

Forming couple relationships

Adolescents' aspirations and young adults' actualities

The number of people living without a partner has increased substantially over the last few decades. Are men and women shirking the idea of marriage and long-term relationships, or are they having difficulties in forming a satisfying couple relationship?

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During the marriage boom of the 1950s and 1960s women tended to leave home at age 20 or 21 to marry men who were also in their early twenties. At the time, being the odd one out by not marrying elicited quite different labels for women and men. Unmarried women were seen as “frustrated spinsters” who were in danger of being “left on the shelf”, whereas unmarried men were seen as “playing the field”, avoiding “getting hooked”, and enjoying their freedom.

How times have changed! Bachelors, whether care-free or not, and spinsters (a term rarely used nowadays given its derogatory connotations) have become far more prevalent. For instance, between 1971 and 2001, the proportion of men aged 25–29 who had never married increased from 26 per cent to 69 per cent, while the proportion of women of this age group who had never married increased from 12 per cent to 54 per cent.

Today marriage is no longer the only way to form a couple relationship. Cohabitation has gained social acceptance and is now widely seen as a prelude, if not an alternative, to marriage (Qu 2003). Available statistics indicate that the proportion of couples in a cohabiting relationship doubled between 1986 and 2001, from 6 per cent to 12 per cent. However, despite the rise in cohabitation, young adult men and women are more likely today than in the past to live without a partner. According to the 1986 and 2001 Censuses, the proportions of men and women aged 25–29 with live-in partners fell from 53 per cent to 41 per cent for men and from 67 per cent to 53 per cent for women, while the proportions aged 20–24 with live-in partners fell from 20 per cent to 13 per cent for men and from 39 to 24 per cent for women (Birrell, Rapson and Hourigan 2004). A fall in partnership rates also occurred to those in their early and late 30s and 40s (Birrell et al. 2004).

These trends reflect snapshots of partnering circumstances at different time points and partly result from delays in couple formation and the breakdown of cohabiting relationships and marriages (Qu and Weston 2001; de Vaus, Qu and Weston 2003).

The personal and societal implications of the decline in the level of partnering and marriage in particular have generated public concern (for example, Birrell

et al. 2004; Maley 2004; Arndt 2004; Farouque 2004). In

relation to personal implications, there is considerable evidence that married people are happier and healthier than those who are divorced or widowed, and those who have never married (see Waite and Gallagher 2000). In addition, cohabitators have been found to be less happy than married people but happier than single people (Shields and Wooden 2003).

From a societal point of view, the fall in partnering – at least since the 1980s – has contributed to the fall in the fertility rate which reached an all time low of 1.75 in 2001 (Birrell et al. 2004). This link between partnering rates and fertility is underscored by research that suggests that partnering formation and stability influence both expectations about having children and their fulfillment (Fisher and Charnock 2003; Qu, Weston and Kilmartin 2000). Another related concern is the rise in lone-parent families. Such families, which largely result from relationship breakdown, are mostly headed by mothers and tend to be socially and economically disadvantaged.

It is thus not surprising that some social commentators have expressed concern about the decline in partnering. While delays in partnering and relationship instability contribute to the decline, economic and social changes have also been proposed as contributors to the fall in the level of partnering.

Macro-economic changes appear to have played an important role in the overall fall in partnership rates. For instance, labour market changes since the 1970s have involved a decline in the availability of reasonably well-paid and secure jobs that are low skilled (particularly in manufacturing). Macro-economic changes also include an increasing shift towards a free market system and globalisation. McDonald (2000) argues that, while this system may offer greater rewards to workers, it is less secure and involves greater risks.

Such macro-economic changes have placed increasing pressure on young adults to pursue tertiary education and to focus considerable energy on becoming well-established in their careers. Pursuit of tertiary education typically requires at least partial dependence on parents in early adulthood. Under these circumstances, couple formation is typically postponed. On the other hand, recent research by



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Birrell and colleagues (2004) shows that both men and women with poor job prospects, and those with low socio-economic status, are especially likely to have difficulty in finding a partner.

