

Table 5. Relationship experience of men and women aged 30-39 years, 1996/97

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

* Less than 30 respondents

Source: Negotiating the Life Course Survey, 1996/97

Intimate relationships: persons aged 40-54 years and 55 years and over

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

Table 6. Living arrangements of men and women aged 40-54 years, 1996/97

Living arrangement	Males	Females
	%	%
Not presently in a relationship	14	17
In a relationship, but not living together	2	2
Living together, not married	4	7
Married and living together	80	74
TOTAL	100	100

Source: Negotiating the Life Course Survey, 1996/97

The dynamic view (Table 7) shows that very high proportions of this age group have married at some time¹. These percentages are much higher than the levels reached by older cohorts. On the other hand, 33 per cent of all women in this age range are either

¹ 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 per cent for men and 94 per cent for women.

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 per cent of the women have lived with a partner outside marriage. Almost 70 per cent of men and 78 per cent of women in this age group who had remarried, had lived together 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.

Table 7. Relationship experience of men and women aged 40-54 years, 1996/97

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

* Less than 30 respondents

Source: Negotiating the Life Course Survey, 1996/97

In contrast to the younger age groups, people aged 60 years and over, particularly women, were much more likely to be married in 1998 than they were in 1971 (Table 1). 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.

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 labour force. All of these changes run strongly counter to the conservative perspective on families. The conservative perspective of family places very 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 sole 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 behaviour. The liberal takes the view that the child should be supported irrespective of the way in which the child was 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. Recognising 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 upon the state to support and facilitate the employment of mothers in the paid labour 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 child-rearing. 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, that is, to the extremes. When maximum benefits are provided at the extremes, disincentives are created as we move away from the extremes and towards the centre.

In relation to work choices for parents, in 1998, six per cent of dependent children in couple families and 58 per cent of dependent children in sole parent families had no parent employed (ABS 1999).

The parentage of children

In June 1996, the proportions of Australian children who were living with both their natural parents was 85 per cent for 0-4 year-olds, 79 per cent for 5-9 year olds and 73 per cent 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, very few Australian children do not live with their mother and the sizeable majority live with both their natural parents. The family type of children in the ages, 0-11 years, is shown in Table 8.

One-parent families come into being in four main 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 lone 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 per cent were one-parent families. This compares with 16.6 per cent in 1991, 14.6 per cent in 1986, 13.2 per cent in 1981 and 9.2 per cent in 1974. In 1998, in 89 per cent 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 very much during the past 20 years and, if anything, appears to be increasing (McDonald 1995, ABS 1999).

Table 8. Family type of children, Australia, 1997

Age of child	Couple family	One-parent family	Total
	%	%	
0-2 years	85.3	14.7	100.0
3-4 years	82.7	17.3	100.0
5-11 years	80.7	19.3	100.0
12-14 years	80.8	19.2	100.0

Source: ABS 1999: 22.

The registered marital status of lone parents in 1997 shows that 62 per cent were separated or divorced from a marriage, 31 per cent had never married and 7 per cent were widowed (ABS 1999: 23). A high proportion of those who were 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 lone 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 not married (ex-nuptial births) increased from nine per cent in 1971 to 28 per cent in 1997. However, the paternity of the child was acknowledged on the child's birth registration for 85 per cent of ex-nuptial births in 1997. Overall, paternity is not acknowledged for only four per cent of all births. Evidence from the ANU Negotiating the Life Course Survey shows that, for 74 per cent of ex-nuptial births in the 1990s, the parents of the child were living together at the time of the birth and, in a further 8 per cent of cases, the parents had lived together before or after the birth of the child. Thus, the parents of the child have neither married nor lived together for 18 per cent of ex-nuptial births constituting only five per cent of all births, virtually the same as the percentage of births where the father is not acknowledged. Ex-nuptial births are often associated with teenagers in the public mind. In fact, less than one in six 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 sizeable majority live with both 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 four per cent of all children. Among those children who are not living with their natural father, again a sizeable majority have contact with their father. For children under the age of five who had a parent living elsewhere, 73 per cent have contact with that parent. For those aged 5-11 years, this percentage falls to 63 per cent (ABS 1999: 28). These results 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.

