New Families for Changing Times

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THE AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE

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Ultimately all social change involves moral doubt and moral reassessment. … Only by examining and taking stock of what is can we hope to affect what will be. This is our chance to invent and thus to humanize the future.

Suzanne Keller 1986

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Summary

Throughout the Western world, the changing nature of families has led to a highly charged debate. Conservatives view family change as a wholly negative phenomenon and attribute 'family breakdown' to a wider decline in moral values and the unhealthy dominance of selfish individualism over more traditional values of responsibility and obligation. They believe that the primary objective of social policy should be to protect the traditional nuclear family from the forces of change.

By contrast, social progressives reject the notion of family breakdown and argue that we must accept the transition to a new diversity of family forms. They regard the idea of family as an evolving social construct that both transforms and is transformed by wider social changes.

While conservative accounts of family change tend to be simplistic and unhelpful, progressive accounts tend to be dismissive of the extent and implications of the far-reaching changes to family formation in recent decades. People marry later, many choose simply to cohabit, around one third of marriages end in divorce, and single-parent, step and blended families are part of everyday life. Each of these affects the wellbeing of family members, often in complex ways.

On the other hand, it is important not to overstate the changes. The nuclear family remains the model to which most people aspire and the dominant form in practice, with nearly three-quarters of families with children in Australia having both natural parents living together.

Rethinking family change

When commentators talk about how families have changed they usually compare family structures now to those of the 1950s and 1960s. But using the post-war period as a benchmark gives a misleading picture, as the nature, structure and functions of families have undergone sharp changes since the Industrial Revolution, and at any point there has been a multiplicity of family forms.

Western families have always been characterised by diversity, although it is generally agreed that the direction of change has been consistent with the growth of democratic political institutions, capitalist economic relations and cultural secularisation. To illustrate, a century ago in Australia only around 41 per cent of marriages remained intact after 30 years, compared to 53 per cent today. At around the same time, falling family size sparked public panic over the 'decline of the family' and the 'selfishness' of women who were failing their duty to procreate.

The high rates of marriage and fertility after the Second World War were historically anomalous, yet this moment in history was enough for the modern idea of the ideal nuclear family to take root, an ideal soon shattered by the social and cultural revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s. Not only was the ideal rendered obsolete, but the image of the happy nuclear family frequently masked a dark side of oppression, inequality and violence.

It is futile to imagine that the nature and structure of the family can be quarantined from the rapid and far-reaching social changes of the last decades of the twentieth

century. Western societies in the period of late modernity are characterised by an emphasis on personal growth and self-identity, itself a product in part of neo-liberal economic policies. It was, after all, Margaret Thatcher who declared that there is no such thing as society. While conservatives understand this process as one of the growth of selfish individualism, it is more accurately understood as a process of individualisation, one in which the social categories of the past (gender, class, race and so on) no longer serve as the framework for individual behaviour or cultural beliefs.

In the age of individualisation, previous modes of behaviour and expectations have been disembedded from society, and we are now in the process of re-embedding new ways of life in which individuals must invent and live according to their own biographies. With respect to family change, the problem with 'conservative wailers' (as Ulrich Beck calls them) is that they see only the process of disembedding without paying heed to the process of re-embedding.

In this transition, relationships, including marriage, must be reinvented too. The downside of the 'pure relationship', freed from convention, is some instability as partners continuously re-evaluate their relationship. They ask whether it fits with their own life project to realise self-identity. Under these conditions of late modernity, it is no surprise that the institution of marriage has been affected. Smart and Neale (1999) argue that, rather than this process being a sign of moral decline, family relationships have become the site where debates about new moralities are played out. Moral dilemmas that have for too long been obscured by a set of rules governing marriage are now being exposed and debated.

Children and separation

These moral dilemmas are most apparent when families with children separate. The extensive research broadly concludes that, compared with children from intact families, children from separated families perform worse on a range of indicators of wellbeing and development, although, taken as a whole, the extent of the difference is not large.

These studies are usually interpreted to mean that separation causes the problems, but in fact this is not necessarily the case. In their exhaustive review, Pryor and Rodgers (2001) conclude that the problems are due not to separation itself but to a complex interplay of factors before, during and after separation. Separation can be beneficial for children where the family is one of high conflict, especially if violence is present. Studies also show that the effects of separation can be ameliorated if the situation is explained to children. A number of factors after separation can heavily influence the wellbeing of children, including continuing contact with both parents, continuing conflict between parents, reduced income, moving house and repartnering.

Large numbers of children from separated families appear to escape any long-term harmful consequences, although the pervasive public debate about 'family breakdown' leaves many expecting some disaster to befall them later in life.

While the process of separation can contribute to negative outcomes for some children, too much emphasis on harm can encourage simplistic answers to the 'problem of divorce'. The strengths of new family arrangements are overlooked and

there is inadequate understanding of, and support for, the re-embedding of new values and norms by which to conduct family relationships.

It is clear that, irrespective of how families are changing, families still matter intensely to people. Despite claims that relationships have become 'disposable', adults whose marriages break down describe the experience as the most traumatic of their lives. Most parents who separate deeply desire that their children be protected from harm. In the words of one relationship counsellor:

> In my twelve years of counselling separating couples, I have only known of one person that I could honestly say was not trying hard enough.

Families are what families do

In the new way of thinking families are what families do. Rather than trying to ensure that family structure adheres to a preconceived ideal in the hope of greater 'stability', it is better to support all types of families in fulfilling parental functions competently, resolving disputes constructively and ensuring economic viability and community attachment. Rather than insisting that parents stay together for the sake of the children, it would be more useful to encourage parents to attempt to resolve conflict in constructive ways for the sake of the children, preferably within the marriage but, if that is not possible, outside of it.

Instead of accusing parents who separate of abandoning their moral responsibilities, it is much more useful to focus on how adults are negotiating and developing moral criteria on which to act and build relationships. In this respect, we are seeing a transition from an ethic of justice, which centres on rights and duties and thus fault-finding and blame, to an ethic of care, which focuses on responsibilities and relationships in which caring is a moral activity rather than a set of principles.

Studies by Smart and Neale (1999) have found that relinquishing an ethic of justice in favour of an ethic of care is a vital factor in establishing and sustaining successful post-separation arrangements. The key skill in making this difficult adjustment is the ability of parents to self-reflect. In other words, creating positive family environments after separation depends largely on the ability of family members to be moral actors and in particular to understand the distinct roles and needs of their children. Children too are fully capable of adopting an ethic of care and becoming moral philosophers adept at understanding and negotiating the complexities of modern family life.

Far from sacrificing their children in pursuit of their own sexual and personal gratification, for the most part parents are engaged in an intense and difficult project of re-inventing family life in a rapidly changing world. The functions of caring, companionship and nurturing that families have always fulfilled are not being abandoned in 'new families' but continue to be provided within new structures in new forms of relationships consistent with the times.

1.   Introduction

Families in Australia and around the world have been undergoing rapid change. The moral, social, economic and personal implications of this change have been the subject of a highly polarised debate. For those of socially conservative persuasions, family change is viewed as a singularly negative phenomenon, and the primary objective of social policy should be to protect the conventional nuclear family against the forces of change. Highlighting numerous social, economic and moral costs, conservatives view 'family breakdown' as both cause and consequence of a decline in moral values and the unhealthy dominance of selfish individualism over personal responsibility and obligation. The conventional nuclear family is advocated as the best and often the only legitimate environment for the nurturing and development of children and for the conduct of adult sexual relations.

