

# **Family Relationships in Australia: The Conservative-Liberal-Radical Debate**

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**Abstract** There have been considerable changes in the family in Australia in the past 30 years. These changes are examined within a political framework of a social debate between conservatives, liberals and radicals. It is argued that, in general, Australia has taken the liberal viewpoint through which greater autonomy is provided to individuals to determine their own individual and intimate lives. In some instances, the state has provided financial and legislative support for this process. There has been growth in cohabiting unions, divorce, delayed marriage and childbearing, lone parent families, increased childlessness, and higher percentages of children born outside of marriage. These can all be seen as social experiments that the society has been prepared to tolerate as people seek their own solutions between their conflicting needs for autonomy, intimacy and social and economic participation.

## **1. On Definitions**

For official statistical purposes, a family in Australia is defined as two or more persons, one of whom is at least 15 years of age, who are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step, or fostering, and who are usually residing in the same household (McEwin 1998, 16).

In everyday language, we use the word “family” in ways that are not consistent with this statistical definition. The most obvious way that our everyday concept of the family differs from the statistical definition is that almost all of us frequently refer to people living in other households as members of our family. If we are adult, our siblings, our parents, our grandparents, and our children would often be described as “family” even though they live elsewhere. If we are a child, then we are likely to see our grandparents, our parent or sibling who lives elsewhere, and even our cousins and aunts and uncles as family. In some uses of the word, we refer to our in-laws as “family” but at other times they will be “your family.” On more ceremonial occasions, such as weddings and funerals, family might be used in a much broader sense to include cousins, uncles, and aunts. The widespread interest in genealogy has extended the concept of family in other directions, most notably, to an ancestor and his or her descendants. The

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people we consider as family in everyday terms vary according to the purpose and to our life cycle stage. Co-residence is just one of several criteria we may employ in making use of the word “family.” Other criteria include our personal circumstances, cultural norms, the nature of the relationship that we have with related persons (closeness, sense of obligation, etc.), and the context.

On the other hand, we might not use the word “family” to describe situations that are considered a family in the official statistical definition. Two sisters sharing a household might not describe themselves as “a family.” Even a couple with no children might not in conversation refer to their household unit as “my family.” In popular parlance, there is a sense in which “family” is something more than two people of the one generation in the one household.

The statistical definition is limited because it requires co-residence. It is also limited because it is static whereas “family” is dynamic. The people we consider as members of our family change as our circumstances change. We are continually adding and subtracting people to the conception of family that we use for different purposes as we move through life. Family type in the statistical definition is a structural type. We live in one-parent families, two-parent families, couple families, or “other” families. More precisely, these are forms of living arrangement rather than forms of “family.” For example, most children who live in a one-parent family have another parent living elsewhere whom they would describe as part of their family. Thus, it seems more appropriate to describe “family” in terms of the changing nature of relationships between people that can be considered to be “family” relationships. This implies a more functional approach to the consideration of families in contrast to the structural approach used in the statistical definition.

## **2. On Theories**

My approach to the family has been classified by sociologist Gilding (1997, 37, 254) as neofunctionalist and liberal. As evidence, he quotes me as follows: “As society changes, the lives of individuals and families will also change. The centrality of family relationships, however, will remain because the family will always be the place in which most people find the care and intimacy that is part of their being” (McDonald 1995, 65). Gilding portrays the liberal, neofunctional approach in this way:

The liberal position is comfortable with the family as a social institution which changes over time. It does not hark back to a glorious past, when life was simpler and people kinder. Nor does it insist upon a narrow definition of family. On the contrary, liberals acknowledge the enduring importance of long-term relationships and children, and the changing meanings attached

to these relationships. The account is consistent with the fact that most Australians in the 1990s nominate the family as the most important aspect of their lives. In close connection, Australians also define families in more diverse ways than was once the case. (1997, 254)

Gilding describes two other theoretical perspectives, the conservative and the radical. The conservative view is reflected in the following quotation:

It is simply false to argue that there is no relatively fixed definition of "family." The human record, honestly confronted, shows that the family is a natural, universal, and irreplaceable community rooted in human nature. The "family" in all ages and in all corners of the globe can be defined as a man and a woman bonded together through a socially-approved covenant of marriage to regulate sexuality, to bear, raise, and protect children, to provide mutual care and protection, to create a small home economy, and to maintain loyalty and continuity between the generations, those going before and those coming after. (Carlson 1996, 8)

Although not stated in this definition, the conservative approach also normally specifies rigid role segregation of husbands and wives, with husbands being responsible for income earning and wives for the care of children and for household maintenance (Bogle 1996). Conservatives see the family as being in a state of decline because, based on the statistical definition, a much smaller percentage of people today live in the conservative form of family than was the case at the beginning of the 1970s. In 1974, approximately 40% of Australians lived in married couple families with dependent children where the husband was in the labor force and the wife was not in the labor force. In 1998, the equivalent figure was about 13% (derived from ABS 1976 and ABS 1998).

In the radical perspective, the family is not about intimacy and caring but about power, oppression, abuse, and conflict. The family is seen as changing, but the changes are very slow in regard to the establishment of equal and cooperative forms of family relationships. The radical perspective sees the family as rooted in patriarchy. This perspective does not regard change as necessarily heading in one direction, but as chaotic, fragmentary, and uncertain. In the extreme, the radical approach does not mourn the passing of "the family" (Stacey 1993).

In contrast to the United States and Britain, according to Gilding (1997, 254), the liberal position achieved widespread influence in Australia in the 1980s, "marginalising the conservative position in terms of religious fanaticism and 'backward provincialism.'" The liberal position also generally held sway in the official pronouncements from the United Nations during the 1994 International Year of the Family: "Families assume diverse forms and functions from one country to another, and within each national society. These express the diversity of individual preferences and societal conditions" (para. I.3.b, United Nations

Proclamation on the International Year of the Family, 1994). Gilding considers the radical perspective to be the most marginal in public debate in Australia to the extent that “in the 1990s, feminist and gay activists are more likely to frame their critique in liberal terms, upholding the diversity of families” (1997, 256).

