



Marriage, births and fertility

DAVID DE VAUS

The fertility decline over the last 30 years (see de Vaus elsewhere in this issue) has gone hand in hand with sharp changes in marriage patterns. While marriage and children were once a package deal for all but the involuntarily childless, this is no longer the case. The order in which people married and had children was firmly established – children were meant to *follow* marriage – preferably by more than seven months.

However, the last three decades have seen a sharp decline in marriage rates and a steady increase in the age at which people marry. While the changing marriage patterns have largely mirrored changing fertility patterns, the link between marriage and children has been loosened substantially.

Since the mid 1970s there has been: a sharp rise in cohabitation; a steady rise in the proportion of children who are born to unmarried parent(s); an increasing gap in the time between marriage and having the first child

within the marriage; a rise in the number of married couples who remain childless; and changing attitudes to the importance of marriage and two parents for the bearing and raising of children.

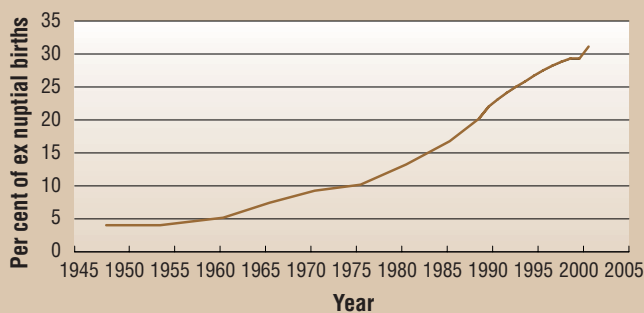
Ex-nuptial births

Children born to unmarried parents (ex-nuptial births) have increased sharply since the 1960s and especially since the mid-1970s (Figure 1). Just after World War II approximately 4 per cent of births were ex-nuptial. By 1981 this figure had increased to 14 per cent, and just ten years later had risen to 23 per cent. By the year 2001, 31 per cent of all births were to mothers who were not living in a registered marriage (ABS 2002a).

Some of this rise was due to more single women having children, and some was due to the increase in cohabiting relationships. The rise in cohabitation meant that many of the births to unmarried mothers were nevertheless births to a couple rather than to a lone mother. In fact, according to the statistics collected by the Midwives Collection (Nassar and Sullivan 2001) the women in 87 per cent of all confinements in 1999 were living with a partner – either in a registered marriage (71 per cent) or in a de facto marriage (16 per cent). Thus about 13 per cent of all births in 1999 were to women not currently in a relationship. This 13 per cent consisted of 11.5 per cent of single women not in a relationship and 1.4 per cent of widowed, separated or divorced women without a partner.

The couple/marital status of mothers differs for Australian women depending on the country in which they were born. Table 1 shows that of all mothers giving birth in 1999 over 90 per cent from Lebanon, Hong Kong, India and Malaysia were married at the time of confinement. Of all mothers, those most likely to be single were from Australia, New Zealand and Vietnam.

Figure 1 Ex nuptial births, 1947-2001



Source: ABS Australian Demographic Statistics December 1994 (Catalogue No. 3101.0) and Births Australia, 1994 and Births Australia, 2001, Catalogue No 3301.0 and ABS Australian Social Trends, 2002.



A key purpose of marriage has traditionally been for the bearing and raising of children. Similarly, the only legitimate context in which to give birth was within a registered marriage. The last 30 years have seen major changes in marriage patterns.

Mothers born in Australia, New Zealand or the United Kingdom were the most likely of all groups to be in a de facto relationship when their child was born.

On average, unmarried mothers having a child are younger than married mothers. In 2001 the median age of married mothers at confinement was 31 years. In the same year the median age of unmarried mothers at confinement was 26.5 years where paternity was acknowledged, and 24.4 where paternity was not acknowledged (ABS 2002a).