By contrast, those of more socially progressive persuasions reject the focus on 'decline' and 'breakdown', emphasising instead family 'transition' and the legitimacy of diverse family forms. Advocates of this position take issue with the idealised model of the nuclear family, pointing out that much of the change has been a direct reaction against the restrictive, oppressive and unequal aspects of conventional family life. Instead of being a natural institution, 'the family' is regarded as a fluid social construct that both transforms and is transformed by wider institutional and societal phenomena. This often gives rise to a broad definition of the family which accommodates relationships without a formal conjugal bond, that are not cohabiting and that are not limited to heterosexual orientations. The policy approach derived from this perspective is to recognise and support changing family structures in changing times.

While conservative accounts of family change can tend toward simplistic and exaggerated claims, a common failing of progressive accounts is a tendency to dismiss or minimise the negative consequences of family change. This paper aims to transcend the somewhat paralysing pattern of claim and counterclaim that dominates the debate and to shed light on the complex and often confusing issues confronting those wishing to understand and respond to family change.

Social change around marriage, sexual behaviour and other norms governing personal life has been rapid and extensive and is no trivial matter. Adults and children in separating families often find themselves in circumstances for which there is little normative guidance and in which there is a strong likelihood of unhelpful reactions to deep emotional hurt and the complex task of dividing property and caring responsibilities. People will disagree about the meaning of such changes, and legal systems will take time to adapt and develop effective and fair solutions to difficult problems. For those who do not like what they see, there is a tendency to find someone, or something, to blame. For those who feel more positive about the changes, the temptation to obscure legitimate concerns and real problems is strong.

It is unlikely that there will be a widespread or sustained swing back to the conventional nuclear family as the only legitimate form of family life. For the foreseeable future at least, new ways of organising family life are here to stay. While

often dubbed a 'haven in a heartless world', the reality is that families cannot be insulated from the world of which they are a part. Indeed, family change has always been intrinsically linked to broader social changes. As the world undergoes rapid, turbulent and far-reaching transformations in economic, cultural and political spheres, family life cannot be expected to remain static and untouched.

Given this, it remains important to monitor and respond to the pitfalls of family change – particularly where they have a clearly adverse effect on children. To date, the overwhelming emphasis of research and public debate has been on the harms associated with family change. But while there is no doubt that family change comes with costs, it also provides an opportunity to construct new family arrangements that are more in keeping with contemporary conditions and sentiments. If new families are a long-term reality, then it is not only important to document and investigate the 'down-side' to change, but also to understand the full range of experiences associated with change. This includes the lessons that families are learning along the way, especially about how to extend care, love, commitment and mutual respect into post-divorce or non-traditional family arrangements.

In light of this, policy options that seek to minimise costs of family change need to move beyond calling for a return to an idealised past. Recent initiatives in the family policy area include a focus on 'family strengths' in which the major objective is to identify and support families of all types in ways that ensure strong relationships and safe environments for children. While the initial prevention of 'family breakdown' is a key plank of this approach, a 'family strengths' approach can be usefully applied to all types of family arrangements.

This paper demonstrates that post-nuclear family life is by no means universally negative. Indeed, those involved in new family arrangements are actively engaged in a process of discovering and building on the strengths that they find along the way as they negotiate and re-negotiate ways of living together in the absence of strong cultural norms or behavioural guidelines. By paying attention to the ways that these families learn to meet the challenges that face them, instead of simply focusing on the ways that families succumb to the pressures of their upheavals, policy will be better able to ensure that opportunities are maximised for families, whatever their form, to provide quality care for children and other dependents as well as intimacy and companionship for adults.

2. Family change in Australia

What has been happening to Australian families over recent years? This section reviews major trends in demography and family formation and outlines some of the common responses that currently dominate debates about family change.

2.1 Diversity and change

The conventional ideal of family formation in Western societies can be summed up as follows. A young man and a young woman make a decision to become life partners. While still living apart from each other and abstaining from sexual activity, they formally announce their decision to become 'engaged' – that is, they wait out a period of time in which they adjust to the idea of a life partnership and in which plans for the wedding day can be made. They then undergo a formal and legal marriage ceremony, usually of a religious but sometimes of a civil nature, which they enter with the solemn intention to remain together for the rest of their lives. The couple then begin a life together, residing in a home in which they become financial, sexual, social and emotional partners. Once a secure and stable home has been established, the couple will start a family, usually consisting of between two and four children. The parents develop a division of labour which enables the children to be cared for (a task usually allocated to the mother), and the financial well-being of the family unit secured (usually the task of the father), until such time as the children grow up and leave home to pursue their adult lives. The couple then live out the remainder of their years together, involved to various degrees in the lives of their children and grandchildren.

Putting to one side the prevalence of this ideal in the everyday lives of past generations, there is little doubt that this image has, for many years, been the dominant community standard of family formation and has been underpinned by a range of legal structures and cultural norms. But over the past 30 years its legal and cultural dominance has faltered and it is now but one amongst many methods of forming couples and families.

Processes of family formation are now quite diverse. The age at which people marry has risen steadily over the past 30 years and many people openly engage in sexual relationships prior to forming a committed couple relationship. Overall, fewer people are becoming formally married. Couples often cohabit prior to marriage and, in some cases, do so without any intention of formalising their commitment to each other through legal marriage. A smaller group of people choose to marry or form a committed relationship but remain living apart. Many marriages do not survive a life-time, with around one-third of all marriages ending in separation and divorce and a significant proportion of people living in two or three marriages or marriage-like relationships over the course of their lives. As a result, many families have only one parent while step and blended families are common. Many people remain single through all or most of their adult lives. Together with the ageing of the population, this has resulted in a substantial increase in the proportion of people living alone. Long-term relationships are not restricted to heterosexual couples as there is greater visibility and social tolerance for homosexual relationships (although formal marriage for homosexual couples is still not an option). Children may be born in or out of a

formal marriage and, with the aid of reproductive technologies and adoption laws, may be brought up by single parents or homosexual couples.

The following sections look at some of these trends more closely.

2.2 Couple relationships: marriage and divorce

The rise in the rate of divorce over the past two and a half decades is usually the first phenomenon that comes to mind when people think about how families are changing. This is largely because of the dramatic and visible effects of divorce across the population and its impact at the personal level on the lives of many individuals. As Figure 1 shows the rate of divorce was very low during the first half of the 20th century but began to rise during the 1960s. With the introduction of the 1975 *Family Law Act* the rate of divorce underwent a dramatic upward surge. In the decade that followed, however, the rate dropped off dramatically, rising slightly through the early 1990s. From the mid-1990s the trend was generally stable until falling in the last two years of the century.

