

In the previous edition of *Family Matters*, Robyn Parker, in her article "Perspectives on the future of marriage," discussed international perspectives on the retreat from marriage, the growth of cohabitation, and whether marriage is valued, concluding with some thoughts on what the future of marriage might be. Michele Simons, Associate Head of School for the School of Education at the University of South Australia and Rosalie Pattenden, a Psychologist and Clinical Practice Leader at Relationships Australia (Victoria) were invited to respond to the issues raised in the article. Here are their responses.

(Re)-forming marriage in Australia?

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Unlike the United States, Australia has not entered into significant or sustained public debate about marriage. When public comment about marriage has occurred in the past few years it has largely been related to two issues – formal recognition of relationships between same sex couples and the best way to respond to marriage breakdown – particularly in relation to the needs of children. This does not mean that marriage is not important to Australians. Indeed marriage still continues to be something that a majority of Australians will enter into at some stage in their lifetime and an institution that is viewed as relevant to contemporary Australian society (de Vaus, 2004, p.163). What has happened, however, is that people have made significant shifts in the ways they make decisions about the place of marriage in their lives.

The article by Robyn Parker provides a clear and succinct overview of trends in marriage and cohabitation in the United States and Western Europe, along with some of the explanations and policy prescriptions that have been offered in response to these trends. This analysis raises a number of questions including: do the trends in the decline in marriage and the growth in cohabitation translate to Australia; and what are the appropriate policy responses to

these trends? This article has been prepared in response to an invitation to reflect on the article by Robyn Parker and to offer some points of discussion to inform further debates on the future of marriage and family life in Australia.

Is marriage in Australia as popular as it was 100 years ago?

One of the most significant trends in Australia has been the decline in the number of marriages occurring at the present time compared to the height of the 'marriage boom' that took place after World War II and continued until the mid 1970s. The rate of marriage has declined since then for all age groups with a particular 'flight' from marriage evident with young people. Teenage weddings are now almost non-existent in Australia (de Vaus, 2004, p.180).

Taking a longer term view, current rates of marriage, while low are comparable with those at the turn of the 20th century. Marriage was slightly more prevalent in the Australian population in 2001 than 100 years ago. In 1901, approximately 47 per cent of the population over 15 years had never married, but by 2001 about one third of the population over 15 years had never married (de Vaus, 2004, p. 161).

For better or for worse: An Australian counsellor's perspective on trends in composition of families

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Massive changes in family formation are apparent in the Western world. As Robyn Parker (2005) points out in her article, Australian trends are similar to those of the UK, Canada and the US, and the available statistics over the last decade regarding reduction in rates of marriage, increase in divorce rates and the increase in numbers of couples choosing to cohabit are no exception. The meaning of marriage and its place in peoples' lives has changed. Despite the trend it is interesting to note that latest Australian figures show that divorces have decreased since

2001, and marriages have significantly increased in the same period (ABS, 2005a). Other personal choices in lifestyle are also on the rise—including increasing numbers of people choosing to live alone. Young people are certainly waiting longer before entering committed relationships. For those separated from longer term relationships, many are choosing not to re-partner (54 per cent of older singles say the best thing about their lives is their independence and personal freedom) (Kantrowitz, 2006). In Australia, couples without children are expected to increase more significantly than any other family type, and eventually overtake the



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The decline in marriage since the 1970s has been attributed to the delaying of marriage. This trend is because of increased time spent in formal education, economic factors, as well as changing social mores around alternatives to marriage such as cohabitation and remaining single.

The story about the decline of marriage in the statistics is also borne out in data from the World Values Survey, which reveal a decline in support for marriage as a contemporary institution, especially from young people. In the periods 1981 and 1995-97 when data were collected, the percentage of 18-34 years olds who believed marriage was an outdated institution rose from just under one fifth to one quarter. While this change is significant, de Vaus also notes

that support for marriage as an institution was high in both periods (de Vaus, 2004, p.163).

What these data arguably point to is the shifting significance in the role and importance of marriage for successive cohorts of the Australian population. Marriage as a human institution is changing shape as social structures and the influence of other institutions (for example, faith-based institutions) (re) form in response to changing social values about issues such as pre-marital sex, fertility control, parenting, work-life balance across the life cycle (particularly for women), divorce and the social acceptability of other options for partnering – most notably the rise of cohabitation but also remaining single. Put simply, ➤

number of couples with children (ABS, 2005b). More children are being born to single or unmarried parents. Same-sex couples, and same-sex couples with children have come to be accepted somewhat ‘casually’. As Coontz (2004) states “the coexistence in *one* society of so many alternative ways ... and the comparative legitimacy accorded to many of them—has never been seen before” (p.974).

