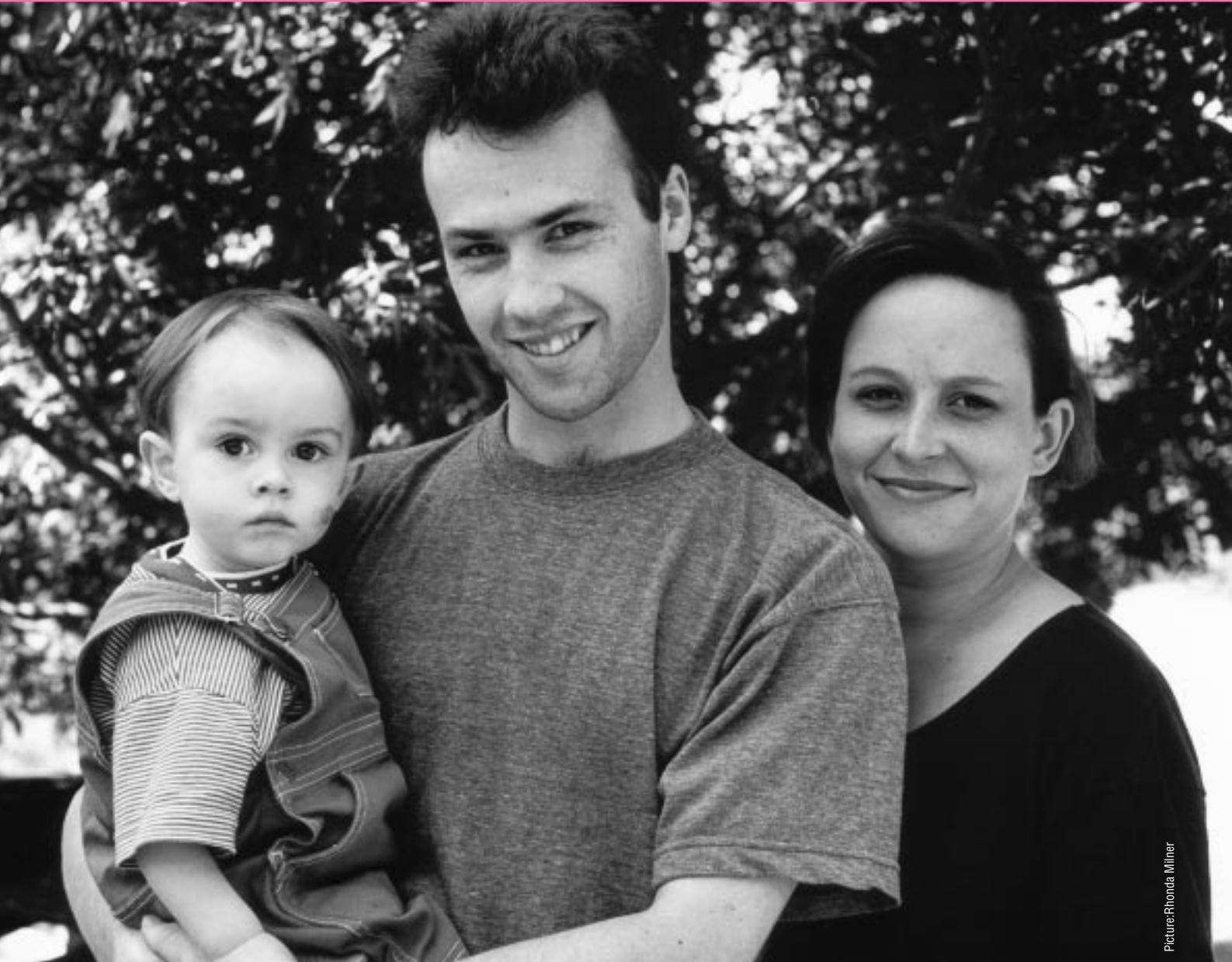


Cohabitation and Marriage Relationships in the 1990s



Picture: Rhonda Milner

De facto relationships are on the increase in Australia yet little is known about the quality or history of these relationships compared with formal marriages. Through new data from the Institute's 1996 Australian Family Life Course Study, HELEN GLEZER explores these relationships, focusing on aspects of relationship quality, gender roles and parenting, intergenerational links and social involvement in the broader community.