Figure 1 Crude divorce rates, 1901-2000
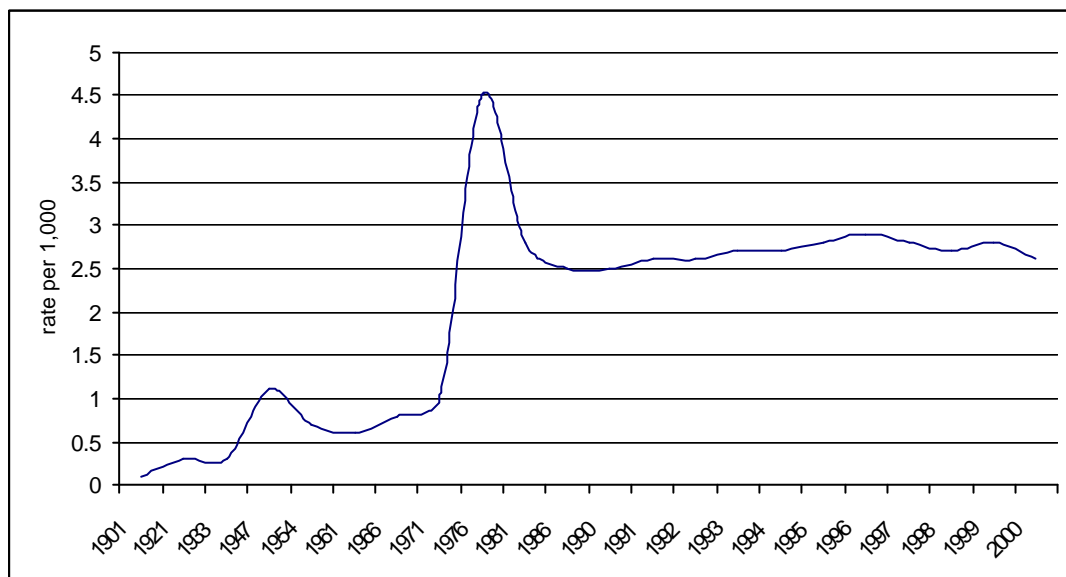
Source: ABS 2000a

However, comparing modern trends in couple relationships to those of the past is somewhat misleading. This is because, although difficult to document, desertion and separation were not uncommon in the past, and many marriages that were intact were nevertheless highly dysfunctional. The difficulty of obtaining divorce, the social stigma attached and the economic dependence of women on male partners all contributed to few of these relationship breakdowns being formalised by divorce. With the introduction of no-fault divorce, reduced stigma attached to divorce and more opportunities for women in paid employment, formalising marriage breakdown through legal divorce became more common. Many divorcees (more men than women) opt to try again in another marriage. Around one-third of all registered marriages are remarriages, mainly involving people who have previously been divorced rather than widowed, and most remarriages are second (rather than third or

subsequent) marriages.[1] However, the rate of remarriage for divorcees has been dropping steadily over the past 15 years for both men (from around 71 per cent to 58 per cent) and women (61 per cent to 49 per cent) (ABS 2000a, p. 89).

However, second marriages are often no more successful than first marriages, with a slightly higher proportion ending in divorce within a shorter period of time. For example, in 1994[2] the median time between marriage and separation for first marriages is nine years whereas for couples who had previously been divorced, the length between marriage and separation was five years (ABS 1999a).

Rising divorce rates have been accompanied by a considerable and sustained fall in marriage rates. From a high of around nine per 1,000 of the population in the early 1970s, the marriage rate has fallen to under six per 1,000 by the year 2000. However, as Figure 2 shows, rather than representing a unique and unprecedented decline, marriage rates have varied considerably over time – especially in times of war and economic recession. In fact, the pre-war marriage rate was not very much higher than it is at present, hitting a low of six marriages per 1,000 of the population during the Great Depression. The strong public impression that currently low rates of marriage are unique is generated by a drop from high peaks in the war and immediate post-war era and again in the early 1970s (Disney and McPherson 1998).

Figure 2 Crude marriage rates, 1900-2000
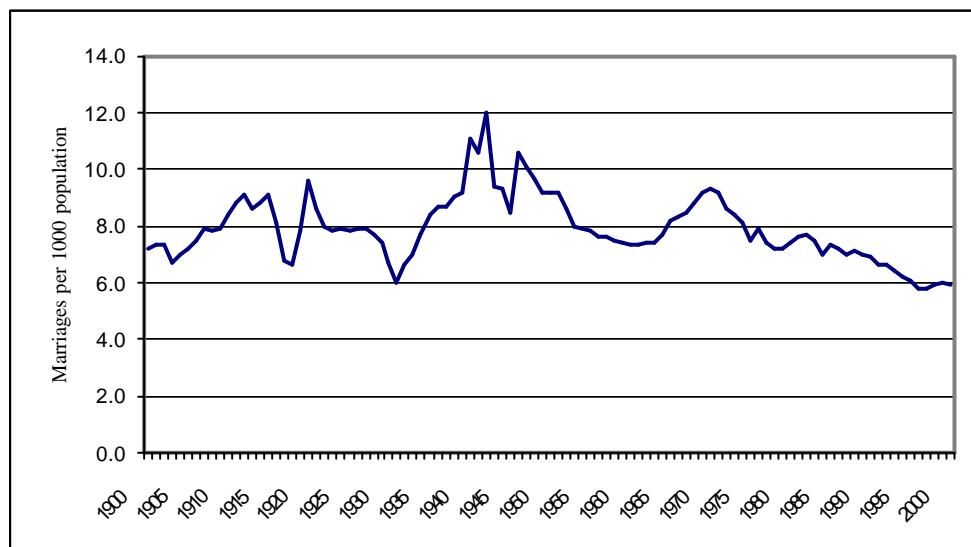
Source: ABS 2000b

Previous falls in the rate of marriage have been largely due to economic recession. In more recent times, however, falls are closely linked to the social, political and cultural changes in Western societies since the late 1960s – particularly the changing role of women in society and the liberalisation of attitudes towards sex.

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[1] In 12 per cent of marriages, both partners had previously divorced; in 18 per cent of marriages, either the bride or groom had previously been divorced and the bride had never previously married; 4 per cent involved a widowed partner. Thirteen per cent of bridegrooms and brides were marrying for the third time, and a further 1 per cent for the fourth time.
[2] The most recently available data.

The age at which people marry for the first time has increased rapidly from the historic lows of the 1960s and 70s. In 1970 the median age at first marriage reached its lowest point in the 20th century, standing at 23.4 for males and 21.1 for females. It is evident from Figure 3 that this low point was the culmination of a long decline in age at first marriage that took place across the 20th century, but that the shift back to older ages of marriage since the 1970s has been sudden and steep.

Figure 3 Median age at first marriage, 1911-2000
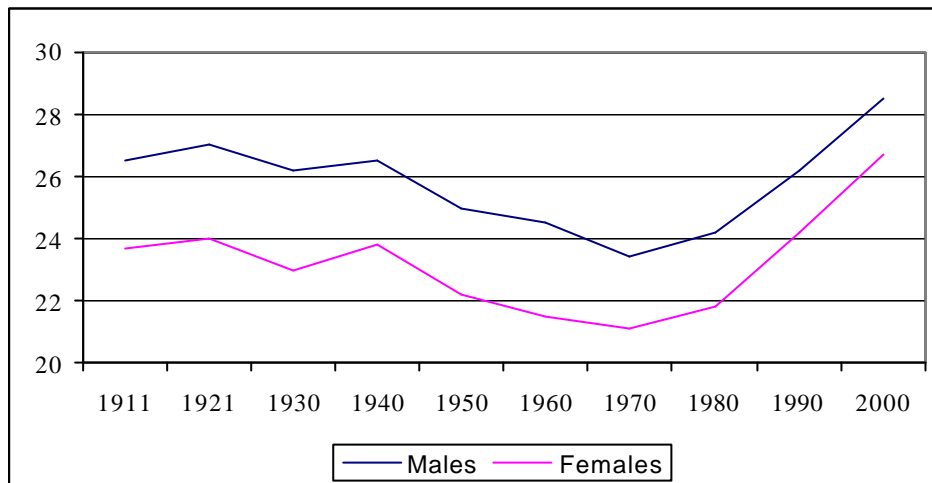
Source: adapted from ABS 2000a, p. 98

The fall in marriage rates is an indication not only of an increase in the proportion of people who remain unpartnered throughout their lives but also of the dramatic rise in de facto relationships in which people form long-term relationships without formally marrying. In 1982 it was estimated that around five per cent of couples were in de facto relationships. By 1991 this figure had risen to eight per cent and by the 1996 census had increased further to around 10 per cent. Projecting trends forward from the 1996 census, the ABS concludes that the proportion of de facto marriages would have continued to increase (ABS 1999b, p. 105).