Not everyone believes these changes are desirable. In fact on reading the articles in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* (Nov 2005) I am struck by the emotive, negative descriptions of these trends, including “formidable changes” (Le Bourdais, 2004), “the golden age of marriage ... is well and truly over” (Kiernan, 2004), “Marriage is on the rocks, beset by divorce and challenged by rising levels of cohabitation” (Gillis, 2004), and “Who would have guessed that the institution of marriage was in so much trouble” (Lewin, 2004). Although a percentage of the population is no doubt troubled by the fact that in the last few decades fewer couples are choosing to marry, and more to co-habit, is it a big problem, or merely an indication that today the choice is a real option? If it is a problem, who to? Why? What can we do about it? It seems to me that people now can and do choose

what suits them best. The reality is diversity. One size does not fit all. What’s the problem?

Well there is a problem for some. There are a number of cohorts who do struggle with cohabitation as a legitimate choice, and as a result may come to counselling to help sort out the difficulties, and to make their choice of whether to marry or not. These include the following:

First are those couples where one or both come from families, cultures or religious groups where co-habiting is viewed as ‘sinful, shameful or unacceptable’. If they decide to cohabit they risk rejection by the family or community groups they come from. This is not only sad and disappointing for them, reducing the number of meaningful connections they have with significant others (thus compromising their resilience in times of stress), but has a ripple effect on others’ lives – parents like to be proud of their children’s love unions, and want ongoing relationships with them – and any children born to the couple. Rifts in relationships are sad for everyone.

The second group are cohabiting couples where one partner believes the cohabitation is a prelude to marriage, and the other a comfortable and convenient relationship to stay with ➤

marriage would appear to be considered a valued social institution in Australia by a majority of people but it *might not* be 'for me' and *may not* be 'for all time'.

An alternative explanation, as suggested by the research from the US, is the growing awareness of the reality that marriage has been unattainable for particular groups within the population. Marriage, within this frame of reference, is viewed as holding a particular status and something to be 'aspired to' rather than a relatively straightforward transition that the vast majority of people would be expected to make with little concern. While we do not have recent equivalent Australian data examining perceptions of marriage, or the expectations that people might hold for marriage (and the possibility of attaining these expectations), there is perhaps some evidence of the shifting accessibility to marriage in data from Australia. Drawing on the work of Birrell and his colleagues, de Vaus (2004) concludes that a man's chance of *partnering* (this includes marriage) is higher as education, income and the quality of his job increases (pp. 175-177). What we do not know is whether the absence of these attributes in certain groups of males makes them 'less desirable' as marriage partners in the eyes of Australian women.

The rise ... and rise of cohabitation

One of the more spectacular demographic trends that has occurred in Australia across the last 40 years has been the rise of cohabitation as a form of partnering. Figures reveal that 72 per cent of people live with their partner before marrying. It is estimated that 12.4 per cent of all partnered people in Australia cohabit (de Vaus, 2004, p.129). This rise in the number of couples choosing to cohabit rather than marry has contributed to the observed decline in the percentage of married people in the Australian population over the period 1982- 2001 (de Vaus 2004, p.129). These figures mirror the growing acceptance of cohabitation, particularly among young people and as such, cohabitation appears to be an activity largely confined to young people under thirty.

Contrary to popular opinion, however, cohabitation is not the choice of lifestyle of the majority of people who have

—unless or until something better comes along. For the one wanting marriage (usually the female), marriage may not only be the desired state, but also a sign of the partner's commitment—and by giving an ultimatum she may get him over the line, but lack confirmation that it is what he has chosen to do of his own accord. Alternatively pushing for a commitment too soon may 'drive him away'. The danger for the woman and her 'biological clock' is that she is wasting time in a relationship that will not lead to a long-term union and family. The danger for the man is that he may slide into a long-term relationship to which he is not fully committed. Years down the track she may initiate couple counselling to address his ongoing lack of commitment to her and the family symbolised by his refusal to 'marry'.