'Until the beginning of the 1960s, a person's living arrangement could be predicted reasonably well by looking at the individual's marital status. During the 1980s, the situation altered dramatically.' (Prinz 1995)

Changes in family formation patterns in recent decades in Australia and in other western countries are a major focus of demographic and family research. Of particular focus is the growth in cohabitation (otherwise termed *de facto* or consensual

unions) prior to marriage, in place of marriage, and after marriage breakdown. As Brown and Booth (1996, p.668) state: 'Despite its similarity to marriage we know almost nothing about the quality of cohabiting relationships compared with what

we know about the quality of marital relationships.'

The Australian Family Life Course Project (1996), undertaken by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, collected information on relationship history and relationship quality, providing the opportunity for a comparison between married respondents and those currently living in a cohabiting relationship.

This article looks at some of the similarities and differences between cohabitating and marriage relationships, including aspects of relationship quality, gender roles and parenting, intergenerational links and social involvement in the wider community.

Trends

The majority of all those who marry in Australia will have cohabited prior to marriage. Of those who married in 1976, almost 16 per cent had cohabited prior to marriage;

A third phase occurred from the mid-1980s where divorce seemed to plateau but remarriage rates declined, replaced, to some extent, by post-marital cohabitation and part-time or 'living apart together' (LAT) relationships. 'Life cycle transitions have become more frequent, less strictly patterned and more complex.' (Lestaeghe 1995 p.18)

Explanations

Demographers offer a range of explanations for these changes, which are seen as part of long-term historical trends that are linked to modernisation: the rise in secularism; an increasing emphasis on individual aspirations; greater equality of opportunity between men and women; and related economic factors (more particularly the opportunity costs for women in relation to marriage and childbearing) (Lestaeghe 1995).

Research findings have noted that individuals who cohabit tend to be more

life-long commitment with contractual obligations. It assumes the sharing of economic and social resources, connecting people to other individuals, social groups (such as the extended family) and social institutions within the society.

Cohabitation has some but not all of the characteristics of marriage, and carries some but not necessarily all of the benefits. It does not necessarily imply a life long commitment. Nock (1995) notes that in marriage, the legal formalising of the union acts as a barrier to separation, in that separation involves legal divorce proceedings and division of property: 'Barriers are things that hold two persons in their relationship in addition to, or even in the absence of, their interpersonal attraction.'

Marriage Values in the '90s

With increasingly diverse patterns of family formation, how is marriage viewed in the 1990s? The National Social Survey in 1989 (Kelly, Bean and Evans 1993) found that almost half the Australian population favoured young people living together before marriage. The Australian Family Values Survey conducted by de Vaus in 1995

(de Vaus and Wolcott 1997) found that 62 per cent of the Australian adult population agreed it was alright for a man and woman to live together without being married.

While around two-thirds of Australians accept cohabitation as an alternative rather than prelude to marriage, there is less acceptance of having children outside of wedlock. In 1995 de Vaus found that only 45 per cent agreed it was 'alright to have children without being married'. The Australian Family Values Survey found significant differences by age cohort, with younger age cohorts being far more tolerant of people living together with no plans for marriage and having ex-nuptial children (de Vaus 1995).

The Australian Family Formation Survey (1991) also asked similar questions. Significant differences were found for both men and women between those who were currently cohabiting and those who were married. Ninety six per cent of cohabiting men and 88 per cent of cohabiting women agreed 'it was alright to live together without marrying', compared to 54 per cent of married men and 56 per cent of married women.

Similarly, 68 per cent of cohabiting men and 59 per cent of cohabiting women agreed 'it was alright to have children without being married', compared to a third of married men and women. Of cohabiting men, 71 per cent saw living together as a way of having a trial marriage, compared to only 37 per cent of cohabiting women. This latter point suggests very different motivations within cohabiting couples in the nineties.

Individuals who cohabit tend to be more concerned with personal autonomy, hold less traditional family values, and have more egalitarian views of gender roles.



by 1992 this proportion had increased to 56 per cent (de Vaus and Wolcott 1997).