Over two-thirds of people in de facto relationships had never previously been married. These were generally people under the age of 30. This group is likely to be in the category of people who either cohabit prior to marriage or who consider marriage to be an unnecessary formality. Around one-third have been separated or divorced, and this group is dominated by people between the ages of 40 and 60. A small proportion (around 1.5 per cent) have been widowed (ABS 1999b).

2.3 Families and children

At the start of the 20th century the total fertility rate in Australia was around 3.5 to 4 babies per woman. By 1933, however, the rate fell to 2.1 babies per woman. The rate began to rise once again as the uncertainties of economic depression and war gave way to prosperity and relative stability. By 1961 the fertility rate again peaked at around 3.5, but quickly fell off again with changing social attitudes, availability of contraception and the movement of women into education and paid employment. In 1976 the fertility rate dropped below replacement level and has continued to fall slowly (Hugo 2001). Currently standing at 1.75 births per woman, Australia's fertility

rate is now one of the lowest fertility rates in the world and ranks around the middle of comparable developed countries.

Figure 4 Total fertility rate, 1901-1999
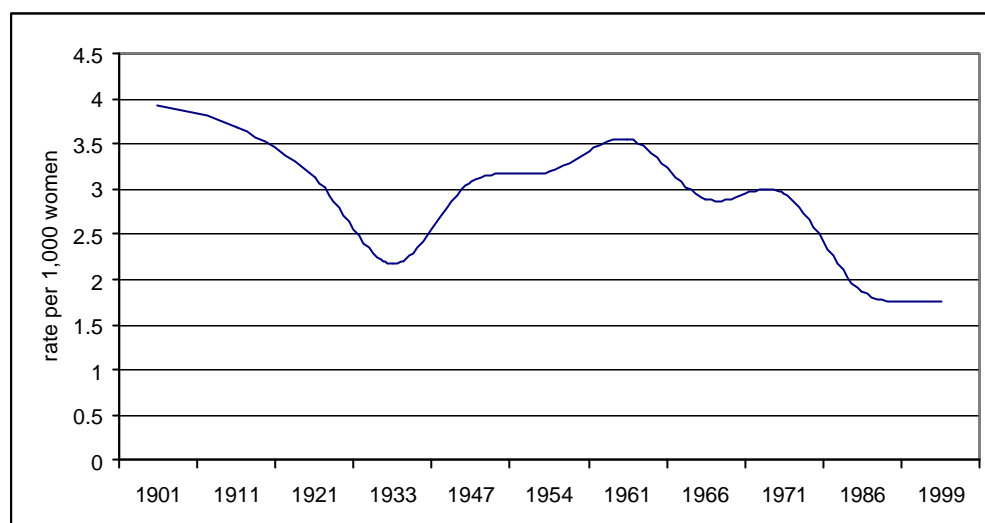
Source: ABS 1999c

The fall in Australia's fertility rate is closely linked to delayed childbearing. In 1979 the median age of first childbearing was 26.5 years. Over the next two decades this rose by over three years to reach 29.8 years in 2000. The median age of fathers (where known) was older still, standing at 32.2 in 2000. The proportion of births to mothers and fathers aged 40 years and above has also increased. For women it has increased from 0.8 per cent in 1979 to 2.5 per cent in 1999 (ABS 1999c) and for men from around 5 per cent in 1980 to 11 per cent in 2000 (ABS 2000a).

 In 1997, 46 per cent of de facto couples had children, compared with 39 per cent in 1992.[3] Indeed, an important change over the past few decades has been the changing character of ex-nuptial births. Where once most ex-nuptial births were to teenage mothers, the rate of teenage motherhood has fallen dramatically over the past two decades. Despite the perception that the post-war years were marked by strong 'family values' and carefully controlled sexual behaviour, especially in the 1950s, the proportion of teenage pregnancies actually rose rapidly over this time (see Figure 5). However, this rate dropped off suddenly and, in 1999 reached its lowest ever rate (ABS 2000c), partly due to the advent of more reliable and available contraception. This has been accompanied by a rise in the proportion of birth certificates on which paternity is acknowledged, from around 47 per cent of all ex-nuptial births in 1976 to 82 per cent in 1993 (ABS 1995).

Despite claims of epidemics, crises and discontinuities in family formation, the nuclear model not only remains the model to which most people aspire, but is also by far the dominant family form in Australia.

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[3] ABS Population, Marriages and Divorces, 'Australia Now'
http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/94713ad445ff1425ca25682000192af2/b95347a43cc81fffca25
6b350010b3fb!OpenDocument

Figure 5 Teenage fertility rate, Australia 1921-1999
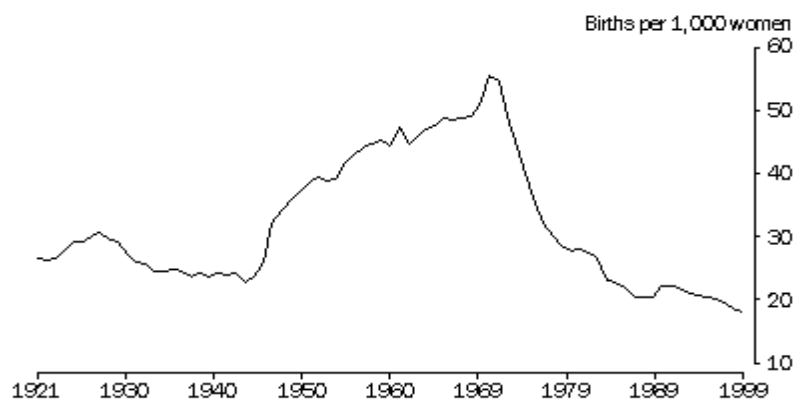
Source: ABS 2000c

The ABS Family Characteristics Survey released in 1998[4] found that there were 2.4 million families in Australia with at least one child in the 0–17 age range (ABS 1997). As shown in Figure 6, the large majority (72 per cent) were living in nuclear families with both natural parents. Around one-fifth (21 per cent) were living in one-parent families and the remaining small minority were living in either step or blended families.[5]

Figure 6 Composition of Australian families with children[a], 1997
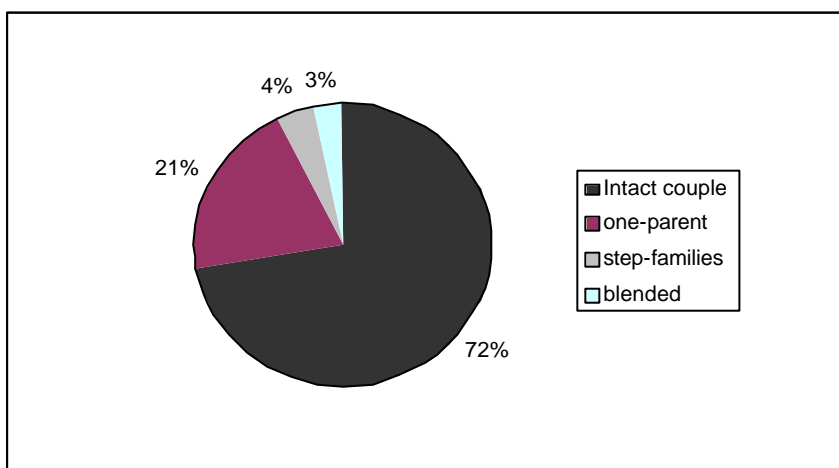
(a) Families with at least one child aged 0-17
Source: ABS 1997, compiled from Table 19