Labour force participation of parents

General considerations

The proportion of mothers in the labour force has risen from the 1970s to the 1990s from about 25 per cent to 50 per cent for mothers whose youngest child is aged 0-4 years and from about 30 per cent to 70 per cent where the youngest child is aged 5-9 years. Much of the increased participation of mothers has been in the form of part-time work and this form of involvement expanded rapidly in the 1980s.

Besides having an effect upon the number of children that women have, postponement of the birth of the first child also fundamentally changes the labour force experience of young women. The longer that the first birth is postponed, the higher is the level of work force experience gained prior to the birth of the first child. Obtaining qualifications and work force 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 very little experience of the labour market before they had their first child. Most were essentially beginning their careers when they returned to the labour force after having children. Without experience and with mainly part-time return to the labour force, 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 per cent of women aged less than 35 who had a partner but no children were in the labour force. Of those who were employed, 82 per cent of these women were employed full-time (ABS 1998). This changed experience of young women

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5-11 years	80.7	19.3	100.0

Source: ABS 1999: 22.

has three important effects. First, it means that women have more to lose if they lose their attachment to the labour force through having children. Second, because they have a greater incentive to return to the labour 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 child bearing are now in competition with a higher proportion of women who have had no children.

From observation of women's labour market participation in relation to the number of children that 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 labour 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 labour 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 paper upon 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 life style 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 aged less than five years.

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 labour market considerations when women have developed a higher level of attachment to the labour 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 upon analysis of the one per cent sample files from the 1986, 1991 and 1996 Australian Censuses.

Among couple families with one child, the percentage of mothers employed was around 25 per cent for those whose child was aged less than one year and there was little change in the percentage employed over the decade (Table 9). When the women had two children, one of which was aged less than one year, the picture was very much the same. Thus, the data 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 per cent of those employed with one child and 40 per cent of those employed with two children). While the numbers are small and hence less reliable, the percentages of lone parents with a baby who were employed were 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 per cent of women with one child aged 1-2 years were employed, with about half of those employed working for 25 hours or more per week. Again, when there were two children, the younger of whom was aged 1-2 years, 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 number of the children. However, this was not the case in 1986 and 1991. The employment rate of women with two children where the younger was aged 1-2 years has risen sharply across the decade. Furthermore, the proportion of these women employed for 25 hours or more per week has also tended to rise across the decade.

In regard to child care, the most important age group of children is those aged 3-5 years who are not yet at school. In one-child families where the child was aged 3-5 years, the proportion of mothers employed rose substantially across the decade, from 48 per cent in 1986 to 55 per cent in 1991 and to 62 per cent in 1996. Similar rises across the decade are evident for those with two children where the younger was aged 3-5 years. For one-parent families with a child aged 3-5 years, 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 from 1986 to 1996 seems to have had a substantial effect upon the employment of mothers where the youngest child was aged 3-5 years. 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 years 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' (Gregory 1999: 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 per cent of couple mothers with one child aged 3-5 years worked 25 hours or more per week at all three censuses (63 per cent in 1996). This figure was a little lower where there were two children and the younger was aged 3-5 years (54 per cent in 1996), but, again, there was little change in this proportion across the censuses. For lone mothers with one child aged 3-5 years, however, there was a substantial fall in the proportion who were working 25 hours or more per week. The percentage fell from 80 per cent working

25 hours per week or more in 1986 to 56 per cent 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 lone 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, lone 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.