In 1992, only 8 per cent of all couples were cohabiting, an increase from 5.6 per cent in 1986. De facto relationships are increasing, but at any given time remain a relatively small proportion of all couples. They tend to occur in early adulthood prior to marriage or following marriage breakdown, and are less stable than formal marriages.

It should also be emphasised that while the increase in cohabitation is a recent trend, consensual partnering was prevalent in previous times. Carmichael (1995) has pointed out that in Australia such relationships were widespread during the convict era.

Western countries have seen in the second half of this century major demographic transitions in the pattern and sequencing of family formation. Lestaeghe (1995) outlines three phases of demographic change. Between 1955-70 there was an increase in marriage breakdown, a decline in fertility following the baby-boom years and associated with major technological breakthroughs in contraceptive technology, and an increase in the age at marriage.

In the period 1970-85, premarital cohabitation began to increase, particularly in the Nordic countries. This was followed by an increase in childbearing within consensual unions and, as Lestaeghe expresses it, 'these unions drifted away from being a period of courtship to becoming more a "paperless marriage"' (Lestaeghe 1995, p.17) resulting in an increase in the rate of ex-nuptial births.

concerned with personal autonomy, hold less traditional family values, and have more egalitarian views of gender roles than those who are married.

Cohabiting couples are also less likely to pool their financial resources (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Glezer 1994); tend to be less religious and of non-religious family backgrounds (Carmichael 1995; Glezer 1993; Khoo 1986; Thornton 1991); and are more likely to have come from a family of origin where parents divorced or separated (Carmichael 1995; Glezer 1993). (See Gordon Carmichael's (1995) working paper on consensual partnering in the developed countries for more detailed information.)

Cohabitation is seen as a stage in courtship, a trial or 'prelude to marriage', as Carmichael (1990) expressed it, or as an alternative to marriage (Bumpass and Sweet 1989). Some suggest it should be viewed as part of the dating process more related to premarital dating relationships than to marriage (Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel 1990).

Earlier research (Glezer 1993) on cohabitation found great diversity in the kind of de facto relationships couples form. Motivations varied between couples and within couples, and changed over time. Levels of commitment varied as did the intention to formalise the relationship in marriage.

Comparing marriage as an institution with 'the (incompletely institutionalised) institution of cohabitation', Waite (1995) maintains that marriage provides individuals with a sense of obligation to others, and is an institution assumed to be a

A comparison between cohabiting and married respondents on attitudes towards marriage illustrates significant differences between married and de facto respondents, but also strong gender differences in some instances.

While 42 per cent of cohabiting men and 30 per cent of cohabiting women see marriage as an unnecessary institution, over half those cohabiting do not agree with this statement, suggesting support for the institution of marriage among the majority of those in consensual unions.

Australian Family Life Course Study

The Australian Family Life Course Study conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in 1996 was a national random telephone survey of 1964 Australian men and women aged between 25–50 years, or under 25 years and with primary parenting responsibility for a child.

One of the major aims of this survey was to examine the pathways and sequences of family formation and reformation in Australia in the 1990s. It should be noted that since the majority in this survey were aged between 25–50 years, we are not discussing here the majority of 'nubile cohabitators' to use Kiernan's terminology (Kiernan and Estaugh 1993); rather, we are looking at cohabiting relationships in older adults. As the median age at marriage in 1995 was 27.3 years for men and 25.3 years for women, the 'never married' in this sample could be said to be delaying marriage.

In the Australian Family Life Course Study, 64 per cent of respondents were

married, 9 per cent were cohabiting, 6 per cent stated they were in a relationship but not living together, and 21 per cent were not in a relationship. Of the 169 respondents who were cohabiting, around one-third had previously been married.

Two-thirds of those who were cohabiting had children living in the household, compared to nine out of ten married respondents. Among cohabiting couples with children, around six out of ten were living in a stepfamily, compared to just over one in ten of married couples. Respondents cohabiting post marriage breakdown were more likely to be living in stepfamilies than never-married cohabitators.

While research on cohabiting couples has been increasing, according to Nock (1995) relatively little is known about how individuals and couples in cohabiting relationships differ in terms of the nature and quality of their relationships, compared to married couples.



Cohabitation has some but not all of the characteristics of marriage, and carries some but not necessarily all of the benefits.