Another theoretical theme that crosscuts the conservative-liberal-radical paradigm is the public-private dichotomy. The liberal agenda is one in which private agendas are public in the sense that they should be supported in the public sphere, philosophically, legally, and financially. In the liberal agenda, individual well-being is seen as the end product of a partnership between government, employers, and families. In the conservative agenda, the family is played out in the private sphere but governed by norms and rules determined in the public sphere. The public sphere addresses the family through its agent, the father and husband. The principal roles of government in the conservative agenda are to protect the privacy and the stability of the family and to ensure the economic well-being of the breadwinner. The position of the radical agenda in relation to the public-private dichotomy is less clear. Sometimes, for example, in regard to sexual relationships, the radical stance will be that the state has no role in the private affairs of individuals. At other times, it will call for state recognition of homosexual marriages or for the removal of abusive fathers from their wives and children. Gilding (1997, 256) points out that in some areas such as new reproductive technologies, the conservative and radical agendas have coalesced around the need for state restriction.

In this essay, I consider the main changes that have taken place in the nature of family relationships in Australia since 1970 using the conservative-liberal-radical paradigm. The discussion also examines the public-private dichotomy and, consequently, the role of public policy. I address the two main family relationships: intimate couple relationships and parent-child relationships.

### **3. Intimate Couple Relationships**

By “intimate couple relationships,” I am referring to relationships through which people obtain both sexual and emotional intimacy. Marriage has been the common form of such relationships, but other forms exist. Survey evidence suggests that most people value such relationships and would prefer to be part of one. The conservative perspective specifies marriage as the one and only acceptable form of intimate relationship. Other intimate relationship types are considered inadequate or inappropriate in some way. The liberal perspective emphasizes the individual’s need for such intimacy, but is not necessarily prescriptive about the legal status of the relationship. Intimate relationships imply

trust and commitment and these may be more or less likely in one form of relationship than in another. The conservative claims that trust and commitment are inherent in marriage. On the contrary, some with a radical perspective argue that, because marriage is a well-established form of patriarchy, freely given intimacy and commitment are more likely in forms of relationship other than marriage. The liberal view is that it is the trust and commitment in the relationship that is important, not the form of the relationship.

Consistent with the views of most people, there is a tendency in all three perspectives to favor living in some form of intimate relationship. However, a choice not to be in a relationship, considered to be deviant in the 1950s, is now less an issue for all three perspectives. The conservative may see singleness as an unfortunate but tolerable outcome. The liberal may see singleness as a legitimate choice but not one that would suit most people. The radical might see singleness as the inevitable outcome of a society that does not offer people equality within relationships.

The statistical evidence (Table 1) shows that, in both 1971 and 1998, marriage was the dominant way in which most Australians lived through the central ages of adult life (30–59 years). Nevertheless, there have been substantial changes in

Table 1 Percentage of Australians legally married and not permanently separated, by age and sex, 1971 and 1998

Age Group	Males		Females	
	1971	1998	1971	1998
15–19	1.4	0.2	8.7	0.7
20–24	35.1	5.8	62.0	13.4
25–29	71.5	31.2	84.3	44.3
30–34	82.6	54.8	88.6	63.0
35–39	85.0	65.5	88.8	69.1
40–44	84.8	70.2	87.0	70.9
45–49	84.6	73.1	84.1	72.1
50–54	84.1	75.4	79.2	72.8
55–59	83.1	77.0	72.3	72.2
60–64	80.7	77.8	61.8	68.8
65–69	76.5	77.1	49.7	61.2
70–74	70.4	75.6	36.1	50.8
75–79	62.5	71.8	24.1	37.8
80–84	51.3	64.2	14.0	23.2
85+	35.5	49.0	6.0	10.5

Sources: 1971 *Census of Population and Housing, Demographic Characteristics, Australia*, table 1, Bureau of Census and Statistics Australia; *Marriages and Divorces Australia, 1998*, table 4.3, Australian Bureau of Statistics, catalog no. 3310.0.

Note: The published 1998 percentages for currently married have been adjusted to currently married and living together using proportions married but permanently separated, by age and sex, obtained from the 1996 Census of Population and Housing. It is assumed that the proportion of married persons who were permanently separated was the same in 1998 for each age and sex group as it was in 1996.

the proportions married at both the younger and the older ages.

The relationships studied in an Australian National University (ANU) Negotiating the Life Course Survey, conducted in Australia in 1996–97, included same-sex relationships. The information was obtained by asking people: Are you married or in a relationship? If the answer was yes, the respondent was asked the gender of the partner. Less than 1% (0.9%) of all relationships were same-sex relationships. The 1996 census also sought to determine the proportion of same-sex relationships. The incidence identified by the census was much lower than that found in the Life Course Survey. Until better estimates are obtained, we must conclude that same-sex relationships in which the couple lives together are a very small fraction of all intimate couple relationships.

### **3.1. Intimate Relationships: The Youngest Adult Ages: 20–29 Years**

At the youngest ages (less than 30 years), the drop in the proportion married is massive. In 1971, 62% of women aged 20–24 were married, but in 1998 only 13% were married. This is the result of a powerful movement away from the early marriage pattern that characterized the 1940–70 period. This is not an area of controversy in the family debate. The conservative perspective does not call for a return to early marriage and would tend to support the notion that there is a “proper time to marry” which involves establishment of economic security and emotional maturity. The liberal perspective would strongly support the shift to later marriage on the grounds that years of experience of adulthood prior to marriage provide young people with a better appreciation of the options open to them. In the liberal way of thinking, later marriage provides women with the opportunity to establish themselves in career terms and hence to be in a position to enter marriage on more equal terms. For the radical, later marriage gives young people time to realize for themselves that marriage is patriarchy and that other options may be preferable.

