

Changing patterns of partnering

There have been important changes over the last 25 years in the way in which men and women form partnered relationships. However, a longer-term perspective provides a better understanding of these trends.

Within the last quarter century family structures and relationships have changed in significant ways. One of the most striking changes is in the area of partnering, perhaps the most obvious being the increasing tendency for people to live together without marrying (here called “cohabitation”) at some stage in their lives and the fall in first marriage and remarriage rates. But what do these trends suggest for the future of marriage? As will be seen in this article, those who focus on the last few decades may well draw markedly different conclusions from those adopt a longer-term perspective.

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The rise and fall of marriage

An appreciation of what is happening to marriage trends is best achieved through reference to different interacting processes, including changes in the prevalence of the married population, rates of first marriages and remarriages, and the timing of marriage in the life course. While marriage rates of previous years contribute to the prevalence of the married population at a later date, other factors are also important, including divorce rates, widowhood, and the sex ratio of the adult population.

This section first outlines changes in proportions of the adult population who are married, then focuses on the changing age at first marriage, and the rates of marriage and remarriage.

The rise and fall of the married population

According to the 2001 Australian census, just over half (52 per cent) of all people aged 15 years or over are married, down from nearly two-thirds (65 per cent) in 1971. As Figure 1 suggests, the fall in the marriage prevalence over this period has resulted in a return to circumstances apparent in much earlier times, for Australia was in the grip of a “marriage boom” from the post-war period until the early 1970s.

Indeed, marriage was slightly more prevalent in 2001 than 100 years earlier, partly because there was a greater overall sex imbalance in that earlier period (115 men for every 100 women at that time, compared with 96 in every 100 women in 2001), along with a gold rush in Western Australia which enticed more single men than women. Australia was also still feeling the effects of the severe economic depression of the 1890s, with economic prosperity not returning until the 1920s (ABS 2001; McDonald 1995). Further, there is evidence that,

towards the beginning of the 20th century, the English middle class norm for couples to delay marriage until they could

achieve a “respectable” standard of living was embraced and encouraged among working classes. These factors not only contributed to delays in marriage but also to a relatively high proportion of people not marrying at all (McDonald 1995).

Statistics on the prevalence of marriage provide snapshots in time that do not take into account all those who have embraced marriage at some stage in their life, including those whose marriages have ended in divorce or widowhood. Despite the declining married population in recent decades, most people do eventually marry, with 1997–1999 trends suggesting that this would apply to 72 per cent of men and 77 per cent of women. Nevertheless, these proportions are lower than those of just 12 years earlier, when 79 per cent of men and 86 per cent of women would marry (ABS 2001).

As noted above, the size of the married population at any point of time reflects the proportions of the population marrying in earlier years. Thus, the current size of the married population would be much lower were it not for the marriage boom of the 1940s to 1970s.

The rise and fall of first marriages

The marriage boom is reflected in both the high overall first marriage rates and the increasing tendency for individuals to marry at a relatively early age. Factors that appeared to facilitate and sustain this boom include the improved economic conditions prevailing after World War II, the emergence of a new era of familism which encouraged early and universal marriage, the continuing social disapproval of sex outside marriage and stigma attached to unmarried mothers, increased social acceptance of birth control in the 1950s, and the introduction of the contraceptive pill (in the 1960s) which enabled women to marry when young while avoiding having children (Gilding 2001; McDonald 1982, 1995).

Likewise the subsequent retreat from early marriage and overall decline in marriage rates was fuelled by a number of interacting factors. The 1980s saw a dramatic fall in the number of low skilled yet relatively well paid and secure jobs for early school leavers. The demand for a skilled workforce led to increasing numbers of young people completing high school and proceeding to tertiary education and decreasing numbers of early school