Marital status of teenage mothers

Since the early 1970s there has been a steady decline in the number of births to teenage mothers. Alongside this decline has been a change in the marital status of teenage mothers (Table 2). In 1971 two-thirds of births to teenage mothers were to married teenagers. A considerable proportion of these marriages would have been due to pregnancy. By the year 2001 just 9 per cent of births to teenage mothers were to married teenagers. This change from 67 per cent to 9 per cent reflects the dramatic change in attitudes to having children outside of marriage (ABS, 2002a).

Of course, not all unmarried teenage mothers are lone mothers – many births to unmarried teenage mothers will be to a couple. In 1999, of all confinements of teenage mothers, 45 per cent were to mothers who were either married or living in a de facto relationship. Nevertheless, 54 per cent of teenage confinements were to teenage mothers who were not living with a partner (Nassar and Sullivan 2001)¹.

Timing of births within marriage

The once tight link between marriage and childbearing reflected the social disgrace attached to non-marital pregnancy and illegitimacy and the absence of economic

supports for unmarried mothers. Unmarried women who became pregnant “had to get married” or release their child for adoption (Weston, Stanton, Qu and Soriano 2001). These so-called “shotgun weddings”, along with adoption of Australian-born children, have become much less common in recent years. Changed attitudes towards ex-nuptial children, together with better birth control and the widespread access to abortion, means that the old shotgun wedding (defined as having a child within seven months of marriage) is now a relatively unusual event. Even where births occur within seven months of marriage we can no longer assume that it was because a couple “had to get married”.

Table 1 Marital status of mother by selected country of birth, all confinements, Australia, 1999

Country of birth	Married % ^a	Married & de facto % ^b	Single % ^b
Australia	67.7	86.0	12.5
New Zealand	58.4	83.9	13.9
United Kingdom	75.6	92.4	6.1
Italy	89.6	96.6	2.4
Former Yugoslavia	87.2	94.7	4.0
Lebanon	94.9	97.7	1.5
China	88.2	95.5	3.4
Hong Kong	92.3	95.8	4.2
India	95.6	97.1	1.7
Malaysia	91.3	96.4	3.1
Philippines	81.0	88.9	8.6
Vietnam	73.5	83.8	13.2

a Source: ABS Births, 1999

b Source: Nassar and Sullivan, (2001) Mothers and Babies, 1999.

Data exclude New South Wales.

AIHW Data for Tasmania unavailable, 1998 data used as an estimate.

In 1998, only 9.5 per cent of all first births within marriage occurred within the first seven months. Such births were much more common among teenage brides. Of first births to newlywed teenage brides, over half (54.8 per cent) were within seven months of marriage. For woman aged 20 and over, very few had a baby within seven months of the wedding (Figure 2). However, despite such births being relatively common

having the first child within the marriage has increased sharply since the mid-1960s when the oral contraceptive pill became widely available (Figure 3). In the early 1920s the average time between marriage and the birth of a child was just 11 months. This gap increased during World War II, partly no doubt due to husband absences. After the war the gap between marriage and giving birth dropped somewhat, but from 1965 onward



One of the factors contributing to the lower number of births to teenagers is the rate of abortions among teenagers.

among *married* teenagers they were nevertheless rare among teenage mothers overall. Of all births to teenagers in 1998 only 4.3 per cent occurred within seven months of their marriage – a dramatic decline from 1971 when 40 per cent of births to teenagers occurred within seven months of their marriage.

One of the factors contributing to the lower number of births to teenagers is the rate of abortions among teenagers. Although national data are not available, South Australian abortion statistics indicate that since 1995 teenage pregnancies are more likely to result in an abortion than a birth. Of all age groups, teenagers are the most likely to have abortions (ABS 2000).

The ability of women to control their fertility, together with less pressure to marry because of pregnancy, has meant that the time between marriage and

there was a sharp increase in the gap between marriage and having a child. This gap increased further in the 1970s so that by the late 1970s the average gap was over 28 months. Since then the gap has remained reasonably stable, just increasing to 30 months by 2000.