Has the movement away from marriage among young people in their twenties been associated with a burgeoning of other forms of relationships? We can address this question in a static or dynamic way. In the static approach, the living arrangements of 20–29-year-olds at a point in time are examined. Four living arrangement types are shown in Table 2. At a point in time, the proportion that are living together without being married is the smallest of the four possible states. The most prominent state for young people in their twenties is not being in a relationship, followed by marriage and “living apart together” relationships. Thus, from the static viewpoint, the alternative of living together without being married does not appear to be widespread.

The dynamic approach considers people’s experience during their lifetime,

Table 2 Living arrangements of Australian men and women aged 20–29, 1996–1997

Living Arrangement	Males (%)	Females (%)
Not presently in a relationship	44	31
In a relationship but not living together	15	20
Living together but not married	13	16
Married and living together	28	33
Total	100	100

Source: ANU Negotiating the Life Course Survey, 1996–97.

Table 3 Relationship experiences of Australian men and women aged 20–29, 1996–1997

Relationship Experience	Males	Females
All persons:		
% ever married	29	36
% previously married but not now married	2	3
% married now but married more than once	0	1
% who have ever lived together without being married	46	50
Ever married:		
% lived with spouse before first marriage	71	55
% has lived with someone other than a spouse	16	14
Ever remarried:		
% lived with spouse before second marriage	*	*

Source: ANU Negotiating the Life Course Survey, 1996–97.

\* Fewer than 30 respondents.

rather than their circumstances at a point in time. Table 3 shows a selection of measures that indicate the experience of young Australians of various relationship situations. There is little difference between the proportions who are currently married and living with their spouse (Table 2) and the proportions who have ever been married (Table 3). Also, the proportions who have married more than once are very small. That is, breakdown of their own marriage is not an important feature of the lives of 20–29-year-olds. However, the dynamic approach provides a very different perspective to the static approach in relation to the frequency of living together relationships. Almost 50% of all men and women aged 20–29 have lived together without being married, including those who lived together before their marriage. Among those who have married, 71% of men and 55% of women had lived with their spouse before the marriage. Thus, a dynamic approach shows that living together relationships occur much more commonly than we would conclude from the static approach. The implication of this is that living together

relationships are not lasting relationships.

The ANU Negotiating the Life Course Survey shows that about 90% of living together relationships contracted in the late 1980s had been ended by separation or marriage within about 8 years of formation and only 24% were intact after about 4 years (McDonald 1998). Hence, although, in Australia, living together may be a short-term alternative to marriage, it appears not to be an alternative form of permanent relationship. There may be a small number of people whose preference is for a sequence of short-term, nonmarital relationships and a small number who have lasting living together relationships, but, in general, living together in Australia is not an alternative to marriage. Instead, for a high proportion of people, it is an integral part of the process of getting married. This is counter to the standpoint of both conservatives and radicals. Both portray living together as if it were an alternative form of permanent relationship, one seeing it as an inadequate alternative, the other seeing it as a desirable alternative. For the majority who live together before they marry and for whom living together is part of the marriage process, an antiliving together agenda is effectively an antimarriage agenda. Conservatives, therefore, tend to marginalize their message about the importance of marriage by not recognizing that a sizable majority of people enter marriage via a living together relationship.

Those who do not live together before marriage are identified by their ethnicity and their religiosity. People of Mediterranean origin and Asian origin are much less likely to live together before marriage than other groups. For example, only 16% of people whose mother had been born in a Mediterranean country lived together before marriage. Also, the percentage who live together before marriage rises as the level of religiosity falls. For people for whom religion was not at all important in their lives, 80% lived together before marriage. This fell to 33% for those for whom religion was very important in their lives (McDonald 1998). In 1996–97, religion was important or very important in the lives of less than 30% of Australians aged 20–29.

Over the past 30 years, there has been an important change in relationship patterns at this age. The 1996–97 ANU Negotiating the Life Course Survey has shown that, over time, first living together relationships have become more likely to break up than to end in marriage. Facilitated by the availability of reliable methods of birth control, a pattern of young people living together prior to marriage began to be prominent in the 1970s. At that time, most living together relationships led to marriage. More recently, however, these first living together relationships have been more likely to break up than to lead to marriage. The shift to later ages at marriage is both a cause and a consequence of this trend. But the longer marriage is delayed, the less likely it is to occur at all, and, certainly, the proportion of Australians who ever marry has fallen sharply since the early 1970s.



This recent trend presents something of a dilemma for the liberal. If the most desirable end result for most people is marriage, is there a question about a trend in behavior that clearly makes marriage less likely to occur? The trend may sustain the case of the radical that the gender inequality inherent in relationships or the unfavorable nature of institutional structures relevant to young people (employment, housing) leads to fragmentation and uncertainty. The conservative case that people should simply marry without living together is not well supported by this trend. First, as already indicated, most people would not marry at all unless they had lived together beforehand. Second, we could not expect that couples whose living together relationship broke up would have stayed together if they had married without first living together, and the trauma of ending a marriage would have been greater.

### **3.2. Intimate Relationships: Persons Aged 30–39**

The married state was much less common in 1998 than in 1971 for people in their thirties (Table 1 above). This is where the political debate about marriage heats up. The conservatives would prefer to see most people in their thirties in the married state. They would be particularly concerned if people in their thirties were living in some other form of relationship. The radicals would be happier with even lower percentages married and would approve if the shift away from marriage was related to a shift into other, more egalitarian forms of relationship. Liberals are ambivalent and uncertain about the situation. They have a strong sense that being in a relationship is a good thing and, as marriage is by far the most common form of intimate relationship for people in their thirties, perhaps the percentage married ideally should be higher. On the other hand, liberals would be loath to make pronouncements in individual cases and would defend the reasons why people in this age group are not married.