Another driving force in the postponement or absence of couple formation appears to be the increased choices available to women as a result of their increased education which have provided women with far greater access to personal economic resources and personal fulfillment than was available to earlier generations of women.

Thus marriage is no longer the only ticket to economic security and prosperity for women today, and the need to find a partner may be less urgent or critical for today's generation of young adult women, compared with earlier generations. Furthermore for some, a lack of a partner in life may be compensated for by the rewards of a career.

Changes in social values may have also contributed to the decline in the level of partnering (Lewis 2001; McDonald 1984). Several authors have argued that "individualism", which emphasises the pursuit of individual rights, personal growth, and a search for immediate self-gratification, has become increasingly prevalent in society at the expense of commitment to intimate relationships. According to this argument, people have become more intent on investing in themselves than in family life (for review see Lewis 2001).

Consistent with these arguments, social commentator Hugh Mackay (1998) proposed that the generation born since the 1970s have learnt to "keep their options open". In his view, young adults are reluctant to commit to one pathway until they have explored all their options, will commit when they feel "ready", and will tie the knot only when they are "established" emotionally and financially.

To what extent are men and women shirking the idea of marriage or life-long partnering? How do individuals who have no partner feel about their prospect of finding one? To what extent are the above-mentioned factors impinging on their chances of finding a partner to live with and to marry?

This article will first examine the aspirations of adolescents about forming a long-term relationship and getting married as aspirations can help shape an individual's behaviour (Ajzen 1985). Attention will then be given to examining the extent to which young people have difficulties in finding a partner and what difficulties they face.

Adolescents' aspirations about forming a relationship and marriage

Two sources of data were used to assess the aspirations of boys and girls about forming a long-term relationship or getting married.

The first is based on the *Australian Temperament Project (ATP)*, which followed a representative cohort of children from Victoria from infancy. In 2000, around 1,250 participants (then aged 17-18 years old) were asked about their views on forming a long-term relationship and getting married, via a mailed survey. In an earlier edition of *Family Matters Smart* (2002) reported that the views which emerged from the study were similar for both young men and women although girls hoped to make each type of relationship transition earlier than boys.

The study revealed that the vast majority of these teenagers (92 per cent) hoped to experience a long-term relationship, with 81 per cent hoping to be in such a relationship within five years – that is, when they were in their early twenties (Smart 2002). Only 1 per cent expressed no desire at all for such a relationship, and about 7 per cent indicated that they had not thought about the issue.

The teenagers also held positive attitudes about marriage, with 82 per cent hoping to marry in the future. Nearly two thirds hoped to be married within the next ten years – that is, when they were in their late twenties. Moreover, only 5 per cent rejected the idea of marriage, and 13 per cent indicated that they had never thought about the issue.

The second set of data used in this analysis was derived from wave 2 of the *Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey*. This survey is funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Family and Community Services (for HILDA wave 2 survey details see Watson and Wooden 2004).

Non-married participants aged 18 and over were asked in a face-to-face interview whether or not they expected to marry. Of the 446 participants aged 18 to 19 years, 10 per cent of men and women were living with a partner (married or cohabiting). Of those who were neither married nor cohabiting, 72 per cent indicated that they expected to marry in the future, and only 6 per cent said that they did not expect to marry at all. Although the proportion of men who did not expect to marry was higher than that for women, the difference was small (8 per cent compared with 4 per cent).

Together, these two sets of data suggest that, by their late teens, the vast majority of young people have considered marriage or at least long-term partnering and most hope to marry. Further, it appears that most of those aged 17 or 18 hoped to be in a long-term relationship by their early twenties and marry in their late twenties. Few appeared to shirk the idea of entering these pathways and most had considered these issues. Indeed, Sharpe (2001) maintains that marriage continues to be an important goal for young people as a symbol of commitment to partners, children and community.