Of the intact couple families, around 90 per cent of parents were in a registered marriage while approximately 10 per cent were in de facto relationships. Eighty-seven per cent of one-parent families were headed by mothers and 13 per cent were lone-father families. Indeed, most children of separated families live with their natural mother either in one-parent families (68 per cent), or in step or blended families (20 per cent). In 1997, 96 per cent of 0-4 year olds, 89 per cent of 5-11 year

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[4] National data regarding family arrangements are not collected regularly. Major sources of data are the ABS Family Characteristics Survey, last conducted in 1997, and the National Census which takes place every five years.
[5] A step family is defined by the ABS as a family in which a lone parent has re-partnered. A blended family is defined as a step family which includes a child by the new relationship.

olds and 82 per cent of 12-17 year olds whose parents had separated were living with their natural mother (see Table 1).

Of children who lived with only one natural parent, 10.5 per cent had no parent reported living elsewhere. Three per cent of families in which children did not live with both natural parents operated shared care arrangements – an arrangement defined by the ABS as one in which each natural parent looked after the child at least 30 per cent of the time (ABS 1997).

Table 1 Children with a natural parent living elsewhere (%), 1997

	Age of child			
	0-4yrs	**5-11yrs**	**12-17yrs**	**Total**
Living with natural mother	95.9	89.2	81.8	87.9
One parent family	88.7	69.7	54.6	68.5
Step-family	5.6	10.7	15.3	11.3
Blended family	1.5	8.8	11.9	8.4
Living with natural father	4.1	10.8	18.2	12.1
One-parent family	3.7	8.7	12.6	9.1
Step-family	-	-	3.7	2.0
Blended family	-	-	1.9	1.1
Total with a natural parent living elsewhere	100 (207 900)	100 (409 800)	100 (360 800)	100 (978 400)

Source: ABS 1999a, p. 42

Forty-two per cent of children who had a natural parent living elsewhere visited this parent at least once a fortnight. Thirty-six per cent visited only once per year or less, although they reported having regular contact by phone or letter.[6] As Table 2 shows, the frequency of visiting is related to the age of the children, with younger children tending to visit non-resident parents more frequently than older children.

Table 2 Frequency of visiting non-resident parents by age of child

Age	Frequent Visiting %	Rare visiting %
0-2yrs	60	28
15-17yrs	31	40

Source: ABS 1997

Although it is commonly believed that separating families usually fight their post-separation arrangements out with the help of solicitors or in the courts, the large majority of child support arrangements are reached privately. According to the ABS survey of families, 82 per cent of separated families reached agreement about the

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[6] Those in which the children were over 2 years old.

financial care of children without using mediation, counselling or legal avenues. Almost 12 per cent of families relied solely on solicitors to make agreements about financial matters, and a further 5.8 per cent used either mediation or a combination of solicitors and mediation to come to agreement.

Table 3 Method of reaching agreement on financial support post-separation

	%
Mediation/counselling only	3.2
Solicitors only	11.6
Both	2.6
Neither	82

Source: ABS 1997

Over half of parents (52 per cent) came to private agreement regarding care and visiting arrangements, with 17 per cent of sole parent families agreeing with the assistance of mediators, counsellors, consultation with lawyers and/or court arrangements. In the case of shared care arrangements, however, there appeared to be a greater need for external assistance with negotiating arrangements, with 41 per cent of such arrangements being made with the assistance of outside help (ABS 1997).

However, it should not be assumed that because parents are able to come to arrangements between themselves, this is a satisfactory or equitable arrangement. Indeed, a large proportion (41 per cent) of separated families do not have any arrangements for financial child support. Of families with a natural parent living elsewhere, 42 per cent received cash-based child support and 16 per cent received in-kind child support. However, this also depends on whether the family is a one-parent or a couple family. Of those who received cash-based child support, 44 per cent were one-parent families compared to 37 per cent of couple families. There are a number of possible reasons for this. Many residential parents may choose to settle for no child support rather than engaging in difficult or protracted negotiations on the matter of money. Some non-residential parents may not be in a financial position to provide child support for reasons of unemployment, imprisonment, illness or disability; others may attempt to evade their responsibilities for child support, still others may trade off on-going child support for immediate financial benefits or assets such as the family home.

2.4 Responses to family change

The depth and breadth of the changes in contemporary family life have sparked widespread concern, with the predominant view that it is a singularly negative development. As such it is usually described in negative terms such as 'family breakdown' and 'family decline'. These concerns are especially strong for those who consider the biological nuclear family – a mother, a father and their biological offspring – to be the normal standard of family formation and the natural environment for human reproduction. According to this view, the nuclear family forms the core unit of all human societies, is the best environment for the conception of children, and for their successful induction and integration into community life. In addition, the joining of heterosexual partners through a formally binding marriage agreement is argued to be the method by which most human societies regulate sexual behaviour to

ensure stable and predictable forms of biological reproduction, socialise children and transmit community mores and norms across generations (Morgan 1995; Muehlenberg 1996).

It follows from this position that deviations from this 'universal' pattern of regulating human societies are, by definition, 'unnatural' and bring about social instability in the regulation of sexuality, reproduction and the intergenerational transmission of moral values. A range of social ills are said to flow from divorce and family breakdown – the most serious of which is the effect of divorce on children. This is considered to be the most serious for moral reasons – because children are the 'innocents' in the situation and are powerless in the face of their parents' decisions; and for practical reasons – because the children grow up psychologically and materially damaged and are thus less likely to become well-functioning adults. Other costs of divorce are also identified, such as the cost to the economy of sole-parenthood due to an increase in welfare recipiency, and the cost to society of large numbers of psychologically damaged and poorly parented children manifesting in high crime rates, drug and substance abuse, and early sexual promiscuity and pregnancy. Alongside this are arguments that marriage itself is a critical influence on wellbeing. People who are married (as opposed to just cohabiting) rate higher across a range of wellbeing measures than people who are not married (whether single or de facto), as do children who come from homes where the parents are married (rather than single or de facto).

The extent to which the various components of this argument are stressed depends on whether those who make it adhere to what might be called 'regressive' (see Box 1) and 'reformist' conservative positions (see Box 2).

Regressive accounts of family change rely principally on moral arguments about permissive attitudes to sexuality, marriage, divorce and personal responsibility. According to regressive conservatives, rising divorce rates, reduced marriage rates, high levels of cohabitation, pre-marital sexual activity and the increasing legitimacy of sole-parent and homosexual families are all evidence that 'the family' is in crisis and undergoing a major moral decline.[7] Although often having a strong religious basis, these arguments are also used by groups that do not have explicit religious foundations, such as socially conservative political organisations, as well as some activist men's rights movements. Empirical evidence regarding the benefits of marriage and the costs of divorce, particularly for children, is used to strengthen, justify and prove the arguments and the 'righteousness' of the moral position. The resulting policy solutions tend to be regressive in nature and call for a return to fault-based divorce, tightening up on the ease of divorce generally and stopping the ever-diversifying definitions of 'family'. They focus to some extent on the need for punishment of the party or parties considered to be at fault in the breakdown of the marriage.[8]

This position was well illustrated by the call of the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, Dr George Pell, for a return to fault-based divorce and the suggestion that a 'divorce tax' should be imposed on divorcing couples with children in order to offset the

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[7] For accounts of these arguments see Maley (1996, 2001); Zubryzcksi (1996); Morgan (1995); Christensen (1991); Muehlenberg (1996); Popenoe (1988); Waite and Gallagher (2001).
[8] See particularly Maley 1996, 2001.

damage that divorce causes to wider society (Pell 2001). According to Archbishop Pell,

> We will have to bite the bullet and commit to supporting the family over and above other ways of life that people may choose. …[T]here are many things this might comprise, including a re-examination of no-fault divorce. … Divorce should be harder and slower to get. … [and] a divorce tax should be paid by couples who have children and separate to help defray the costs divorce forces society to pay (*The Age* 24 August 2001).