Some partners are reluctant to commit to a 'marriage' because they have been badly affected by divorce (either their parents or family friends divorces or through their own experience). They are usually determined not to repeat the 'pain' they have seen or experienced through marriage break-up, and believe that if they are to separate further down the track, leaving a *de facto* relationship will be less harmful than divorce for all concerned. For the other partner

divorced or separated – the vast majority of these people live alone or in sole parent families. Similarly, less than 10 per cent of cohabiting couples live in families with dependent children (de Vaus, 2004, p.129). However, the number of children born into cohabiting relationships has increased to 16 per cent of all children over the period 1970-2001 (Gray, 2004, p.140). These data offer support for Parker's assertion that, on the basis of Kiernan's (2002) four-stage process of acceptance of cohabitation, Australia rests somewhere between stage 2 (cohabitation as a prelude to marriage) and stage 3 (cohabitation is accepted as an alternative to marriage and a viable arrangement for raising children).

Australian data appear to mirror those from overseas in relation to the instability of cohabiting relationships. De Vaus (2004) estimates that cohabiting relationships last approximately 2.5 years before either breaking up or converting to marriage but the conversion rate to marriage has been in decline since the 1970s (p.129). In other words, the notion that cohabitation acts as a pathway to marriage is increasingly being tested. This has obvious implications when aligned with data noted above in relation to the increasing numbers of ex-nuptial births (which necessarily means that relationship formation increasingly might involve children conceived in previous relationships or outside any living-together relationship).

What is also significant in the Australian data is the evidence that different types of people choose to cohabit rather than marry. Individuals who cohabit are more likely to come from Anglo-Celtic backgrounds and to hold no religious affiliation or alignment with a mainstream religion. Indigenous people cohabit at three times the rate of non-indigenous people. These differences in who chooses to cohabit (along with other personal characteristics such as level of education and age) may account for observed differences in outcomes for areas such as mental health. However, it appears well established in Australian data that violence is more likely to occur in cohabiting relationships – especially where a man is unemployed. Where both partners are

this decision may seem more like a lack of commitment to the relationship, and so cause difficulties between the partners with different goals and expectations.

Other cohabiting couples may want to marry, but postpone it until they reach 'the bar'. Smock (2004) comments that although 'marriage' is highly valued in the US, couples believe that a number of factors have to be in place before the ceremony. These include attainment of a certain economic status, including a secure income, home ownership, getting out of debt, and a sense that the financial security will be maintained into the future. In Australia too, young couples are delaying marriage until this status is achieved, and even have one or more children before the wedding (which they often finance themselves). This is fine if all goes according to plan, but the expectations are high, which means that failure, disappointment and impatience can put added pressure on the relationship and thus risk its longevity.

Research has shown that children in healthy two-parent families are less prone to ill health, school failure, substance abuse and emotional and social difficulties (Amato, 2005). Children are also negatively affected by transient relationships

employed the rates of violence in cohabiting and married relationships were similar (de Vaus, 2004, p.124).

So what does it all mean?

Robyn Parker's article challenges us to reflect on what is happening to marriage in Australia. One of the first issues we need to face is that in searching for comparative data, there is a significant lack of Australian research on marriage and family life, particularly in relation to examining the *meaning* of marriage held by different groups of people and the ways in which people make sense of and act on decisions about their relationships across life. This qualitative research is sorely needed to add depth and insight into the broad demographic trends that are well documented and analysed by researchers such as David de Vaus.

Regardless of the volume of research, the interpretation of the available data does present significant challenges for policy makers. Both the United States and the United Kingdom are currently initiating significant policy agendas to strengthen family life – although arguably these agendas are being driven by different underlying assumptions. In the US a strong 'pro-marriage agenda' has arisen over the past decade largely driven by a coalition of some academics, policy makers and churches. This agenda is underpinned by the assumption that marriage is in decline (as evidenced by falling marriage rates, increasing ex-nuptial births, a rise in rates of cohabitation) and moves to be made to arrest the perceived social decline that has resulted from the flight from marriage. Initiatives to promote and strengthen marriages via policies such as covenant marriages (where couples commit to seeking counselling and rejecting the notion of no fault divorce), programs to support couples from poor families to consider marriage, and marriage education programs in schools, have arisen as a response to these perceived trends. The overarching goal is to promote a culture of marriage as a way of reversing what are seen to be the long-term negative effects of a flight from marriage.