The main alternative to being married in this age group is not being in a relationship at all (Table 4). Only 8% of people were living together without being married and between 3% and 7% were in relationships but not living together.

The dynamic view of the relationships of this age group is shown in Table 5. Marriage breakdown is now a feature of the history of relationships. For example 23% of all women in this age range (26% of all ever married women) have been previously married or married more than once. This is well on the way to the estimated 40% of first marriages that end in divorce. The rise in the rate of divorce took place over a short period of years, mainly in the 1970s. In the past 20 years, there has been little further increase in the divorce rate.

The high incidence of marriage breakdown is abhorred by the conservative. Indeed, reduction of the divorce rate is a rallying cry of the conservative

perspective on the family. The liberal would probably like to see a lower divorce rate, but achieved by means other than making divorce harder to obtain. The liberal would also say that, while it is a good thing to provide supports to marriage so that relationships continue, a high divorce rate is inevitable and we must adjust to this situation. The radical looks upon a high divorce rate as a consequence of all that the radical perspective says is wrong with the institution of marriage, that is, as a justification of the radical position. The debate about marriage breakdown is at the center of the differences between the different perspectives in the conservative-liberal-radical paradigm.

The dynamic view provided in Table 5 also shows that 60% of all 30–39-year-olds have lived with a partner to whom they were not married at some time in their lives. This again is a very different picture to that provided in the static analysis of Table 4. In most cases, respondents later married the person with whom they had lived, but 28% of men and 21% of women in this age group had lived with someone they did not marry.

Table 4 Living arrangements of Australian men and women aged 30–39, 1996–1997

Living Arrangement	Males (%)	Females (%)
Not presently in a relationship	17	14
In a relationship but not living together	7	3
Living together but not married	8	8
Married and living together	68	75
Total	100	100

Source: ANU Negotiating the Life Course Survey, 1996–97.

Table 5 Relationship experiences of Australian men and women aged 30–39, 1996–1997

Relationship Experience	Males	Females
All persons:		
% ever married	76	88
% previously married but not now married	8	13
% married now but married more than once	6	10
% who have ever lived together without being married	60	62
Ever married:		
% lived with spouse before first marriage	52	51
% has lived with someone other than a spouse	28	21
Ever remarried:		
% lived with spouse before second marriage	*	86

Source: ANU Negotiating the Life Course Survey, 1996–97.

\* Fewer than 30 respondents.

### 3.3. Intimate Relationships: Persons Aged 40–54 and 55 and Over

The decline from 1971 to 1998 in the proportion of people who were married and living with their spouse is still quite evident for ages 40–54 but is somewhat less prominent than it was at younger ages (Table 1 above). Again, the main alternative living arrangement was not being in a relationship. Other alternatives accounted for only small fractions of people (Table 6).

The dynamic view (Table 7) shows that very high proportions of this age group were married at some time.<sup>1</sup> These percentages are much higher than the levels reached by older cohorts. On the other hand, 33% of all women in this age

Table 6 Living arrangements of Australian men and women aged 40–54, 1996–1997

Living Arrangement	Males (%)	Females (%)
Not presently in a relationship	14	17
In a relationship but not living together	2	2
Living together but not married	4	7
Married and living together	80	74
Total	100	100

Source: ANU Negotiating the Life Course Survey, 1996–97.

Table 7 Relationship experiences of Australian men and women aged 40–54, 1996–1997

Relationship Experience	Males	Females
All persons:		
% ever married	93	95
% previously married but not now married	13	21
% married now but married more than once	10	13
% who have ever lived together without being married	48	40
Ever married:		
% lived with spouse before first marriage	33	23
% has lived with someone other than a spouse	22	13
Ever remarried:		
% lived with spouse before second marriage	68	78

Source: ANU Negotiating the Life Course Survey, 1996–97.

<sup>1</sup> The percentages ever married in the survey are a little higher than those recorded at the 1996 census. The equivalent percentages ever married in this age range from the 1996 census were 90% for men and 94% for women.

range were either previously married or married more than once. Hence, while those with a conservative perspective would approve of the extent to which this cohort has married, divorce is again the worrying feature for the conservative. The dynamic view given by Table 7 also shows that almost half the men in this age group and 40% of the women had lived with a partner outside marriage. Almost 70% of men and 78% of women in this age group who had remarried had lived with their spouse before the marriage. Again, if remarriage is desirable, then the conservative must expect that people will live together before they marry again.

In contrast to the younger age groups, people aged 60 and over, particularly women, were much more likely to be married in 1998 than they were in 1971 (Table 1 above). This change is due both to an increase in the prominence of marriage after about 1940 and to improved rates of old age survival in the past 25 years. These are not changes that would figure highly in the debate about families, but, given that spouses are the first carers in the society, this trend has important and positive implications for aged care.

#### **4. The Parent-Child Relationship**

The relationship between parents and children has changed in many ways since the 1970s. The three main changes have been that children are now much more likely to be born outside marriage, the relationship between the child's parents is much more likely to have been ended, and the mother of the child is much more likely to be in the labor force. All of these changes run strongly counter to the conservative perspective on families. The conservative places heavy emphasis on the situation in which children are raised. The conservative ideal is that children are raised in a marriage of both the natural parents of the child where the mother of the child is not in paid employment. The liberal also would express a preference that children grow up with both their natural parents, but that this ideal often will not be possible. For the benefit of children whose parents live apart, the liberal will call for support for single-parent families and social tolerance for those who are in this situation. The conservative sees such support and tolerance as incentives for parents to end their relationships. The conservative would prefer to see divorce made much more difficult for those who have the care of children. Likewise, where a child is born outside marriage, the conservative sees social support for mothers in this situation as stimulating such behavior. The liberal takes the view that children should be supported irrespective of the way in which they were born. The radical perspective is that any person who has a child has a right to social support for that child and for the relationship between the parent and the child. It is the parent-child relationship that is paramount for the radical, not the relationship between the child's parents.