Reformist accounts of family change, on the other hand, highlight the empirical evidence regarding the social costs of 'family breakdown' and place concerns about moral dimensions in second place. Less crusading and more oriented towards social policy justifications for reform, solutions focus more on the prevention of family separation through programs designed to 'strengthen families' such as marriage counselling, pre-marriage education, and early relationship education through schools (Wilkinson 1997, 1998; Gillis 1996). This perspective is central to 'Third Way' political programs that are being adopted in many Western countries that seek to reassert and enforce 'responsibilities' as a natural corollary of individual 'rights' (Wilkinson 1998, p. 113).

Box 1. Regressive conservatism

It is simply false to argue that there is no relatively fixed definition of the family. The human record shows that the family is a natural, universal and irreplaceable community, rooted in human nature.

Carlson 1996, p. 8

…there is no society known to anthropology which has not been based on marriage. The stigma attached to illegitimacy represented the fear that the culture could not survive if biological parents were not formally bound to care for their children.

Morgan 1995, back cover.

In the past generation, Australian family life and marriage have undergone a revolution that has left wounds in the lives of thousands of adults and children, and, directly or indirectly, the quality of life for many others. The litany of change and decay has become so familiar that we tolerate horrors that once would have appalled us… When marriage becomes more uncertain…men and women will invest less in it…When the going gets tough, exit is easy and the less devoted will go….We cannot afford to be heedless to what family law is doing to marriage – and to the children who fare better within it than without it.

Barry Maley, *The Age* 8 December 2001

Box 2. Reformist conservatism

… we all recognize the enormous social and emotional toll that family separations take, especially on children…Common sense tells us prevention is better than cure and that keeping families together should be one of our major social objectives … the Australian government is … putting in very substantial resources to help prevent families splitting up in the first place.

Prime Minister John Howard and Senator Jocelyn Newman 2000, p. 5

We cannot say we want a strong and secure society when we ignore its very foundations: family life. This is not about preaching to individuals about their private lives. It is addressing a huge social problem…I am a modern man leading a modern country and this is a modern crisis. Nearly 100,000 teenage pregnancies every year…children growing up without role models they can respect and learn from; more and deeper poverty, more crime, more truancy, more neglect of educational opportunities, and above all, more unhappiness. Every area of this government's policy will be scrutinised to see how it affects family life… every avenue explored to see how we strengthen our families.

UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, *The Guardian* 1 Oct 1997

Although the two perspectives are distinguished by differences in rationale and policy solutions, they share two main beliefs. First, the origin of 'family breakdown' lies, at least in part, in a lack of commitment on the part of adults and an irresponsible attitude towards their children and to society more generally. Secondly, the conventional nuclear family is the preferred model for family life and that 'family diversity' is not a model to which we should aspire. The belief that 'family breakdown' is largely a symptom of the selfishness of separating parents who put their own needs ahead of their children's imagines family breakdown as a 'zero-sum' game; that is, children can only 'lose' if parents 'win' and vice versa. For regressivists, this is a manifestation of a rise in selfish individualism consistent with a broader decline in the moral foundations of society; for example, as one author argues, the ease with which divorce can be obtained 'rewards selfishness, egoism and destructiveness over altruistic commitment' (Morgan, 1995, p. 32). For reformists, it is a manifestation of the imbalancing of rights over obligations and personal responsibility evident in the growth of the welfare state over the course of the past century.

There are two main types of difficulties with the conservative perspective – one conceptual and one methodological. The following two sections deal with each difficulty in turn. Section 3 argues that in conceptualising the family as an institution that is separate from the rest of society and that should be protected from change, conservative accounts of change tend to lack a historical or sociological perspective thus falling into the trap of assuming that current changes deviate from a previously stable past. Section 4 demonstrates that the research evidence on the consequences of divorce is far less straightforward than is often implied by the conservative analysis. Section 5 examines in detail the ways that family life is being re-invented in a rapidly changing world. Section 6 then draws some conclusions.

3.   Rethinking family change

> *[W]hat drives millions of people in all the countries of the globe, seemingly as individuals, but actually following a generally shared dream, to break out of marriage...? Is it a type of 'ego fever' that can be treated by hot compresses of 'us'? Not likely. A new relationship between individual and society is announcing itself here. Communal spirit can no longer be ordained from the top down, but must instead be freed up by questioning [and be]... agreed on, negotiated, justified and experienced*…(Beck 1998, p. 35).

3.1   Private and public issues

As long ago as 1959 the North American sociologist C. Wright Mills famously outlined a distinction between 'private troubles' and 'public issues'. A 'private trouble' is an individual's personal problem that 'has to do with his self and with those limited areas of social life of which he is directly and personally aware.' A public issue, however, 'transcend(s) these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life' and has to do with the 'organization of many such milieux…(which)… overlap and interpenetrate to form the larger structure of social and historical life' (Mills 1959, p. 15). To illustrate this point, Mills says:

> Consider marriage. Inside a marriage a man and a woman may experience personal troubles [a 'private trouble'], but when the divorce rate ... is 250 out of every 1,000 ... this is an indication of a structural issue having to do with the institutions of marriage and the family and other institutions that bear upon them [a 'public issue'] (Mills 1959, p. 16).

In other words, a high divorce rate is not reducible to a large number of individuals with 'private troubles' who independently and coincidentally choose to place their own needs ahead of their children's or those of wider society. Rather, a high divorce rate is a 'public issue' that is both cause and consequence of wider social change. It is a social phenomenon, with roots in deep-seated social, economic, political and cultural change. As Smart and Neale argue,

> … families are changing but the public debate separates these changes from other wider, social transformations and then seeks to admonish family members for their failure to stand still while the conditions that supported specific forms of family organisation in the past are demolished (Smart and Neale 1999, p. 24).

The view that families are 'breaking down' or 'falling apart' can only be understood in relation to what has 'been lost'. Thus, the current panic about what is happening to families in modern times is set against a picture of what 'the family' used to look like – an idea that necessarily implies that in some earlier era families were more stable and harmonious than they are today. Nevertheless, however much some may wish it to be so, there is in fact no stable, ideal traditional family to which we can return. As the following sections will argue, not only was the family model that conservatives wish to restore the product of a particular social and economic era that has passed, but

it is also an idealised view of the past which minimises or ignores the internal strains that have always existed inside family life.

3.2 The family in context

To think of family decline only in the negative makes no more sense than to think only negatively about the decline of feudalism, hereditary monarchies, or dictatorships (Popenoe 1988, p. 9).

Much of the despair over what has been lost in family stability relies on data illustrating trends such as falling rates of marriage, increasing divorce, cohabitation, ex-nuptial births, falling fertility and other facts of the type outlined in Section 2. Generally speaking, these trends are used to indicate how much worse the situation has become over time and they contribute to the sense of alarm that society is undergoing cataclysmic change. This interpretation is usually made possible by the fact that the most consistent data available on family change dates from around the 1950s and this period of time thus has become a benchmark against which trends are assessed.