Young adults' current relationship status

While majority of adolescents hope to form a long-term relationship within five years (in their early twenties) and to marry within ten years (in their late twenties), current levels of partnering and marriage suggest that adolescents' aspirations may not materialise for many of them. As noted above, the 2001 Census indicated that only 13 per cent of men and 24 per cent of women in their early twenties were either married or cohabiting. This situation also applied to only a minority of men (41 per cent) and just over half the women (53 per cent) who were in their late twenties.

The *Young Adults Survey*, a national random survey conducted in 1998 by the Australian Institute of Family Studies of 580 men and women who were interviewed using CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing), provides insight into the views of those aged 20-29 years on having a partner. Consistent with the 2001 Census data, the proportion of those living with a partner and the proportion of married young adults in the study were much lower than those proportions that adolescents hoped to achieve when they reached their twenties. Only 15 per cent of men and 27 per cent of women in their early twenties were living with a partner, mostly in a cohabiting relationship. Of

those in their late twenties, 43 per cent of men and 64 per cent of women were living with a partner.

With the exception of women in their late twenties, these figures are very similar to those derived in the 2001 Census which show that 53 per cent of women in their late twenties were living with a partner. These levels of partnering and marriage detailed in Table 1 were thus considerably lower than the levels aspired for by teenagers aged 17 to 18, or 18 to 19 years outlined earlier.

Table 1 also shows that a quarter to one third (27 per cent to 33 per cent) of young men and women in their early twenties were in a relationship but not living together, compared with only 8 to 12 per cent of men and women in their late twenties. Nearly half of the men in both age groups and of the women in their early twenties were single and not in a relationship, while this situation applied to around one quarter of women in their late twenties.

Of course, not currently living with a partner does not mean never having partnered. Not surprisingly, the

Table 1 Young adults' current relationship status and union history by age and sex: percentage distributions

	Men		Women	
	20-24	25-29	20-24	25-29
Current relationship status	Per cent			
Living with a partner	14.9	43.4	27.1	63.9
Married	(3.0)	(30.4)	(11.8)	(47.8)
Cohabiting	(11.9)	(13.0)	(15.3)	(16.1)
In a relationship but not living together	32.8	7.8	27.1	12.4
Not in a relationship	52.2	48.7	45.9	23.6
Total	99.9	99.9	100.1	99.9
Ever been living with a partner				
Yes	26.9	67.8	40.0	80.7
No	73.1	32.2	60.0	19.3
Number of respondents	134	115	170	161

Source: Young Adults' Survey (1988), Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Table 2 Explanations for the question: "Why is it hard to find a suitable partner?"

	Men	Women	Total
	Per cent		
Internal constraints	47	46	47
Being selective or having standards to be met	36	33	35
Cautious or lack of trust	11	16	14
External constraints	30	22	26
Time constraints	13	7	10
Scarcity of meeting places in general	16	13	14
Personal locational constraints	4	3	4
Other	11	18	15
Changing social attitudes, appropriate behaviours	11	11	11
Being a sole parent	0	7	3
Don't know	10	12	11
Number of respondents	88	87	175

Source: Young Adults' Survey (1988), Australian Institute of Family Studies.

proportion of men and women who had “ever” been living with a partner was substantially higher than the proportion currently in such a relationship. For instance, 68 per cent of men in the older age group indicated that they had been living with a partner, compared with 43 per cent who were currently living with a partner. About one quarter of men and women had lived with a partner but were no longer doing so. This situation applied to 14 to 18 per cent of men and women in their early twenties, and 43 to 47 per cent of men and women in their late twenties. Thus, the unpartnered status of many of the men and women at the time of the interview could be the result of relationship breakup.

Finding a suitable partner – “It is hard”

According to the Young Adults Survey (1998), for those men and women who were not in a relationship (living together or otherwise), finding a partner was clearly on their minds and a pressing matter, with half of them reporting that they hoped to either get married or move in with someone within the next two years. However, nearly three quarters of men and women who were not in any sort of relationship said that finding a suitable partner was difficult.