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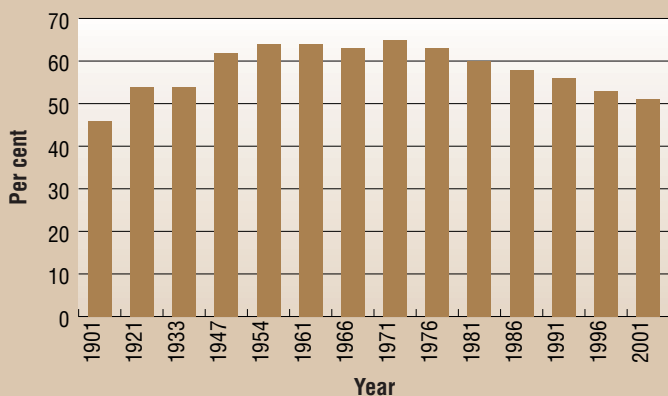
leavers finding full time paid work – factors that discouraged early marriage. In addition, the contraceptive pill, which initially facilitated early marriage in a climate of social disapproval of sexual relationships outside marriage, eventually contributed to changing patterns of couple formation, including a rise in cohabitation and delays in marriage. In turn, social disapproval attached to cohabitation diminished considerably (McDonald 1995).

In 1970, just before the marriage boom ended, 78 in every 1000 bachelors married. This rate was substantially higher than in 1921 (53) but even higher than the rate in 2000 (32). For women, first marriage rates were 110 in 1970, and 68 and 40 in the earlier and later years respectively. Thus, in 2000, first marriage rates were not only significantly lower than those during the marriage boom but also before that unprecedented period.

Figure 2 shows first marriage rates per 1000 never married men and women in different age groups in 1921, 1970 and 2000. The greatest change in rates occurred among those under 30 years old, with the swing being particularly marked

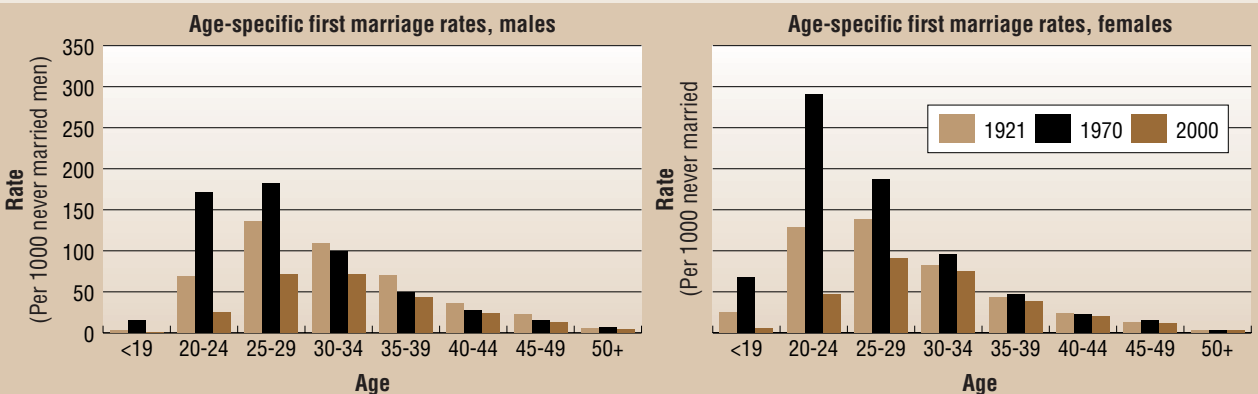
for men and women in their early twenties. For example, for every 1000 never married women aged 20-24 years, 290 married in 1970, compared with 128 in 1921, and only 47 in 2000. It is noteworthy that first marriage rates for the year 2000

Figure 1 Percent married, 1901-2001 (of population aged 15 and over)



Note: Per cent married excludes those who were separated
Source: ABS census (various years)

Figure 2 Age-specific first marriage rates, 1921-2000



Sources: ABS (2001)

were lower than those in 1970 and 1921 across all age groups, and most particularly for young adults.

As mentioned above, one striking aspect of the marriage boom was the tendency for people to marry for the first time at quite young ages by historical standards. Figure 2 shows that in 1970 age 20-24 years was by far the most common time for women to enter their first marriage, while in 1921 marriage in the late 20s was marginally more common for women than marriage in the early 20s. On the other hand, in 2000 women most commonly married when aged 25-29 years. In 1921 and 1970, men most commonly married when they were 25-29 years, but in the year 2000 they were just as likely to marry when aged 30-34 years as when aged 25-29 years. Thus, marrying before the age of 25 is now relatively uncommon for both sexes.