Analysing data from the National Survey of Families and Households in the USA, Nock (1995) found that, when comparing married and cohabiting relationships, cohabitators were less committed to their relationships, reported lower levels of happiness in their relationships and had poorer relationships with parents than married individuals.

Brown and Booth (1996), using the same data set controlling for relationship duration and some demographic characteristics, found cohabitators in general report

poorer relationship quality than married respondents. Relationship quality was higher among cohabitators who plan to marry in the future.

Who cohabits?

Those cohabiting in 1996 tend to come from an English-speaking background, to not be religious, to have come from family backgrounds where parents had divorced, and to have been experiencing difficulties in finding secure employment in the last five years (particularly for those who have never married). No differences were found in occupational status or feelings of general life satisfaction.

Intention to marry

Within the Australian Family Life Course Study, 55 per cent of never married cohabiting women felt it likely they would marry their partner, compared to 47 per cent of never married cohabiting men. Those cohabiting post marriage breakdown were

less likely to be intending to re-marry (39 per cent of men and 36 per cent of women).

Of those partnered but not living together, just over half had never married. However, while these respondents stated they were in a relationship but not living together, a third spent one to two nights per week together, and another third between three to seven nights per week together. This indicates that many of these respondents are in what has previously been termed LAT, or 'living apart together' relationships.

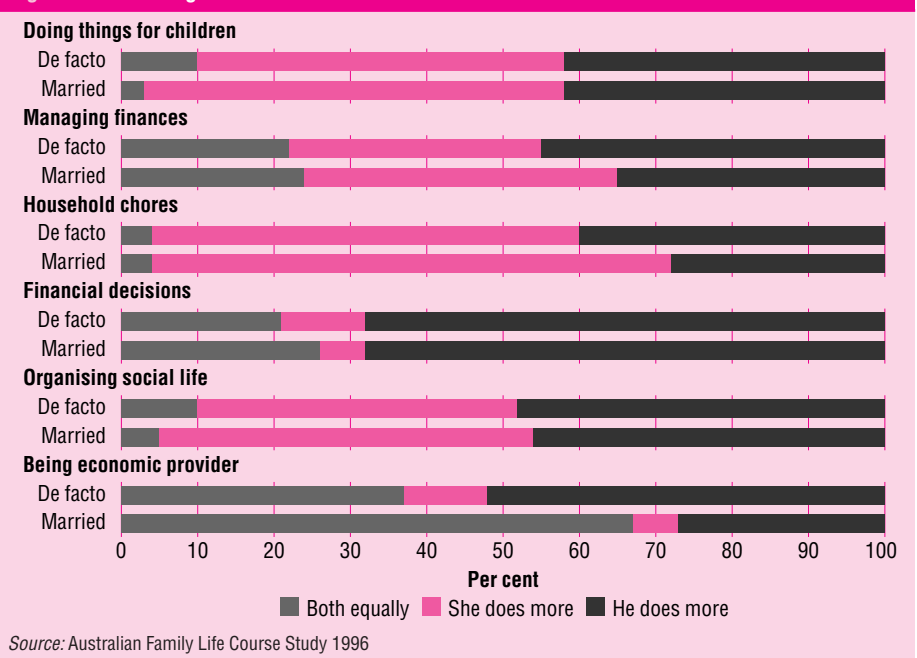
Among those not formally living together, 29 per cent believe they are likely to marry, significantly less than couples who are cohabiting. These data illustrate the complexity of family formation patterns in the 1990s.

Household tasks

Research has shown that cohabiting couples tend to have more egalitarian sharing of household tasks than married couples (Carmichael 1995; Glezer 1993). As Figure 1 illustrates, data from the Australian Family Life Course Study confirms that household chores are more likely to be shared in cohabiting couples (45 per cent) compared to married couples (35 per cent).

There are no significant differences between cohabiting and married respondents when looking at who does things for children, although cohabiting men report doing slightly more for children than do married men. There was also little difference in how couples organised their social lives.

Figure 1 Sharing domestic roles



Source: Australian Family Life Course Study 1996

Finances

Past research (Glezer 1994) has found that cohabiting couples are more likely to keep finances separate and are less likely to have joint bank accounts. This was also the situation for respondents in the Australian Family Life Course Study.