The liberal perspective strongly supports increased levels of gender equity in families. Recognizing that young women are now provided with educational and employment opportunities that are equivalent to those of young men, the liberal case argues that it is incumbent on the state to support and facilitate the employment of mothers in the paid labor market. This involves initiatives such as provision of support for child care and for working conditions that more readily enable parents to combine work and childrearing. The conservative sees the employment of mothers as the root cause of social problems related to children and young people. The mother at home is able to provide much greater time and much greater care to her children than a mother who is working. A child with a full-time mother feels that he or she is a valued child. Full-time care by the mother is valued at all ages of the child, but especially when the child has not yet commenced school. Governments in Australia, in recognition of the chasm between the views of liberals and conservatives, have attempted to please both through the provision of "choice." Maximum government benefits now flow on one hand to mothers whose work attachment is highest and on the other hand to mothers whose work attachment is lowest, i.e., to the extremes. When maximum benefits are provided at the extremes, disincentives are created as we move away from the extremes and toward the center.

In relation to work choices for parents, in 1998, 6% of dependent children in couple families and 58% of dependent children in single-parent families had no parent employed (ABS 1999).

#### 4.1. The Parentage of Children

In June 1996 the proportions of Australian children who were living with both their natural parents was 85% for 0–4-year-olds, 79% for 5–9-year-olds, and 73% for 10–14-year-olds. Among those not living with both natural parents, by far the majority lived with only their mother in a one-parent family. Hence, few Australian children did not live with their mother and the sizable majority lived with both their natural parents. The family type of children in the ages 0–11 is shown in Table 8.

Table 8 Family type of Australian children, 1997

Age of Child	Couple Family (%)	One-Parent Family (%)	Total (%)
0–2	85.3	14.7	100.0
3–4	82.7	17.3	100.0
5–11	80.7	19.3	100.0
12–14	80.8	19.2	100.0

Source: ABS (1999, 22).

One-parent families generally come into being in one of four ways: divorce or separation from a marriage, widowhood, separation from a living together relationship, and birth to a woman who is not in a relationship. Except for widowhood which has become increasingly less common, all of these paths to single parenthood have become more common since the 1970s. As a consequence, the incidence of one-parent families has been increasing. Of all families with dependent children in 1998, 21.5% had one parent. This compares with 16.6% in 1991, 14.6% in 1986, 13.2% in 1981, and 9.2% in 1974. In 1998, in 89% of all one-parent families with dependent children, the parent was a woman, almost always the mother of the children. The percentage of one-parent families that are female-headed has not changed much during the past 20 years and, if anything, appears to be increasing (McDonald 1995; ABS 1999).

The registered marital status of single parents in 1997 shows that 62% were separated or divorced from a marriage, 31% had never married, and 7% were widowed (ABS 1999, 23). A high proportion of those who never married would have had their children as part of a living together relationship, and the family became a one-parent family because the living together relationship broke down. Also, some of the births to single parents who were separated or divorced from a marriage or widowed may have occurred outside the marriage. The proportion of all births that were births to women who were unmarried (ex-nuptial births) increased from 9% in 1971 to 28% in 1997. However, the paternity of the child was acknowledged on the child's birth registration for 85% of ex-nuptial births in 1997. Overall, paternity was not acknowledged for only 4% of all births. Evidence from the ANU Negotiating the Life Course Survey shows that, for 74% of ex-nuptial births in the 1990s, the parents of the child were living together at the time of the birth; in a further 8% of cases, the parents had lived together before or after the birth of the child. Thus, the parents of the child had neither married nor lived together for 18% of ex-nuptial births constituting only 5% of all births, virtually the same as the percentage of births where the father was not acknowledged. Ex-nuptial births are often associated with teenagers in the public mind. In fact, less than 1 in 6 of all ex-nuptial births in 1997 were to mothers in their teens.

In summary, almost all Australian children live with their mother and the sizable majority live with both of their natural parents. One-parent families have been increasing mainly because of marriage breakdown and the breakdown of living together relationships, but the father is acknowledged on the birth record for all but 4% of the children. Among those children who were not living with their natural father, again a sizable majority had contact with their father. For children under the age of 5 who had a parent living elsewhere, 73% had contact with that parent. For those aged 5–11, this percentage fell to 63% (ABS 1999, 28).

These findings suggest that conservative and radical pronouncements of the demise of the Western family, based on the situation of children, are premature, at least in Australia. There is support here for the liberal case that assistance should be provided to help couples stay together but that the breakdown of some families is inevitable, and so, in most cases, parenting relationships should be fostered for the minority of children whose parents do not live together.

## **4.2. Labor Force Participation of Parents**

### **4.2.1. General Considerations**

The proportion of mothers in the labor force rose from the 1970s to the 1990s from about 25% to 50% for mothers whose youngest child was aged 0–4 and from about 30% to 70% where the youngest child was aged 5–9. Much of the increased participation of mothers was in the form of part-time work, and this form of involvement expanded rapidly in the 1980s.

Besides having an effect on the number of children that women have, postponement of the birth of the first child also fundamentally changes the labor force experience of young women. The longer that the first birth is postponed, the higher is the level of workforce experience gained prior to the birth of the first child. Obtaining qualifications and workforce experience are the two most important means of human capital formation. In the 1950s and 1960s, when the age at first birth was low, women had little experience of the labor market before they had their first child. Most were essentially beginning their careers when they returned to the labor force after having children. Without experience and with mainly part-time return to the workplace, the chances of establishment in their careers were lessened. The only advantage they had was that almost all other women were in the same situation. Few women had no children and few had only one child.