Although women are married, on average, for about two and a half years before they have their first child within the marriage: a third of couples have their first nuptial child within less than a year of getting married; almost another quarter (22.8 per cent) have their first child within one and two years of marriage (Figure 4); and most married couples who have children have their first child within the marriage within five years of marriage. In 1998, 79.2 per cent of first nuptial births were to couples who had been married for less than five years.

Attitudes about marriage and children

The changing demographics of children and marriage have been accompanied by shifting attitudes among younger people associated with these changes. While a bare majority of adults (53 per cent) believe that it is not acceptable for unmarried people to have a child, younger people are much more accepting of such ex-nuptial births. Of men and women in their twenties, just 29 per cent disapprove of ex-nuptial births and 40 per cent of those in their thirties disapprove of ex-nuptial births. These figures contrast with a disapproval rate of more than 75 per cent among those aged over 60 years.

Accompanying these views about ex-nuptial children are views about the desirability of unpartnered single women having children. While almost two thirds (64 per cent) of adults did not approve of a woman

Table 2 Births to teenage mothers by marital status, 1971-2001

Year	Married (number)	Not married (number)	% to not marrieds
1971	20,281	9951	32.9
1976	12,871	8712	40.4
1981	7736	10,076	56.6
1986	4050	10,180	71.5
1991	2593	12,048	82.3
1994	1555	11,298	87.9
1998	1125	10642	90.0
2001	1110	10706	90.7
% change	-94.5%	+7.6%	

Source: ABS (various years) Births, Australia.

Table 3 Recent attitudes about marriage, fertility and children

	All	20-29%	30-39%	40-49%	50-59%	60-69%	70+%
Unacceptable to have children without being married (AFVS, 1995)	53	29	40	52	64	75	82
Do NOT approve of woman wanting a child as a single parent without a stable relationship with a man (WVS, 1995/7)	64	51	60	67	74	75	85
Agree that child needs a home with both mother and father to grow up happily (WVS, 1995/7)	79	72	72	77	75	85	91
Childless marriage is incomplete (NSSS, 1996)	45	35	44	47	58	64	68
There's something wrong with a woman who does not want children (AES, 2001)	10	8	9	6	6	12	22
Life without children is incomplete (NSSS, 1996)	50	35	40	42	53	67	69
Couples with young children are happiest (NSSS, 1996/96)	43	24	29	36	48	59	60
A woman is only fulfilled if she is a mother (AFVS, 1995)	16	9	11	13	14	23	35

Sources: 1. AFVS=Australian Family Values Survey, 1995
 2. NSSS96=National Social Science Survey, 1996
 3. WVS=World Values Survey wave 3, 1995/7
 4. NSSS96=National Social Science Survey, 1996
 5. Australian Election Survey, 2001

without a stable heterosexual relationship having a child, there is less disapproval among younger people. For example, while just on half of those in their twenties did not approve of an unpartnered woman having a child, more than three quarters of those aged over 60 did not approve of such arrangements.

While there is still a generally positive view about the importance and value of having children, there seems to be a declining emphasis among younger people. For example, the National Social Science Survey found in 1996 that while two thirds of those aged 60 years or older thought that life without children is incomplete, only a third of those in their twenties felt this way. Similarly, while about two thirds of those aged 60 or over thought that a childless marriage is incomplete, only a third of those in their twenties felt this way. For younger people the link between marriage, children and happiness is much less tight.

Certainly there is considerably more acceptance of the view that having children should be seen as an option rather than a necessity for women. Even among those aged over 60, less than a third say that a woman needs children to be fulfilled. Among those in their twenties just 9 per cent stress that children are a precondition for women's happiness. More recently, in a 2001 national survey, just 10 per cent of people expressed the view that there is something wrong with a woman who does not want children.

Concluding comments

Giving birth and being married have traditionally been part of the same package. A key purpose of marriage has traditionally been for the bearing and raising of children. Similarly, the only legitimate context in which to give birth has been within a registered marriage. The last 30 years have seen major changes in marriage patterns, with fewer people are marrying, and marrying later. Part of the decline in marriage is due to more people cohabiting, but is also due to fewer adults living with a partner (married or de facto) than just 15 years ago.