However, as we have seen, using the immediate post-war era as a benchmark contributes to an exaggerated and misleading impression of recent decline or instability. In fact the notion of a 'traditional' family that consists of a homemaker/mother who is responsible for the care of children and other family members and a breadwinner/father who earns a living for his family in the formal labour market is confined to a discrete and brief historical period (Disney and McPherson 1998; McDonald, 1994).

For many years sociologists, anthropologists and historians have studied and debated the nature and distribution of family forms, functions and arrangements over time. Anthropological debates have been particularly divided on the universality of the nuclear family – debates that can largely be boiled down to a dispute about definitions. In other words, whether the nuclear family can be viewed as universal or not depends entirely on how it is defined. The point of agreement between protagonists is the centrality of parenthood – particularly maternity – and the capacity of societies to stabilise processes of reproduction and socialisation (Keller 1986, p. 521, 522). However, as Keller argues, such broad definitions are not particularly helpful in our current debates about family change:

> All surviving societies have indeed found ways to stabilise the process of reproduction and child care else they would not have survived to tell their tale. But since they differ greatly in how they arrange these matters …, the generalisation does not help us explain the phenomenon, but more nearly explains it away. …. there are as many forms of the family as there are forms of society, some so different from ours that we consider them unnatural and incomprehensible. There are, for example, societies in which couples do not share a household and do not have sole responsibility for their offspring; others in which our domestic unit of husband and wife is divided into two separate units, a conjugal one of biological parents and a brother-sister unit for economic sustenance. There are societies in which children virtually rear each other and societies in which the wise father does not know his own child. All

of these are clearly very different from our twentieth century, industrial-urban conception of the family (Keller 1986, p. 522).

Even within the Western system, the diversity of family forms is considerable. As we shall see, at least two things are clear from the literature on the social history of Western families. First, 'there can be no simple history of *the* Western family … because there is not, nor has there ever been, a single family system' (Anderson 1980, p. 14). Rather, to the extent that the historical record allows us an understanding of times past, it is clear that Western families have always been characterised by diversity: of family forms, functions and attitudes both over time, and at any one point in time (Anderson 1980, p. 14). Second, whatever form, function or attitude that prevails in family systems, these correspond to, and are greatly influenced by, different social, cultural and economic conditions. There is general agreement that the direction of change in Western families has been consistent with the growth of democratic political institutions, capitalist economic systems and secular cultural changes.

Change in Western family forms

Although scholarly debates continue about the exact nature of families in history and of the causes and consequences of change in family life,[9] broad generalisations about the trajectory of change remain useful in identifying large-scale patterns. These not only alert us to the depth and breadth of family change throughout history, but also to the fact that the scope of contemporary change is far from unique.

The broad historic trend in Western family forms has been towards the increasing importance of the 'nuclear family' (co-residing biological parents and children) and an associated decline in importance of wider kinship network and community ties (Gilding 2001, p. 6). This is despite recent evidence that extended family living (especially three-generation living) was far less common in times past than is often assumed (Hareven 1986), and despite the considerable variation in family life according to class, religious belief and other cultural and economic factors (Anderson 1980, pp. 14-15).

The pre-industrial family in Western countries was essentially a community of workers in which all able-bodied members worked together to produce material goods for the entire family unit. Within these structures, although the roles of different household members were clearly defined, family and work were essentially inseparable. Families were an intrinsic part of the community and the notion of the private family realm was largely foreign. While emotional intimacy and interpersonal factors were perfectly possible within pre-modern families, the *raison d'etre* for family formation was social reproduction – the propagation of children for the economic advancement of families and communities.

Although expected to last 'until death do us part', for most marriages this was not a very long time. Analysis of marriages in pre-industrial North America show that marriages lasted an average of 10 years before they were broken by death, and

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[9] See Anderson (1980) for an excellent account of the various debates, inadequacies and inconsistencies of historical scholarship on family life.

between one-third and one-half of all children in American colonial families lost at least one parent before they were 21 years old (Skolnick and Skolnick 1986). A similar situation prevailed in 19th century Australia. According to McDonald, in 1891, due to the death of one partner, only 46 per cent of Australian marriages survived for more than 30 years. Although only one per cent of marriages ended in divorce, it is estimated that approximately 10 per cent of marriages had also broken down, but without formal divorce. Taken together, McDonald argues, these figures indicate that in 1891, only about 41 per cent of marriages would still be intact after 30 years. But the percentage of today's couples who can expect to be together after 30 years is considerably higher than that at 53 per cent[10] (McDonald 1994, 2000).

The pre-industrial cultural ideal of marriage was of a 'formal, wordless kind of love, based on duty, working together, mutual help and sex' (Cancian 1987 cited in Millar Bidwell and Vander Mey 2000, p. 10). Despite the implication of an equal partnership of differentiated roles, patriarchy dominated. On marriage, women became the property of their husbands, were no longer legally considered to be persons separate from their husbands and could not own property, sign contracts or obtain custody of children.

The Industrial Revolution in Western countries brought about sweeping changes to family life. Principal amongst these was the separation of home and work as family members moved out of the domestic economy to earn wages in the formal economy. The predominant move into the paid labour force was of husbands and fathers, while women's roles were increasingly limited to caring work and to 'consumers' rather than 'producers' of material goods.[11] However, women (married and unmarried) and children also left the home to undertake paid work as factory workers, domestic servants or private educators of the rising bourgeois middle classes.

These circumstances coincided with the development of factory legislation limiting the exploitation of female and child labour and the movement for universal and compulsory education for children, and gave rise to the dominant model of the family (or at least the model to which people aspired) which has been termed the 'bourgeois family system' (Lasch 1986) or the 'bourgeois nuclear family' (Popenoe 1988). Families aspired to be sufficiently well off to survive on the income of the 'breadwinner', leaving the mother free to attend to the consumption needs of her family and to invest in the education of their children (Popenoe 1988, p. 75; Hareven 1986, p. 48). This model of the family heralded a clear shift in the function and cultural expectations of marriage and family. The idea that marriage should be founded on feelings of 'romantic love' – what Giddens calls the 'romantic love

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[10] This estimate is based on the fact that 88 per cent of marriages in 1991 had both partners still alive at the 30 year wedding anniversary and by estimating a small percentage for marriage breakdowns that were not formalised by divorce.

[11] This argument is often used to create the impression that such a change heralded the end of domestic labour and that women had little to do in the home. However, this has been compellingly challenged by Schwartz Cowan whose argues that 'before industrialization women fed, clothed and nursed their families by preparing (with the help of their husbands and children) food, clothing and medication. In the post-industrial age, women feed, clothe and nurse their families (without much direct assistance from anyone else) by cooking, cleaning, driving, shopping and waiting. The nature of the work has changed, but the goal is still there and so is the necessity for time-consuming labour' (Schwartz Cowan 1986, p. 69).

complex' (Giddens 1992, p. 58) – displaced previous familial, economic and community foundations for marriage.

Where pre-industrial family life was founded on 'institutional marriage' entailing various *extrinsic* functions and *raisons d'etre* such as production, reproduction and familial advancement (for higher classes), the modern bourgeois family ideal was more concerned with the *intrinsic* functions of marriage such as companionship, life-long love and affection and sexual satisfaction. The modern nuclear family was child-centred and became increasingly 'structurally isolated from the kinship system and from society in general' (Anderson 1980, pp. 49-58). Rather than being part and parcel of broader society, the family came to be viewed as a haven from society – as an 'emotional refuge in a cold and competitive society' (Lasch 1986, p. 43).