Today the situation is very different. Most women, before having their first child, have worked full-time for several years and most have established themselves in some form of career. In 1998, 92% of women aged less than 35 who had a partner but no children were in the labor force. Of those who were employed, 82% were employed full-time (ABS 1998). This changed experience of young women has three important effects. First, it means that women have more to lose if they lose their attachment to the labor force through having children. Second, because they have a greater incentive to return to the labor force, they are likely to do so more quickly than was the case in previous generations. Third, because they have a much higher level of human capital than previous generations, they are more readily employable than mothers of earlier generations. In addition, those who return after childbearing now compete with a

higher proportion of women who have had no children.

From observation of women's labor market participation in relation to the number of children they have, it is possible to calculate the loss of lifetime earnings that a woman experiences because of the birth of a child. This was done by Beggs and Chapman (1988) using the 1986 ANU Family Survey and by Chapman et al. (1999) using the 1997 ANU Negotiating the Life Course Survey. This research shows that the largest part of lost earnings is due to the birth of the first child. Losses related to subsequent births are considerably lower. However, by comparing the results of the two studies, Chapman et al. found that the loss of earnings related to the birth of the first child dropped substantially between the two surveys. In 1997 dollars, the lifetime earnings lost through having the first child for women who had completed high school fell from \$435,000 in 1986 to \$200,000 in 1997. This indicates that the greater level of attachment to the labor force that today's young women gain before they have their first child enhances their lifetime earnings through greater attachment and higher earnings after they return to the labor force.

From the perspective of gender equity, it is worth noting that the lifetime loss of earnings for men who have children is less than zero. That is, men who have children actually have higher lifetime earnings than those who do not have children. The fact that this is a very different story to that of women who have children confirms the emphasis taken in this essay on the changing employment patterns of mothers rather than of fathers. At the same time, with rising expectations and increased insecurity of male employment, employment of mothers provides both additional family income in the good times and a hedge against unemployment of fathers in the bad times. Most young couples today see two incomes as being necessary to maintain the lifestyle to which they aspire. That two incomes are required in today's environment is also indicated by the recent expansion of tax rebates to one-income families with children less than 5 years old.

#### **4.2.2. Employment Circumstances of Mothers According to the Number and Ages of Their Children**

Decisions about the timing and number of children are much more likely to be influenced by labor market considerations when women have developed a higher level of attachment to the labor force. It is important therefore to consider changes in the employment circumstances of mothers with varying numbers and ages of children. The following discussion is based on analysis of the 1% sample files from the 1986, 1991, and 1996 Australian Censuses.

Among couple families with one child, the percentage of mothers employed was around 25% for those whose child was less than 1 year old and there was



Table 9 Employment of Australian mothers in couple families according to the number and ages of their children, 1986, 1991, and 1996

Ages of Children	Percentage with Mother Employed at Least 1 Hour per Week <sup>a</sup>		
	1986	1991	1996
Couple families with 1 child			
0	24	27	28
1-2	42	53	50
3-5 <sup>b</sup>	48	55	62
Primary school	56	60	63
Secondary school+	60	66	69
Couple families with 2 children			
0 and 1-2	14	28	22
0 and 3-5 <sup>b</sup>	23	28	24
0 and primary+	*	31	27
Both 1-2 or 1-2 and 3-5 <sup>b</sup>	33	41	48
1-2 and primary+	38	45	53
Both 3-5 <sup>b</sup>	37	45	45
3-5 <sup>b</sup> and primary+	45	53	56
Both primary	55	66	65
Primary and secondary+	59	69	67
Both secondary+	63	68	75
Couple families with 3 children			
All preschool	22	27	26
2 preschool and 1 primary+	27	34	33
1 preschool and 2 primary+	37	45	49
All primary	52	54	61
2 primary and 1 secondary+	52	65	64
1 primary and 2 secondary+	60	62	74
All secondary+	63	71	70
Couple families with 4 children			
At least 1 preschool child	29	32	30
All primary+	47	50	52

<sup>a</sup> Mothers less than age 55.

<sup>b</sup> 3-5-year-olds who are not yet in primary school.

\* Denominator is less than 100 mothers.

little change in the percentage employed over the decade (Table 9). When the women had two children, one of which was aged less than 1 year, the picture was much the same. The data thus suggest that it is the age of the youngest child rather than the number of children that determines the employment of the mother when one of the children is a baby. However, among those with a baby, where there was only one child, women were a little more likely to work 25 hours per week or more (about 50% of those employed with one child and 40% of those employed with two children). Although the numbers are small and hence less reliable, the percentages of single parents with a baby who were employed were

Table 10 Employment of Australian mothers in one-parent families according to the number and ages of their children, 1986, 1991, and 1996

Ages of Children	Percentage with Mother Employed at Least 1 Hour per Week <sup>a</sup>		
	1986	1991	1996
One-parent families with 1 child			
0	11	15 <sup>b</sup>	10
1–2	20	23	30
3–5 <sup>c</sup>	33	36	44
Primary school	36	45	52
Secondary school+	52	61	63
One-parent families with 2 children			
Younger is aged 0 <sup>b</sup>	4	17	9
Younger is aged 1–2	14	22	21
Younger is aged 3–5 <sup>c</sup>	28	36	31
Younger is in primary school	39	51	53
Younger is in secondary school+	52	67	71

<sup>a</sup> Mothers less than age 55.

<sup>b</sup> Denominator is less than 100 mothers.

<sup>c</sup> 3–5 year-olds who are not yet in primary school.

much lower than for mothers in couple families with a baby (Table 10).