Some of the decline in fertility is linked to these changing marriage patterns. Later marriage, cohabitation, and being unpartnered are all associated with having fewer children. At the same time, however, there has been some unravelling of the marriage and fertility package. Marriage is no longer seen to be inextricably bound up with having children; marriage is no longer a social prerequisite for giving birth; and pregnancy of an unmarried woman does not mean that she must marry if she is to have the child. These changes are evident in attitudes and behaviour, and are reflected in social policy such as access to income support, child care, family law provisions, and similar matters.

It is impossible to be certain about what the future holds. We do not know at this stage to what extent changes in fertility are a consequence of changing marriage patterns, and to what extent changing marriage patterns are due to changing fertility preferences. However, current trends suggest that both marriage and giving birth are increasingly a matter of choice, and that the nexus between the two aspects of family formation will continue to be redefined.

Note

1 These data do not include New South Wales figures. However, figures from previous years indicate that this omission does not alter these percentages. The percentages slightly overstate the percentage of mothers living without a partner, since the data from Tasmania include those in a de facto relationship as single.

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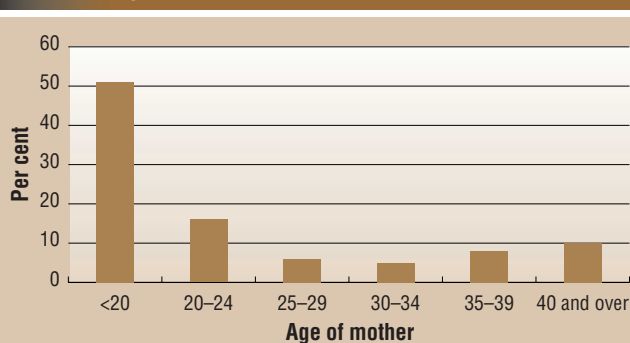
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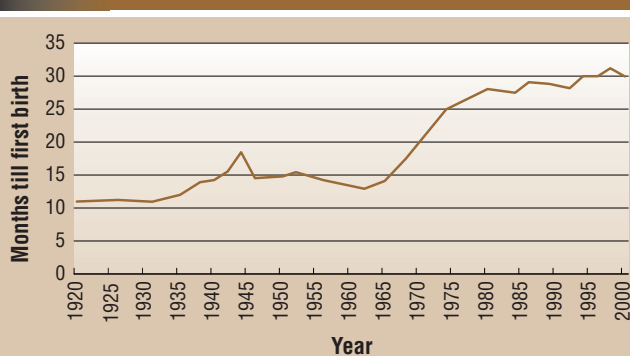
David de Vaus is Senior Research Advisor at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, and Associate Professor of Sociology at La Trobe University.

Figure 2 First nuptial births within 7 months of marriage by age of mother, 1998



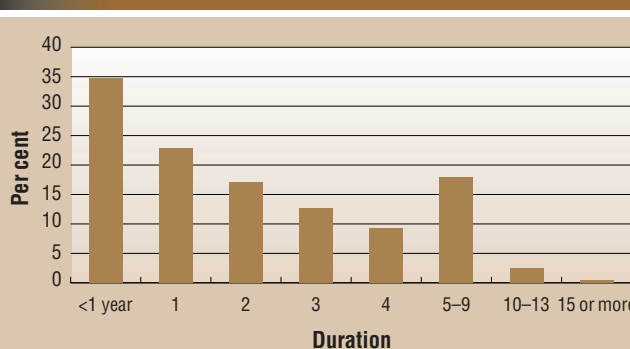
Source: ABS (1999) Births, Australia, 1998.

Figure 3 Duration of marriage until first birth, 1921-2000



Source: ABS Social Trends 1996 and Births, 2000.

Figure 4 Duration of marriage before first nuptial birth, 1998



Source: ABS (1999) Births, Australia, 1998.