The unusually young age at which people entered their first marriage during the marriage boom can be captured by reference to median age at marriage for different time periods. Figure 3 depicts changes in the median age at which men and women married for the first time since 1940. For both sexes, the median age fell until the mid-1970s and rose progressively thereafter reaching a higher age in 2000 than 60 years earlier. For men, the median age at first marriage was 26.4 in 1940, 23.3 in 1975, and 28.7 in 2000. For women, the

median ages were 23.7, 21.1 and 26.7 respectively. To some extent, the delay in getting married in recent times has contributed to the overall lower proportion who are married in 2000 than some 25 years ago (as shown in Figure 1).

In short, trends in first marriage rates indicate that both men and women are not only deferring first marriage, but are less likely to marry now than they were not only 30 years ago during the marriage boom, but also earlier in the 20th century.

The rise and fall of remarriage

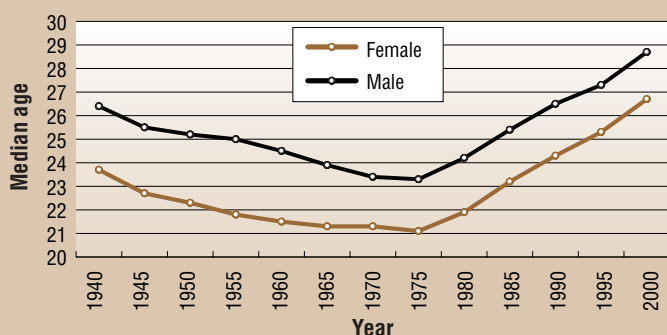
How true is the saying "Once bitten, twice shy" nowadays, compared with earlier times? At first glance, the different types of trends for remarriage may seem to provide conflicting answers to this question.

Remarriages may seem to be particularly popular these days. First, across all age groups, previously married men and women are more likely to marry than those who had never married (Figure 4). For example, while 71 per 1000 never married men in their late 20s and early 30s married in 2000, 103 to 104 per 1000 previously married men in these age groups remarried in 2000.

Second, remarriages have been markedly more prevalent since the late 1970s than in the first three quarters of the 20th century. For example, only 10 per cent of marriages involved remarriage for at least one partner in 1911, increasing to only 17 per cent by 1955. Over the last couple of decades, on the other hand, around one third of marriages each year have been remarriages for one or both partners. In 2000, 15 per cent of all marriages consisted of two previously married people and 19 per cent were the first marriage of just one of the partners (ABS 2001).

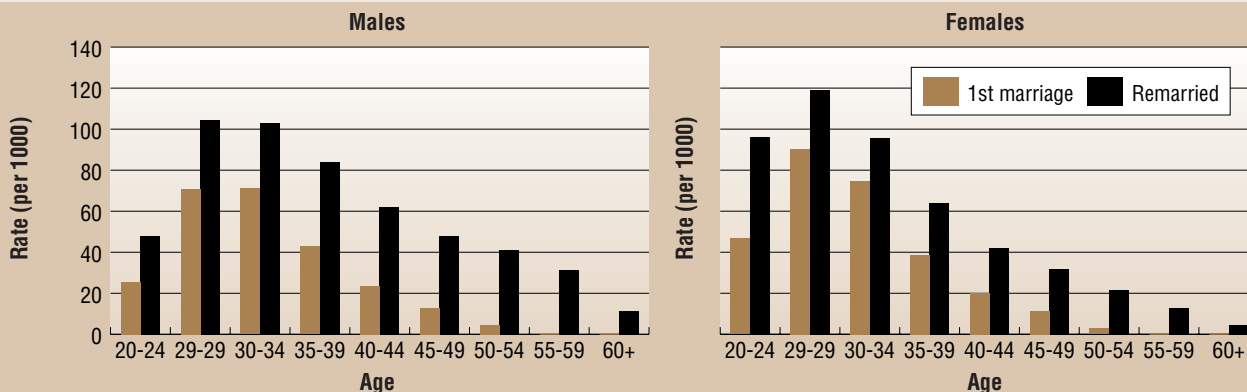
However, the increased prevalence of remarriage does not reflect a greater predisposition for previously married people to remarry since the late 1970s compared the rest of the 20th century. Rather, the greater prevalence of remarriage can be largely explained by the increased size of the divorced population since the Family Law Act 1975 came into operation. There are simply more people in the position to remarry in recent times. In addition, divorced people are more likely to