Respondents gave a range of explanations regarding the difficulties they experienced in finding a partner. Some of these explanations were quite specific, while others were broad, but together, they highlight the complexities involved in partner search and selection. Some young adults referred to internal constraints that limited their chances of finding a partner, such as being overly fussy or lacking trust, and some referred to external constraints such as time pressures and the limited availability of suitable places for meeting potential partners. Other problems included being a sole parent and societal changes that were interpreted as adding to the difficulties of finding a partner.

The proportions of young adults mentioning such problems are set out in Table 2. It should be pointed out that these categories are not mutually exclusive. A few respondents could not provide a specific reason (10-12 per cent of men and women). No significant differences emerged in the nature of reasons provided by men or women or by those in their early and late twenties.

Internal constraints

The most common reasons provided covered internal constraints. These included holding high standards, and being cautious or lacking trust.

Being choosy

Around one third considered their difficulties to be partly or wholly derived from the fact that they were highly selective about the sort of person they were prepared to accept as a partner. That is, they had established a set of standards regarding a future partner. Both men and women suggested similar standards required for “compatibility”: their future partner had to share similar interests, values, and had to have a certain personality. They wanted to find “someone they can get along with”, “someone who was on the same wavelength”, someone with

“same attitude to life as you do”, “someone going in my direction – travel and career wise”, or “someone you click with”.

While previous research suggests that physical attraction is an important factor in choosing a partner (Gelles 1995; Buss et al. 2001), only very few participants in the Young Adults Survey mentioned physical appearance. Where it was mentioned, the suitable partner needed to come as a “package” covering both looks and other desired attributes.

“It is hard to find someone with whom chemistry clicks psychologically and physically.” (26-year-old male)

“It’s really hard to find a good package – that’s got everything that I look for, like looks and personality.” (22-year-old male)

Possibly, the relationship criteria bar is set higher nowadays than in the past. Some respondents felt that they were too “fussy”:

“I’m very fussy – perhaps too fussy . . .” (25-year-old male)

“High standards. I don’t have anything in common with the people I meet. They’re too silly.” (21-year-old female).

“The right person is hard to find – I have high standards.” (21-year-old female)

While it is well established in the literature that women value the ability in a partner to provide economic resources (Buss 1999), interestingly, no one explicitly mentioned any need to find a partner with adequate financial resources. However, this may mean that it was not too difficult to find someone who met these standards. Rather women in this sample were more likely to focus on the personality shortcomings or social ineligibility of the men they meet – “they’re too silly”, “not enough decent men”, “either drunk or already married” as reasons for their difficulty in finding a suitable partner.

The emphasis on high internal standards has been noted by others. For instance, McDonald (1984), maintained that marriage has been stripped of many of its peripheral functions (a sign of independence from parents, a vehicle for financial security, etc.) leading to an emphasis on intimate values and personal dimensions. Likewise, Giddens (1992) argued that marriage has been transformed from an economic contract to an emotional relationship.

In support of these arguments, Clulow’s (1995) analysis of attitudes about marriage over the past four decades suggests that, unlike some 40 years ago, men and women now place greater importance on mutual respect, fidelity, understanding, tolerance and a happy sexual relationship than on other factors such as income or similar social backgrounds in a lasting relationship. Clulow (1995) thus concluded that there is increasing emphasis on the “private companionate” aspects of a marriage rather than on marriage as a “public functional institution”.

Being cautious

Some respondents mentioned that a past relationship experience has made them cautious about entering a new one: they wanted to be certain about

the viability of any new potential relationship before committing themselves for fear of being hurt or “failing” once more. Even some who have not personally experienced a relationship breakup expressed caution in their search, either because they had seen parents, siblings or friends go through a divorce or relationship breakup or because of society’s high rate of divorce or relationship instability.

“From past relationships, you are cautious about going into new ones; getting your heart broken and having trouble trusting people again.” (21-year-old, female)

“My parents’ recent breakup, and my sister’s breakup, has made me more cautious.” (27-year-old male)

“General rate of divorce and uncertain economic conditions . . .” (29-year-old male)

Some respondents expressed their caution as lack of trust in people; they felt wary about getting into a relationship or felt they needed to take their time in assessing the quality of a potential relationship:

“You must understand the person and they might not reveal their true self.” (22-year-old male).