Responsibility for managing finances is more likely to be done by both partners in cohabiting couples (45 per cent) than in married couples (35 per cent), where wives tend to do more. Cohabiting couples are also less likely to have joint bank accounts (54 per cent) compared to married couples (90 per cent). Married respondents (67 per cent) are far more likely to report the male as being the economic provider than cohabiting couples (37 per cent). Financial decision-making is shared in two-thirds of married and cohabiting couples.

These results indicate that married and cohabiting couples differ in the sharing of domestic roles in the areas of housework and financial management, but are similar in the way they go about doing things for their children and in the general organisation of their social lives.

Relationship quality

Aspects of relationship quality in the Australian Family Life Course Study (1996) included level of commitment to the relationship by both partners; amount of time spent talking over issues; the time spent doing things together; and general satisfaction with the relationship.

In addition, respondents were asked how often they regretted the relationship and considered ending the relationship. A relationship quality scale was developed combining these seven items (alpha .775). Respondents in this study reported high relationship quality, a finding common in most research on relationship quality (Nock 1995).

Mean differences in levels of relationship quality between respondents who were married and those who were cohabiting indicated higher levels of relationship quality among married respondents, a finding consistent with research reported by Nock (1995) and by Brown and Booth (1996).

Similar to Brown and Booth's findings, cohabiting respondents who planned marriage reported higher relationship quality. This suggests that those who plan to marry are in more established, stable relationships, and see cohabitation as a precursor to marriage.

Comparing the relationship quality of cohabiting and married men and women separately revealed no significant differences between married and cohabiting women, but married men reported significantly higher relationship quality than cohabiting men.

Previous research has also found that relationship quality tends to decline

when couples have children (Brown and Booth 1996; Olson and McCubbin 1983). Comparing the mean difference on the relationship quality scale of cohabitators with and without children with married respondents with and without children revealed significant differences.

Married respondents without children had the highest relationship quality; married respondents with children and de facto respondents without children were less satisfied; and the least satisfied group were cohabitators with children. This latter group is most likely to be living in stepfamilies.

Satisfaction with parenting

A parenting role scale was created to assess parents' levels of satisfaction with their parenting role. This scale (alpha .689) consisted of three items relating to respondents' satisfaction with the relationship with their children; their partner's relationship with their children; and

with their own role as a parent. The majority of respondents were satisfied with the latter.

A comparison of mean differences on the parenting scale between cohabitators and married respondents with children revealed no significant differences. Gender revealed no significant differences in the level of satisfaction with parenting roles between married and cohabiting women. However, cohabiting men were significantly less satisfied than married men with themselves as parents.

This latter point may, in part, be related to the high number of cohabiting respondents living in stepfamilies. As women are more likely to have custody of their children after relationship breakdown, men are more likely than women to be living with children other than their own biological children. They are also likely to have non-custodial children living elsewhere, which may negatively influence how they perceive themselves as parents. Research by Jordan (1996) has shown that men experience a strong sense of loss and regret about their children after marriage breakdown.

To better understand the relationship between gender, presence of children, type of relationship, the influence of being a non-custodial parent or living with stepchildren and satisfaction with parenting, further analysis was conducted using multiple regression.

This analysis showed that satisfaction with oneself as a parent is related to living with children of the relationship rather than in a stepfamily, and being married rather than in a de facto relationship. A

strong interaction effect between gender and cohabitation was also found.

This means that the effect of cohabiting on parenting satisfaction is different for men and women. This is consistent with the finding that the men who were least satisfied with themselves as parents were cohabiting post marriage breakdown. These men were more likely to be in stepfamilies, and 50 per cent were non-custodial parents.

Intergenerational links and support

Marriage creates links with the extended families of both partners. Of interest is the extent to which cohabiting couples are incorporated into institutions such as the extended family. This no doubt varies according to age, duration of relationship and presence of children.

Respondents in the Australian Family Life Course Study were asked to rate how important contact with family was for them: 77 per cent of those who were

married rated it as very important, compared to 59 per cent of those cohabiting; very few cohabitators, however, stated that family contact was not important to them, suggesting that the majority of cohab-

itors see themselves as part of the extended family.

