it may be beneficial to follow the career path of EPs to determine change over time to assess the dynamic needs of individuals and the field, to further assist in tailoring support.

Conclusion

Emerging professionals in parenting and family science navigate a unique professional landscape. Their careers span diverse roles and disciplines, often without a clear

disciplinary home or structured pathway. While this diversity brings opportunity, it can also lead to feelings of isolation, and significant barriers to wellbeing and career progression. This study highlights the importance of understanding EPs' experiences from their own perspective, and designing supports that are grounded in their lived realities. By applying a human-centred design approach, we demonstrate that meaningful support must be embedded in existing structures, and co-developed with those it aims to assist. Interpersonal relationships, purposeful work, and a sense of belonging are not just desirable, they are critical to EPs' success and sustainability in academia and related sectors. To build a thriving community of EPs, workplaces and professional networks must recognise the diversity of EP pathways and commit to sustained, collaborative efforts to support emerging professionals to promote wellbeing, reduce workloads, improve stability, increase connectedness, foster a sense of working towards one's purpose, and provide accessible, relevant professional development opportunities. Doing so is not only essential for individual EPs, but for the future of parenting and family science, and its ability to contribute meaningfully to children, families, and society.

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