(Cutrona, 2004). Thus assisting parents to strengthen their relationships will clearly benefit their children. Most low-income, unwed parents see a trusting relationship and financial stability as prerequisites to a marriage that will thrive (Edin et al., 2004). Consequently providing opportunities for couples to build better relationships by attending relationship education programs should lead to more couples choosing to marry, thus benefiting the children. The Bush Administration clearly views the number of low-income unmarried parents and the trend away from marriage as a problem that they want to address and have committed to spending \$1.5 billion dollars over a five-year period to promote healthy marriages through the delivery of 'marriage and relationship education' programs. The Marriage-Plus, Smart Marriages approach by the US Government promotes these programs as a way to strengthen families and improve child outcomes through reducing the poverty common in single-parent families.

In Australia the Government is also concerned about social trends. It has committed to the most significant investment in services to support the family law system ever (\$397.2 million over four years). With the opening of

There is, however, an alternative view. This suggests firstly, that marriage as a social institution has changed in form and meaning as societies have evolved and required particular family forms to ensure transfer of property to legitimate heirs, the protection and sustenance of communities in agrarian societies, and the development of family forms to support industrialisation. Secondly, there is some scepticism around the idea that the number of unsuccessful marriages in the population has increased (see for example the work of Coontz, 2005). According to this "resilience perspective" (Amato, 2004, p.960), limitations around divorce prevented many marriages from dissolving. Advocates of this perspective argue for policies which offer people a 'second chance' at happiness and an escape from sometimes violent and oppressive environments, which are especially not in the best interests of children. Offering people choices, they argue, has strengthened the quality of intimate relationships. Problems such as poverty and unemployment are more serious threats to child wellbeing than the decline of the two parent married family and social policy should support all family types – not advantage one form.

It is this line of thinking that has informed policy development in the United Kingdom which has drawn on research evidence that suggests that what really matters for children's developmental outcomes is the relationship between parents. Penny Mansfield (2005) in an edition of the *Journal of Sexual and Relationship Therapy* critiques the lack of recognition given to the link between parental relationship and the quality of parenting in recent policy initiatives. She suggests that the reason for this lies in the fact that early attempts to address this issue were couched in terms of strengthening marriage (Mansfield, 2005). The inherent dilemma, Mansfield believes, lies in how to support stable adult relationships without interfering in people's lives. Public responsibility for the wellbeing of children needs to be balanced with respect of the privacy of adults' intimate lives.

As Cherlin (2004) most eloquently notes, the 'marriage decline' and the 'marriage resiliency' perspectives are

65 Family Relationship Centres around Australia, the main focus of the programs will be to change the culture of family breakdowns by enabling parents to resolve conflict after separation, and encouraging and promoting parents' involvement in their children's lives post separation by assisting them in developing parenting arrangements, outside of the courts.

Research indicates that the most adverse effects on children's well-being post-separation are caused by continued high conflict between parents, poverty and serious mental illness (including depression) of one of the parents (Gottman, 1998, McIntosh, 2003). Separation and divorce from a former partner has been found to be one of the most stressful life events, stemming not only from the changes in living arrangements, finances and care of children but also from significant psychological distress for both partners. Thus by providing services that assist parents who decide to separate to do so with respect and dignity, both the parents and their children will benefit. The services will also assist with the development of co-operative co-parenting and the ongoing involvement of both parents with their children long term (unless this is clearly contra-indicated because of



What is clear is that marriage and family life are becoming more complex social phenomena as individuals seek to develop meaningful intimate relationships in the midst of significant social and economic change and at a time when individual rights and freedom of choice are important cultural values.

fundamentally at odds in that the former emphasises an institutional world view (marriage is more than the individuals in it – and therefore warrants protection by institutions including the law, churches and other groups in civil society), while the latter view is based on an individual world perspective. According to this perspective, marriage is constituted by the individuals who consent to participate in it. In this view, goals such as personal development and self fulfilment drive the shape that marriage might take and change in the nature of marriage over time is inevitable.