Figure 3 Median age at first marriage, 1940-2000



Sources: ABS 1997 and ABS 2001

Figure 4 Age-specific first marriage and remarriage rates, males and females, 2000



Note: First marriage rates are marriages per 1000 never married people while remarriage rates are marriages per 1000 previously married people.
Source: ABS 2001

remarry than widowed people, and in the early part of the century, most previously married people were widowed rather than divorced (McDonald 1982).

In fact, while the proportion of marriages that were remarriages was much higher in the last 20 years than earlier in the 20th century, remarriage rates (defined as the proportion of the previously married population who remarried) rose then fell as did first marriage rates. In 1921, around 46 in every 1000 previously married men remarried (1921 Census and 1922 Year Book Australia). But in 1976, the rate was about twice as high (97 per 1000) but fell to 41 per 1000 in 2000. For women, the respective figures are 20, 32 and 19 per 1000 previously married women.

Consistent with trends apparent in Figure 4, age at which a person's marriage ended is closely linked with the propensity for remarriage (McDonald 1982). Those whose marriage was terminated at younger ages are more likely to remarry compared with those whose marriage end at later ages. Furthermore, men are more likely than women to remarry following divorce, possibly reflecting women's lower desire to remarry compared with men, or fewer opportunities to find a partner, particularly when they have children in their care. For instance, for those aged 45-59 years in 2000, remarriage rates in 2000 were 48 and 32 per 1000 previously married men and women. (ABS 2000).

Changing nature of marriage formation

What does the modern decline in marriage mean? Does it reflect a move away from forming living together unions, or are people just as inclined as in the past to form such relationships? This issue is examined in this section.

The rise of cohabitation

Paralleling the modern decline in marriages is the noticeable increase in cohabitation, from less than 1 per cent of all couples in 1971 to 12 per cent in 2001. However, the increase does not quite compensate for the fall in the prevalence of marriage.

Figure 5 shows that between 1981 and 2001 the proportion of those aged 15 or over that were married fell by 8 percentage points (from 60 per cent to 52 per cent), while the proportion cohabiting increased by about 4 percentage points (from 3 per cent to 7 per cent). Thus, overall, the percentage of those aged 15 and over who were living as a couple fell from 63 per cent to 59 per cent over the last 20 years.

Younger couples are much more likely to cohabit than older couples, with the mid-20s representing a turning point. For instance, two-thirds of partnered men in their early 20s are cohabiting, while two-thirds of partnered men in their late 20s are married.

This greater tendency of younger than older couples to cohabit partly reflects the fact that the modern prevalence of cohabitation is quite recent and therefore would be more common among those who entered a relationship recently. The rise in cohabitation amongst younger groups also reflects the fact that cohabitation is often a stage in the

relationship commitment process – a stage that often leads to marriage.

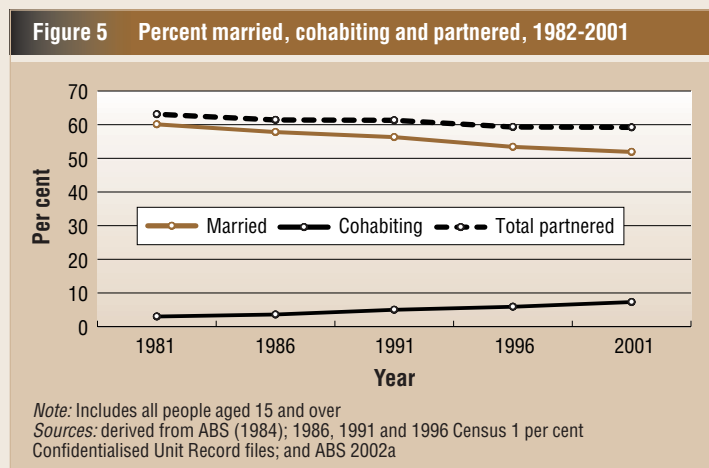
Indeed, one of the most important changes in partnership formation is the increasing tendency for couples to cohabit before they marry. Premarital cohabitation was virtually non-existent before the



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1960s and applied to only 16 per cent of couples who married in 1975. In the late 1980s, around half of all marrying couples cohabited beforehand, while in 2001, 72 per cent of couples who married had lived together first. Thus, it is now unusual *not* to live together before marrying.