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

Ages of children	1986	1991	1996
Percentage with mother employed at least one hour per week ^(a)			
Couple families with one child			
0	24	27	28
1-2	42	53	50
3-5*	48	55	62
Primary school	56	60	63
Secondary school+	60	66	69
Couple families with two children			
0 and 1-2	14	28	22
0 and 3-5*	23	28	24
0 and primary+	**	31	27
Both 1-2 or 1-2 and 3-5*	33	41	48
1-2 and primary+	38	45	53
Both 3-5*	37	45	45
3-5* and primary+	45	53	56
Both primary	55	66	65
Primary and secondary+	59	69	67
Both secondary+	63	68	75
Couple families with three children			
All preschool	22	27	26
Two preschool and one primary+	27	34	33
One preschool and two primary+	37	45	49
All primary	52	54	61
Two primary and one secondary+	52	65	64
One primary and two secondary+	60	62	74
All secondary+	63	71	70
Couple families with four children			
At least one preschool child	29	32	30
All primary+	47	50	52

(a) Mothers aged less than 55 years

* 3-5 year-olds who are not yet at primary school

** Denominator is less than 100 mothers

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0 and 1-2	14	28	22
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Both 1-2 or 1-2 and 3-5*	33	41	48
1-2 and primary+	38	45	53
Both 3-5*	37	45	45
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Table 10. Employment of mothers in one-parent families according to the number and ages of their children, 1986, 1991 and 1996

Ages of children	1986	1991	1996
	Percentage with mother employed at least one hour per week ^(a)		
One-parent families with one child			
0	11	15 **	10
1-2	20	23	30
3-5*	33	36	44
Primary school	36	45	52
Secondary school+	52	61	63
One-parent families with two children			
Younger is aged 0**	4	17	9
Younger is aged 1-2	14	22	21
Younger is aged 3-5*	28	36	31
Younger is at primary school	39	51	53
Younger is at secondary school+	52	67	71

(a) Mothers aged less than 55 years

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** Denominator is less than 100 mothers

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 labour force (short intervals between births) or a succession of periods in and out of the labour force as they have each successive birth (longer intervals between births). An investigation of women's preferences and behaviour in this regard would be useful. I have examined the ages of the younger siblings of children aged 3-5 years (not yet at 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 labour force with the length of the absence being dependent upon the number of children.

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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. As discussed above, young women today, before they have commenced having children, have a much stronger attachment to the labour force than was the case for previous generations. They have more to lose by not working. They are more highly educated and have been socialised through education, family and the workplace to expect to be employed in the paid labour 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 Negotiating the Life Course Survey, 71 per cent of men aged less than 30 years were opposed to 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: 264-269), 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 labour 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 labour market as the cohorts entering the labour force become smaller. The advance of technology and the growth of the service and information sectors also favour 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 upon 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 hours 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 is counter to this. Employer organisations 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 transport 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 upon employment decisions of mothers of these changes 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 cheap, 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 make provision 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 modelling 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 labour 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 aged less than one year, but a clear majority are working when the youngest is aged 3-4 years. 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, that is, 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 become even greater under the new tax package that commences 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 behaviour is that most families prefer a middle course.

Policy favours 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 recognising 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 the age of five years. All families with a child under the age of five (or not at primary school) are treated in the same way irrespective of whether their youngest child is aged six months or four years. Behaviour and preference data, however, show that families themselves make very stark distinctions between these circumstances. Families prefer to increase their labour 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 was more attuned to these preferences. Essentially this means greater emphasis on leave and income support when children are very young (under one 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 years and universal, free early childhood education with child care at the beginning and the end of the school day for children who are aged 3-4 years.

Discussion

In the past 30 years in Australia, rules and norms governing family relationships have been liberalised. 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 liberalised agenda is much more prominent in Australia than in the United States. In Australia, state support takes the following main forms: a very 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 sole parent pension that is not work-tested, abortion free to all through the national health system, state subsidised housing, state subsidised child care, and various provisions that support the employment of women. At the same time, aspects of the liberalisation of family relationships have not extended quite so far in Australia as they have in the United States. The divorce rate, the labour 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 characterised in three broad spheres: the self, the intimate and the social (McDonald 1996). In the conservative agenda, rules and norms of behaviour 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 liberalisation. 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 Spence 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 child-bearing 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, behaviour becomes ethical, driven by personal principles (Stevens-Long and Commons, 1992, p.85). This reliance on ethical behaviour, 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. However, 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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