Among couples with one child, the percentage of mothers who were employed rises as the age of the child rises. In 1991 and 1996, over 50% of women with one child aged 1–2 were employed, with about half of those employed working 25 hours or more per week. Again, when there were two children, the younger of whom was aged 1–2, the employment rate of mothers in 1996 was similar to that for women with one child of this age. That is, again, it was the age of the youngest child that mattered rather than the total number of children. This was not the case in 1986 and 1991, however. The employment rate of women with two children where the younger was aged 1–2 rose sharply across the decade. Furthermore, the proportion of these women employed for 25 hours or more per week also tended to rise in the same period.

In regard to child care, the most important age group of children has been those aged 3–5 who are not yet in school. In one-child families where the child was aged 3–5, the proportion of mothers employed increased significantly across the decade—from 48% in 1986, to 55% in 1991, to 62% in 1996. Similar rises across the decade were evident for those with two children where the younger was aged 3–5. For one-parent families with a child aged 3–5, an increase in employment over the decade was also evident but it was not as great as for couple families. Thus, the targeting of child-care assistance to this group over the decade 1986–96 seems to have had a substantial effect on the employment of

mothers where the youngest child was aged 3–5. Indeed, in 1996, where there was only one child, the employment rate of mothers in couple families was almost the same for those whose child was aged 3–5 as for those with an older child.

This conclusion provides a different impression from that given by Gregory (1999). Gregory concluded that “the rapid expansion of child care places that occurred over the 1991–96 period was associated with a marked decline in the rate of growth of employment of women with dependent children” (p. 14). Two comments can be made. First, it is preferable to examine the employment rate of the mothers with children of the age to which the new child-care places were mainly directed rather than the employment rate of mothers with dependent children of any age. Second, the rate of growth of any percentage will tend to slow down as the percentage gets larger. In these circumstances, it is preferable to look at the absolute shift in the percentage employed rather than the percentage shift in the percentage employed.

Over 60% of couple mothers with one child aged 3–5 worked 25 hours or more per week at all three censuses (63% in 1996). This figure was a little lower where there were two children and the younger was aged 3–5 (54% in 1996), but, again, there was little change in this proportion across the censuses. For single mothers with one child aged 3–5, however, there was a substantial fall in the proportion who were working 25 hours or more per week. The percentage fell from 80% working 25 hours per week or more in 1986 to 56% in 1996. This was not so much because there was a shift among individual women from full-time to part-time work, but rather that the addition to the employment rate during the decade was made up almost entirely of single parents working part-time.

Employment rates of mothers in all categories increased across the decade when all children were of school age. The rises were more substantial, however, for those with somewhat greater difficulties in relation to child care, that is, single mothers and couple mothers with three children. Again, the increase during the decade in out-of-school hours care seems to have been effective in promoting the employment of mothers, especially those with heavier demands.

As the employment rate of women is relatively low when they have a baby irrespective of the numbers and ages of other children, the timing of births determines whether women have one longer interval out of the labor force (short intervals between births) or a succession of periods in and out of the labor force as they have each successive birth (longer intervals between births). An investigation of women’s preferences and behavior in this regard would be useful. I have examined the ages of the younger siblings of children aged 3–5 (not yet in school with no older siblings) at the 1996 census. This suggests that women are much more likely to fall in the category of one absence from the labor force with the length of the absence being dependent on the number of children.

#### **4.2.3. Future Employment Rates of Mothers and Policy Responses**

Couples and especially women will be making decisions about family formation and about employment within the social and institutional context of a future Australia. Several aspects of that context will influence both decisions about employment and decisions about the number of children that people have.

The first set of social and institutional considerations is changes in attitudes and values. Young women today, before they have commenced having children, have a much stronger attachment to the labor force than was the case for previous generations. They have more to lose by not working. They are more highly educated and have been socialized through education, family, and the workplace to expect to be employed in the paid labor market. Housing mortgages are usually based on an assumption that both parents will be working. There is an indication that young men welcome the additional income that a working partner obtains. In the 1997 ANU Negotiating the Life Course Survey, 71% of men aged less than 30 opposed the notion that it is better for the husband to be the principal breadwinner while the wife takes primary responsibility for the children. Also, young people may have become accustomed to a higher spending lifestyle before their first child was born. Finally, employment rates of mothers of young children are higher in similar countries such as Canada (Peron et al. 1999, 264–69), the United States, and the Nordic countries than they are in Australia. All of these considerations point to an increase in the employment rate of mothers of young children in Australia in the future. On the other hand, there has been little change in the extent to which young men are prepared to share household work, and this will be an obstacle to mothers taking up paid employment (Baxter 1996).

The second set of considerations relates to the labor market. If the economy remains strong, there should be a rising demand for the employment of young mothers because of the skills that they hold as a result of their high skill levels and workforce experience. There are also signs of a tightening of the skilled end of the labor market as the cohorts entering the labor force become smaller. The advance of technology and the growth of the service and information sectors also favor the employment of women.

On the other side of the equation, mothers of young children require job security and predictability and family-friendly workplaces. They also need to be able to work for the number of hours that best fits their family responsibilities. If they are unable to return to work part-time or if their employer puts excessive demands on them, then the employment rate of mothers will fall. Alternatively, women will have fewer children. Flexibility of work hours benefits women with young children, but this is not necessarily the case if the flexibility is all in the control of the employer. Twelve-hour shifts or early-morning starts, beneficial to many workers without young children, are less likely to be in the interests of those with young children.

An argument is often made that employers will benefit from family-friendly workplace policies because they will be able to retain or attract the best workers. If this were so, we would expect employers to support new approaches to family-friendly workplaces. The evidence contradicts this. Employer organizations almost always oppose suggested new initiatives to make workplaces more family-friendly.

The third set of factors relates to the economic returns from employment. This includes the wage rate that employed mothers can obtain, the costs of child care, the costs of working including transportation costs, and the changes in entitlements through the tax-transfer system as mothers take on employment. Costs of child care have been increasing in recent years, and the loss of benefits from the tax-transfer system resulting from employment has increased through the introduction of single-income family tax rebates. The costs of child care and the single-income family tax rebate provide an incentive for the father to work more hours than he does at present and for the mother not to work. For example, where the husband works 40 hours per week and the wife none, the couple will be better off if he works an additional 10 hours per week than if she works 10 hours per week. The effect of these changes on employment decisions of mothers is yet to be assessed.