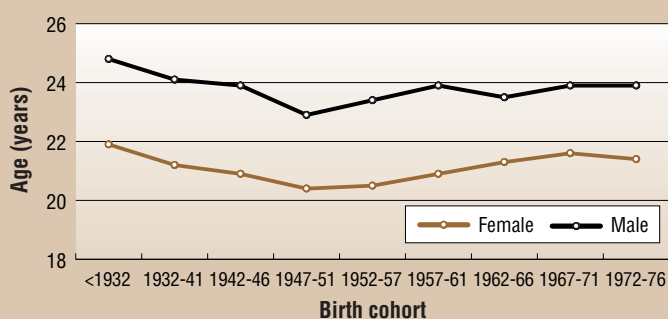
A marked turnaround in attitudes to cohabitation has accompanied these trends, both contributing to them and being fuelled by them. When cohabitation was virtually non-existent a strong stigma was attached to such behaviour and to sexual relationships outside marriage generally. Single women who became pregnant were pressured either to release their child for adoption or to marry. So-called "shot-gun" marriages were thus common – applying to about one-quarter of first-time brides during the late 1960s (McDonald 1995). Since this time, there has been a growing acceptance of cohabitation. By the late 1980s, a national survey suggested that the majority of people believed that



couples should live together before marrying (see McDonald 1995). More recently, cohabitation has become widely condoned not only as a stepping stone to marriage, but also as an alternative to it (de Vaus 1997).

As the proportion of marriages preceded by cohabitation has risen, the period of living together before marriage has also increased steadily. The first (2001) wave of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey suggests that, of couples who lived together before marrying, the proportions who married within six months of moving in together fell from 40 per cent in the 1960s and 1970s to 12 per cent by the late 1990s. Conversely, the proportions who lived together for at least three years before marrying increased from about 5 per cent in the 1960s and 1970s to more than 30 per cent by the late 1990s.

Figure 6 Age by which 50% of cohort had formed a live-in relationship



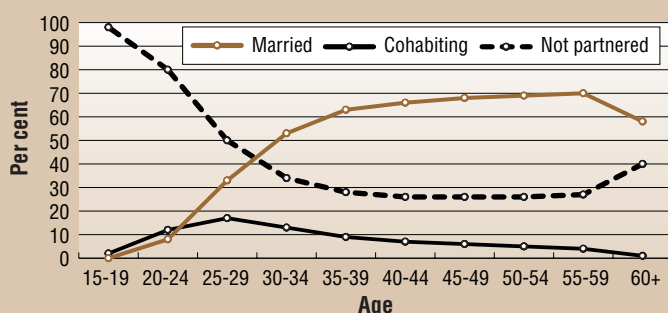
Source: HILDA 2001 (FaCS 2002)

Table 1 Changes in levels of being unpartnered, 1986-2001

Age	Female			Male		
	1986 %	1996 %	2001 %	1986 %	1996 %	2001 %
20-24	61	74	74	80	85	86
25-29	32	43	45	46	57	57
30-34	23	30	31	29	38	38
35-39	21	26	27	23	31	30
40-44	20	27	27	21	28	27
45-49	21	27	27	21	25	25

Source: Years 1986 and 1996 figures are derived from tables in (Birrell and Rapson 1998) which are based on special 1996 Australian Census matrix tables. Year 2001 figures from customised ABS tables.

Figure 7 Social marital status by age group, 2001



Source: 2001 census special tables

Age at relationship formation

Given that men and women are living together for longer periods before they marry their partner, the growth of cohabitation is also linked with the increasing age at which men and women are marrying. But has there been any change in the age at which people partner?