As Cherlin (2004) notes, both views together offer at least a partial explanation of social changes that have been

observed across many developed nations. The marital decline perspective focuses on the role that marriage has to play in terms of meeting the needs of society and the importance of sustaining the structure over time. Advocates of the marriage resilience perspective emphasise and celebrate the changing structure of marriage, the promotion of individual rights and the need to retain reforms that have made marriage more flexible. Most family scholars and policy makers would probably favour some balance between these two positions and this is in fact the position that appears to be informing policy debates in Australia surrounding initiatives such as the introduction of Family Relationship Services and attempts to broaden the reach of

family violence or other serious risks to the wellbeing of the children). Although the primary focus is on separating couples, the Australian Government, like the US Government, is also providing many new services to strengthen couple and family relationships, and prevent relationship breakdown. These programs include pre-marriage and relationship education, family violence services and counselling and skills services for couples and for men. However, unlike the US, nowhere in the literature do we see the word 'marriage'. The terminology used is 'couple relationships', which is inclusive of marriage, cohabiting and same-sex relationships. Many styles of relationships exist in our society. Our family law system seems to be moving towards cohabitation or 'de facto relationships' being given similar rights to marriage, with one consequence being that women and children are protected after separation, regardless of the form of the union.

When Australian practitioners work with clients with relationship problems they may not even know if the couple is married or not. Unless the couple want to discuss issues relating to cohabitation versus marriage, or unless direct questions about the legal status of their relationship are

asked, the relevant issues are not about which is the better relationship, marriage or cohabitation, but rather how to help couples maintain or enhance their relationships (whether same-sex or heterosexual), and prevent the distress that relationship breakdown causes them, their children, extended family, community and society.

Our endeavours are to help couples resolve or manage their problems and stay on track together 'for better or for worse, 'till death us do part', or if the problems are insurmountable, to help them separate with the least possible adverse effects on the partners, their children and extended family. Researchers such as Bradbury and Karney (2004), provide us with information about the importance of positive emotions, in particular affection, humor and interest/curiosity, in counteracting the negative effects of poor problem-solving on relationships. Gottman's research (1999) helps us identify behaviours that are deleterious to healthy relationships, and those important to maintaining connection and love. This and similar research informs clinical practice. Other than an interest in social change for its own sake, it is the quality of the relationships that remains our focus. As Parker (2005) points out we need in-depth Australian research to determine what

the Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP) and other similar government programs.

However, there is one factor above all that has assumed prominence in more recent debates and adds a layer of complexity to discussions about the role of marriage and family life. This relates to the consistent finding that children raised by two happily married and contented parents have the best chance of developing into competent adults (Amato, 2004, p.962). However, it needs to be stated clearly that merely decreasing the rate of divorce (as advocated by some groups engaged in these debates) is not enough (Amato, 2004, p.964). Researchers are also clear in their assertion that children raised in families by married parents experiencing acrimonious conflict are also at risk. Restricting access to divorce may not be in the best interests of children (Amato, 2004, p.964) whereas increasing the quality of relationships – marital and non-marital – appears to hold the most hope of benefiting a majority of children. Furthermore, as Parker points out in her analysis, US researchers agree that attention to relationship quality is needed. However, related issues such as affordable housing, access to employment, affordable child care, dealing with poverty, substance abuse and domestic violence and abuse should also be part of an overall strategy to support marriage and family life. In a time when people are increasingly becoming disconnected from their communities and their kin networks, building connections for individuals is also an important part of social policy planning.

Conclusion

How one views the future of marriage and family life in Australia is, in some respects, like the 'glass half empty; half full' distinction. What is clear is that marriage and family life are becoming more complex social phenomena as individuals seek to develop meaningful intimate relationships in the midst of significant social and economic change and at a time when individual rights and freedom of choice are important cultural values. Current policy debates are informed by both 'marriage decline' and 'marriage

marriage and cohabitation *means* to people, and how it influences their choice, and long-term relationship outcomes. In our day-to-day work however, clinicians generally are not so interested in the deinstitutionalisation of marriage, (Cherlin, 2004) but rather in the intervention strategies needed to help people make the most of their lives and relationships, including those who choose to marry.

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resiliency' perspectives, although these are not often fully articulated nor subject to critical public scrutiny.

What is essential in these times is to *have* the debate about the role of marriage in Australia. Without it, it is unlikely that we will be able to develop programs for individuals, families and children which are focused on prevention and early intervention and that go some way to answering the critical questions of 'what are we trying to prevent?' and 'what does early intervention mean in this context?'

The other challenge that we face in the Australian context is the moral imperative to accommodate diversity and to transform services so that all persons are equally enabled and motivated to learn and feel supported and able to learn about marriage and family relationships at what ever their life stage. In other words we need to establish services that work to establish inclusion, enhance meaning and engender competence (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg 1995), as a means of building a culture that is genuinely supportive of family life in Australia.

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