The Australian Family Life Course Study also collected information on intergenerational support given to respondents by their parents, and the emotional, financial and practical support received by parents from their children.

Table 1 shows that whether cohabiting or married, around 70 per cent of respondents received emotional support from their parents, and around two-thirds received practical assistance. Parents tended to provide more financial help to cohabiting couples (49 per cent) than to married couples (42 per cent) and, irrespective of marital status, respondents provided high levels of emotional, practical and financial help to their parents.

In summary, the Study showed that close ties between generations appear common in families in the 1990s, and while family links are slightly stronger for married couples, there are close bonds



The majority of all those who marry in Australia will have cohabited prior to marriage.

Table 1 Married and cohabiting respondents: intergenerational support*

Support received from parents	Cohabiting (%)	Married (%)
Emotional	71	72
Financial	49	42
Practical	60	66
Support given to parents		
Emotional	77	83
Financial	42	43
Practical	71	79

*n=1431
Source: Australian Family Life Course Study 1996

with extended family among cohabiting couples.

Social involvement

Since the institution of marriage is considered to link people to the wider social environment (Waite 1995), it is of interest to examine whether those who are cohabiting have the same level of social involvement in their community and neighbourhood as married respondents.

One of the measures of social involvement used in the Australian Family Life Course Study was the importance of community involvement. Community involvement was considered as 'somewhat important' by the majority of respondents irrespective of marital status. Only 23 per cent of cohabitators compared to 13 per cent of married respondents rated community involvement as not important.

Involvement within the neighbourhood was another dimension examined. A three-item scale (alpha .693) which consisted of items about 'having good friends in the neighbourhood', 'being attached to your home', and 'being attached to your neighbourhood' was developed. Mean differences on this scale indicated that those who were married had a greater attachment to their neighbourhood than those who cohabited.

To better understand the relationship between attachment to neighbourhood and marital status, multiple regression was conducted to examine the relationship between gender, presence of children, marital status and home ownership (including home purchasers). Home ownership was included as married respondents (86 per cent) were more likely to own or be purchasing their own home than those living in cohabiting relationships (66 per cent).

Results of the regression indicate that home ownership, having children and being female are factors that contribute to neighbourhood attachment. Marital status in this multivariate analysis was not significant.

Thus home ownership and children were found to provide the major links to neighbourhood involvement. Women tend to be more attached to their neighbourhood than men, no doubt through their greater involvement with children and the likelihood of extended periods during the childrearing years in which they are working part time or are not in the labour force.

Conclusions

As the incidence of de facto relationships grows and the presence of children living in these relationships increases, there is a greater need to understand the similarities and differences between cohabiting and marriage relationships.

While the Australian Family Life Course Study found relationship quality to be high in both cohabiting and marriage relationships, the quality was lower for those in de facto relationships than for married respondents.

The presence of children tended to lower relationship quality, and cohabiting men, particularly post marriage breakdown, were the least satisfied with their relationships. These men were also more likely to be living in stepfamilies and have non-custodial children.

The effect of cohabitation on parenting satisfaction for men and women is different. Parenting satisfaction was greater for parents living with their biological children only than for stepparents. Fathers cohabiting post marriage breakdown were least satisfied with themselves as parents. Nine out of ten of these men were in stepfamilies and half had non-custodial children.

While in a study of this size sample numbers are small, these results tend to

The effect of cohabiting on parenting satisfaction is different for men and women.



confirm Jordan's (1996) findings of the strong sense of loss and regret that men feel about their children after marriage breakdown.

Community involvement was slightly more important to those who were married than to cohabitators. Married respondents are more likely to own their own home and have children – two important mechanisms that contribute to community attachment.

Strong evidence of intergenerational exchange and support between generations in both cohabiting and married couples was also evident. With the increase in and broad acceptance of de facto relationships within Australian society, it appears that these relationships are increasingly incorporated into the extended family.

The results discussed in this article indicate some of the similarities and differences between married and cohabiting respondents. Differences exist between those who cohabit and those who are married, but they are not great. Those differences that do exist are largely due to the presence of children, being a stepparent, gender and, in relation to community involvement, home ownership. This article provides a starting point for more detailed work on cohabitation to be continued using the 1996 Australian Family Life Course data.

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