Figure 6 shows that young people nowadays begin their first partnership – involving cohabitation or marriage – at ages similar to those born in the early part of the century. For example, of men born in the early 1970s, half of them formed their first relationship by the age 24 compared with age 25 for those born before 1932. However, those who were born right after World War II entered their first relationship at an earlier age – half of the men had partnered by the age of 23 years. A similar pattern applies to women, although the differences are smaller for women than for men. These changes relating to age of entry into first partnerships are considerably smaller than those relating to age of entry into first marriage.

Living without a partner

So far, attention has been directed to partnership trends. They indicate that there are more adults living without a partner today than in the mid 1970s. Indeed, Birrell and Rapson (1998) found that, between 1986–1996, there was a sharp rise in the percentage of men and women who were not living with a partner. They attribute this trend, in part, to a mismatch between the types of men and women who are available to partner. They show that unpartnered women are particularly likely to be well-educated and have higher status occupations and higher incomes, while the opposite is the case for unpartnered men. Disproportionate numbers of unpartnered men have lower education levels and poor job prospects, with economic restructuring playing a major role in these developments.

Nevertheless, the proportions of men and women who were unpartnered changed little from 1996 to 2001 (Table 1) and by age 30–34, only a minority are unpartnered. Figure 7, which is based on 2001 census data, shows quite dramatic changes in the proportions who are unpartnered from their early 20s (80 per cent) to late 20s (50 per cent) and early 30s (34 per cent). The proportion without partners then levels out to just over one quarter for the five-year age groups between 35 and 59 years, increasing to 40 per cent for those 60 years or older, largely as a result of widowhood. (These trends are derived from Census figures which only identify people who have a partner living in the same household.)

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, those in their early 20s are more likely to be cohabiting than married, by their late 20s, those with partners are twice as likely to be married than cohabiting. By their early 30s, more than half are married and only 13 per cent are cohabiting, yet this group entered marriage at a time when cohabitation was already widely condoned as an alternative to marriage.

(de Vaus 1997). Such trends highlight the continuing importance of marriage to couples in a context of a socially accepted alternative.

As noted earlier in relation to marriage, being without a partner at a given time does not imply having never partnered. While about half of those aged 25-29 years were unpartnered at the time of the 1996 census, data from the 1996 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing (ABS 1997) suggest that only one-quarter in this age group had never lived with a partner. Part of the rise in the percentage of people without a partner observed by Birrell and Rapson (1998) probably reflects the decreasing stability of early relationships (Qu and Weston 2001). This issue will be explored further in the future.

Summary

There have been important changes in the way in which men and women form couple relationships. The proportion of the adult population that is married has declined since the period after World War II. Both men and women spend a considerable part of their adult life without being married, and are now older when they marry than they were some 25 years ago. However, the period from World War II until the 1970s was marked by a marriage boom, involving high marriage rates and a fall in age at marriage that was unprecedented. Since the Family Law Act 1975 came into operation, around one-third of marriages each year include at least one previously married person.

Formal marriage is no longer the only way in which people partner. Many people live in cohabitating relationships – at least for a while – and most marriages are now preceded by cohabitation. In addition, an increasing number of people are, at any given point of time, living without a partner at all.

However, it is easy to exaggerate the extent of change in partnering patterns. While important changes have taken place, there remains a great degree of continuity. As in the past, the vast majority of men and women form a relationship at some stage in their lives, and marriage remains by far the most common form of partnered relationship.

When the period of cohabitation is taken into account, men and women these days are entering into intimate live-in relationships at much the same age as they have for most of the last century, although the marriage boom period saw a fall in the age at which people began forming live-in relationships (almost exclusively via marriage). Although fewer people are now married, this has been partly compensated for by the increase in cohabitation. While more people are now unpartnered since the marriage boom, this is less a case of never finding a partner and more a case of having separated from a previous partner.

If the past is any guide to the future we will continue to see changes to the way in which people form relationships. These will be influenced by other changes in the wider society, including those relating to the economy, gender relations and social values, with values also being influenced by partnership formation trends. It is normal for changes

to occur in the way men and women go about establishing families and relationships – change is an underlying theme in family history. The critical thing is to enable people to make good decisions in a time of change when old guidelines are not as helpful as they once were.



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