Finally, employment decisions of mothers of young children will be affected by the availability of quality, affordable, and accessible child care. It has been argued above that many parents are unable to obtain inexpensive, informal care through the extended family. This implies that quality, affordable, and accessible child care must be provided through the formal sector. Australia has taken great strides to provide for this type of care over the past 15 years. Progressively, we have been building a system of which we can be justly proud. The argument here would be that we should continue to build the system. While a careful modeling exercise is required, the indications from the analysis in this report are that the demand for child care places, which rose sharply during the 1990s, is likely to level off in the near future.

In summary, Australian women tend to increase their labor force participation as their youngest child ages. Participation rates step up when the child reaches the first and third birthdays. Only a minority are working when the child is younger than 1 year, but a clear majority are working when the youngest is aged 3–4. Part-time work is common. This middle pathway of participation is not supported by current policy in Australia. Under the banner of the provision of choice, present family policy allocates the highest financial rewards to those who take the two most extreme choices—i.e., mothers who spend no time in paid employment while they have young children and mothers who work full time from soon after the birth of their child. Mothers who spend no time in paid employment have benefited from new tax policies that provide tax rebates for single-income families. These advantages have become even greater under the

new tax package that commenced in the year 2000. At the other end of the spectrum, the new child-care benefit arrangements will provide the highest benefits to mothers who work the longest hours. The former Child Care Rebate, available to all working parents, was based on the cost of child care irrespective of the hours worked. Its replacement bases benefits on hours worked, with the maximum benefit flowing to those who work the longest hours. Thus, present policy provides incentives for women to take the extreme choices and, consequently, disincentives to make choices that lie between the extremes. Yet all the evidence of preference and behavior is that most families prefer a middle course.

Policy favors the extreme choices because governments have attempted to accommodate views about the employment of mothers that extend from the conservative to the radical instead of recognizing that the reality of most people's lives lies between the extremes. More specifically, the problem is that policy only distinguishes between those who have children under and over age 5. All families with a child under the age of 5 (or not in primary school) are treated in the same way irrespective of whether their youngest child is aged 6 months or 4 years. Behavior and preference data, however, show that families themselves make stark distinctions between these circumstances. Families prefer to increase their labor force participation and the time that a child is in child care as the child ages from birth to school age. Policy would be more effective if it were more attuned to these preferences. Essentially this means greater emphasis on leave and income support when children are very young (under 1 year), a mixture of income support and child care much like the present child-care system (but more generous) when children are aged 1–2 and universal, and free early childhood education with child care at the beginning and the end of the school day for children who are aged 3–4.

## **5. Discussion**

In the past 30 years in Australia, rules and norms governing family relationships have been liberalized. Much of the change occurred in the 1970s, but it has been sustained since that time with less assault from the conservative agenda than has been the case in the United States and the United Kingdom. In regard to the public-private dichotomy, public support of the liberalized agenda is much more prominent in Australia than in the United States. In Australia, state support takes the following main forms: a liberal divorce law, equal treatment of marriage and living together relationships in most state systems (immigration, social security, taxation, health, child custody), provision of a livable single-parent pension that is not work-tested, abortion free to all through the national health system, state subsidized housing, state subsidized child care, and various provisions that

support the employment of women. At the same time, aspects of the liberalization of family relationships have not extended as far in Australia as they have in the United States. The divorce rate, the labor force participation rate of mothers, and the proportion of children born outside marriage all stand at significantly lower levels in Australia than in the United States.

People's lives can be characterized in three broad spheres: the self, the intimate, and the social (McDonald 1996). In the conservative agenda, rules and norms of behavior are set in the public or social sphere that largely determine how people behave in the intimate sphere of family relationships. The third sphere of life, the self, is expected to conform to these rules and norms. In the radical agenda, autonomy is provided to individuals (the self) to determine their own intimate outcomes free of social rules and norms. The liberal agenda floats between these two. Social changes in the past 30 years have provided more autonomy to individuals to determine their own individual and intimate lives. In other words, conservative social rules and norms have been greatly relaxed, and, indeed, often the state has paid the financial costs of liberalization. However, autonomy provides an increased range of choices such that most people experience conflict between the three broad spheres of life: their social sphere (particularly work), their sphere of self (personal autonomy), and their intimate sphere (couple relationships and parent-child relationships). The need to resolve the conflict between individuation (autonomy) and fusion (intimacy) was the subject of the presidential address to the American Psychological Association by Janet Spencer in 1985 (reported in Stevens-Long and Commons 1992). These conflicts are acute in the transition periods of the life structure such as forming and ending couple relationships and having children. The changes in women's and men's lives over the past 30 years have accentuated the degree of conflict.

The liberal approach to this increased conflict has been to allow people greater flexibility in the ways in which they arrange their relationships and to provide new supports in combining work and family responsibilities. The growth of cohabiting unions, divorce, later marriage, later childbearing, and having children outside of marriage can all be seen as social experiments that the society has been prepared to tolerate as people seek their own solutions to these conflicts. Rather than being driven by conformity to rules and norms, behavior becomes ethical, driven by personal principles (Stevens-Long and Commons 1992, 85). This reliance on ethical behavior, however, is at once the strength and the weakness of this social approach. In Australia, the liberal social experimentation is holding up relatively well and, in general, has community support. But as in the United States and the United Kingdom, the argument is mounted that the financial cost of these social experiments should be borne by those who wish to engage in them rather than by the state. Through this means, changes in family relationships

become caught up in social debate about welfare dependency. And the conservative-liberal-radical debate about the family continues.

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