“It is hard to finding someone you can trust and know that it will go somewhere.” (21-year-old female)

Taking a cautious approach to a relationship appeared to be shared by many young people. More than half of single men and women reported that the number of relationship breakup these days made them cautious in their quest for a suitable partner. Those who had experienced a personal relationship breakup were more likely to feel so than those who had not experienced any relationship breakup in the past (73 per cent compared with 43 per cent).

External constraints

Some men and women felt that practical external constraints (time and lack of meeting places) limited their opportunities of finding a partner.

Time constraints

Time pressures linked with the demands of work, study or other commitments were mentioned by 13 per cent of men and 7 per cent of women. Some of these respondents seemed to view “going out” and socializing outside work or study hours rather than meeting people through their work or study as the best avenues for finding a partner, but time pressures prevented their adopting this strategy.

“Spending so much time at work makes it hard to spend time outside work.” (27-year-old male).

“I’m extremely busy studying – I don’t have time.” (21-year-old, male)

“I don’t have time to socialise a lot.” (21-year-old female)



Some young people considered their difficulties to be partly or wholly derived from the fact that they were highly selective about the sort of person they were prepared to accept as a partner.

“I don’t have much free time, and I find it hard to meet suitable partners, because I don’t go out much and I don’t know how else to meet people.” (28-year-old male)

Scarcity of meeting places in general

Another common theme was the notable lack of venues and places to meet potential partners. Both men and women explained that it was hard to meet people because there were “not enough places to meet people”, “no places of nice social setting”, or that they needed to “find a place to meet them”. Nightclubs featured as the usual venue for socializing and meeting people for both men and women in this study yet respondents acknowledged that this was not the appropriate place for finding a life-long partner. Although a great majority of respondents in this study were working, studying, or doing both, some respondents maintained that their campus or workplace provided little, if any, pool of potential partners.

“There are only males working mainly in my workplace and I don’t have the time to go out.” (20-year-old male)

“Just the people I come into contact with is fairly limited – I mainly meet people through work.” (21-year-old female)

“You just don’t really meet people at nightclubs . . .” (28-year-old female).

Personal locational constraints

Some of the young people living in the country or in small towns saw their residential location as a key barrier to meeting potential partners. Problems mentioned included not only distance from, or lack of, social settings, but also a diminished pool of young adults, owing to movements of their contemporaries to major cities in pursuit of higher education or work opportunities.

“Location in the country makes it difficult. Most young people shift to city or coastal areas.” (25-year-old male).

“More to do with I live in a small country town.” (26-year-old female)

“Because I live on a dairy farm.” (24-year-old male)

Changing social attitudes and changing society

Some young people felt that changing social attitudes and changing society (for example, changing gender roles, the trend towards less social conformity, rising individualism and slow erosion of the sense of community) have made people view and approach relationships and marriage differently – thus making it difficult for them to find a suitable mate with similar views and values as their own.

“Fifty years ago we lived in a more tight-knit community, but these days we are all so different and we don’t know each other [as a community]. I find females don’t have a lot of respect for men.” (22-year-old male)

“Basically everyone’s morals have changed, even older guys seem immature. Men are expected to be macho and many have several relationships rather than just one girl.” (21-year-old female).

“Changing gender roles makes it hard to meet people.” (22-year-old female)

“Men don’t settle down these days.” (23-year-old female)



Taking a cautious approach to a relationship appeared to be shared by many young people.

Some men in the study felt that there was a de-valuing of the importance of relationships nowadays – “people were not looking for relationships”, “people play around”, “people don’t value relationships” – thus making it more difficult for them to find “Ms Right”.

For a few respondents, their difficulties were compounded by lack of knowledge of proper introduction or courtship processes.

“It is hard to meet guys; who will make the first move? You need a lot of confidence.” (20-year-old female)

“It’s often hard to meet people through other people – the dating game is difficult.” (26-year-old female)

Having young children

Seven per cent of women were single mothers and all of these mothers felt that having children was a barrier to finding a suitable partner. The difficulties confronting these women were multi-pronged: having children made it difficult for them to find the time

to go out and meet people; or, after having met someone, there was concern about not knowing if the person would be a proper father to their children; and there was general concern about the impact of their partnering on the children. Mothers felt that the welfare of their children should always be the overriding concern.

“Because of having three children, finding someone who would be a proper father.” (26-year-old female)

“Because I have three children, and it’s difficult to get out.” (29-year-old female)

“It all depends on the person. The situation for me to be a single parent was my choice – for the welfare of my daughter.” (22-year-old female)

Combinations of reasons

As indicated earlier, the categorisation of the explanations is by no means mutually exclusive and the categories merely reflect the major themes or dimensions that emerged from the responses provided by the respondents. In a number of cases, respondents cited more than one reason for their difficulty in finding a partner.

“I’m very fussy – perhaps too fussy. It is hard to find someone who is compatible and I don’t go out often and meet people.” (25-year-old male)

“There are so many unsuitable people. I am too busy.” (21-year-old female)

Conclusion

In the 1950s and 1960s, many young people embarked on marriage in their twenties. The optimistic outlook provided by an economy with full employment facilitated this early family transition (McDonald 1984). Since then, however, there have been significant social and economic changes that have affected patterns of partnering. Nowadays, many young people remain at least partly financially dependent on their parents until well into their twenties, and with many women having university education and being in the labour force, marriage is no longer seen as the only vehicle for ensuring their financial security.

While marriage rates and overall partnering levels have declined, this does not mean that young people today reject marriage and intimate relationships. In fact, both the ATP survey and HILDA survey suggest that the vast majority of adolescents aspire to form a long-term relationship and to marry quite soon in the future. However, current statistics on partnering cast doubts on the proportion who will succeed in finding partners during their twenties.

This article has highlighted some of the major difficulties experienced by young single adults in their search for their Ms or Mr Right. Their explanations suggest that some place a great emphasis on the ability of an intimate relationship to meet their emotional needs. This is consistent with prior research findings and discussions in the literature that suggest that increasing importance is now placed on the quality of the relationship (Clulow 1995; Giddens 1992; McDonald 1984).

Clearly, the fragility of relationships nowadays has made young people exercise caution in their own search for a relationship. While an experience of a failed relationship does not necessarily put young people off a new relationship (Ermisch 2002), those in the study who had experienced the breakup of a relationship were more likely than other respondents to indicate that they were very cautious about re-partnering. The need to establish trust and the caution and wariness displayed by these young adults show that they did not like to take a risk when it comes to committing to a long-term relationship. While such a cautious approach may help young people avoid making poor choices, it may also inadvertently cause some to pass up potentially good matches.

Some young people who were pursuing higher education or career development appeared to place greater emphasis on career establishment than on finding a partner at least at this stage in their life course. Despite the number of venues for entertainment and recreational purposes, some young people felt that there was a lack of appropriate places for meeting potential partners. Those living in rural areas or small towns had particular difficulties in this regard. As more young people engage in cyber-socialising (for example, internet chat rooms) and the flourishing of dating agencies, the usefulness of these modes of introduction for partnership formation has yet to be determined.

This article has examined predicaments reported by single young adults in their search for a suitable partner to further our understanding about the increasing prevalence of the unpartnered. The considerable caution that often appeared to be exercised in mate selection may suggest that marriages entered into will more likely be successful. On the other hand, emphasis on having one's emotional and companionate needs met may also make some of these marriages vulnerable to breakdown when such needs could no longer be fulfilled.

While some people may make a choice to remain single, this article suggests that many are having difficulty in finding a partner. For the latter group, prolonged difficulty in finding a partner will have personal and social implications as noted earlier. Moreover, the proportion of unpartnered people has also increased among those in their 30s and 40s. It is likely that many of the single men and women in the older age groups have lived with a partner previously. Further research is needed to understand to what extent these single men and women are having difficulty in finding a partner, and if so, whether or not the nature of their difficulties are the same as those faced by young adults.

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