In contrast to popular belief that the traditional nuclear family only began its decline in the permissiveness of the mid-to-late 20th century, indications that it was undergoing significant transformation in Western societies were evident a hundred or more years ago. In Australia as elsewhere, social statisticians noted sharp drops in family size and fertility rates during the latter decades of the 19th century. This sparked much public panic about the 'decline' of the family, with public debate focusing on the 'selfishness of women' in refusing their duty as procreators (Gilding 2001, p. 8). There was also widespread expression of concern about the contribution of economic insecurity to the instability of family life, especially in working-class communities (Gilding 2001, pp. 7-8), and governments began to shoulder many of the burdens that were otherwise precariously and unreliably left to families – welfare support for the elderly and disabled, the rise of social insurance schemes and, in Australia particularly, the introduction of a 'living wage'. The feminist movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries also gave women a greater role in public and economic life. The early 1900s, in particular, saw a shift of middle-class married women into the workforce and a distinct easing of sexual regulation that had underpinned the Victorian value system.

By the mid-1900s, after decades of war and economic depression, these trends were undergoing a sharp reversal. In the immediate post-World War II years marriage and birth rates rose, the age of marriage dropped substantially and the divorce rate fell. Explanations for these phenomena abound – including socio-psychological explanations relating to a need for comfort, security and stability in the post-Depression, post-war era; materialist explanations relating to the increased prosperity of the post-war years which 'gave the working classes the opportunity at last to achieve the bourgeois family ideal' (Popenoe 1988, p. 77) and cultural theory explanations based on changes in sentiment (Stone 1977, pp. 118-9; 658).

Whichever explanation one accepts, some conservatives correctly identify a moment in Western history – around two decades in the middle part of the 20th century – when the conventional concept of marriage was in harmony with the prevailing cultural and institutional structure (Maley 2001). However, the apparent stability of marriage and the family during this period is best understood partly as an aberration, and partly as an illusion. It was an aberration in the sense that it was an interruption to processes begun many decades earlier, and an illusion in the sense that these earlier processes had begun to reject the restrictive or oppressive elements of family life. Instead, the movements towards democratisation, the loosening of restrictions on

sexual behaviour, and of women out of the domestic sphere and into public life that had begun in the late 19th century, resumed once again in the 1960s.

From the 1960s onwards, developments in the economy and mode of production (in particular the rise of the service sector labour market) combined with the accelerating popularity of 'second wave' feminism to provide substantial opportunities and incentives for women to participate in formal employment. The tertiary education sector underwent an expansion, and young women and girls were encouraged to continue their studies beyond secondary school. Gradually public pressure and changing public attitudes saw the lifting of bars on the employment of married women and the push for equal pay and sex-neutral awards was increasingly successful,[12] further reducing the barriers to female participation in paid employment. In Australia, the proportion of women in the paid workforce increased from 22 per cent in 1947 to 32 per cent in 1971 (Gilding 1991, pp. 117-18). This was further consolidated in the early to mid 1980s with the introduction of sex discrimination and equal opportunity legislation, with the result that by 1999 women constituted over half of the labour force.

Despite ongoing and apparently stubborn inequality in wages, conditions and security of employment there is little doubt that women's increased participation in paid employment has had a significant effect on family life, as women became less reliant on marriage for their financial security and social status. Together with changing attitudes towards sexuality during the 1960s and '70s, a decriminalisation of abortion around Australia, access to contraception and the growing influence of the women's movement in public policy and Australian society in general, the dependence of the conventional nuclear family form on the exclusion of women from public life has been fundamentally undermined.

The dark side of family life

Despite often being dubbed the 'best form of social welfare yet devised' (Howard and Newman 2000), families regularly fail dismally in this function, instead generating serious social and personal problems for which the only solution is some form of external social welfare service. The image of 'happy families' that dominated cultural aspirations and expressions during the 1950s and early 1960s was, to some extent, an illusion. The image masked a 'dark side' of deep-seated dissatisfaction that could not stay long suppressed and that was out of step with changing cultural conditions. Exposing and rejecting the model of family and society that gave rise to such unsatisfying conditions became a central project of late modern life. Giddens argues that family models of the past contained 'too many oppressive facets … to make them a model for today' (Giddens 1997 p. 167).

At least two inter-related 'oppressive facets' can be identified: the gender inequity on which the conventional, modern nuclear family was founded, and a pervasive seam of violence and abuse.

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[12] In Australia, the Commonwealth and State public services removed the bar on the employment of married women in the mid-1960s and early 1970s and cases for equal pay were successful in 1969 and 1972.

The 'dark side' of women's experience in the family is well established. One hundred and fifty years ago Frederick Engels noted that '(t)he modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed slavery of the wife' (Engels, 1972 [1884], p. 137). Whilst not all would agree with such a blunt evaluation of the bourgeois family model, nor with the historical accuracy of Engels' theory (Stone, 1977, p. 661), it is difficult to dispute that the situation of women within the model constituted a 'serious social flaw' (Popenoe 1988, p. 74). The first-wave feminists, particularly those in the suffrage movement, brought attention to the ways that national economies exploited unpaid female labour and that patriarchal family systems denied women citizenship opportunities. They noted that the separation between the private and public economies that assigned women to the domestic sphere and men to the formal labour market was highly patriarchal and depended heavily on the maintenance of very limited opportunities for women other than marriage and childrearing. The resulting economic dependence of women on male earnings and the concomitant reliance of men on the limitation of women's life choices to unpaid, domestic work heavily determined the quality and scope of family life for women.

The second-wave feminist movement of the 1960s – especially the work of influential feminists such as Friedan (1963), Gavron (1966) and Greer (1970) – highlighted the gap between the popular image of happy, contented homemakers and the realities of women's lives. The growing awareness of domestic violence, sexual assault and the disproportionate prevalence of depression, tranquiliser and alcohol dependence and other mental disorders amongst women united with the new wave of emancipatory politics sweeping Western societies to challenge patriarchal definitions of family life, sexuality, gender roles and personal identity (Hawkes, 1996; Delphy and Leonard 1992, p. 12).

The 'dark side' of children's experience within families has also been exposed over recent decades. The contemporary view of children as requiring protection, love, security and emotional stability above all else is a relatively new conception of childhood and contrasts strongly with the model that prevailed in the traditional, patriarchal nuclear family. The pre-industrial concept of the 'child' as little more than a small adult gave way in the industrial era to the view that childhood was a unique and separate developmental phase. In the 19th and early 20th centuries particularly, the child was viewed as innately evil and having appetites and desires that needed to be controlled through the imposition of strict discipline, punishment and rigid paternal authority (Anderson 1980, p. 60). 'Cruel to be kind' theories of child development abounded and many behaviours that today would be considered intolerable were viewed as necessary for the proper development of citizens in the industrial West (Shorter 1975). The belief in the need for harsh discipline and the soundness of the 'cruel to be kind' philosophy is still commonplace in many families, while high levels of other forms of child abuse – physical, emotional and sexual – are also evident.

There is no doubt that the seam of violence and abuse still runs through Australian families. Although data remain frustratingly unreliable and difficult to compare between jurisdictions,[13] it is currently estimated that between 23 and 30 per cent of

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[13] Accurate estimates of the real incidence of family violence are difficult to obtain for a number of reasons. Survey-based victim reports as well as police or court data will almost certainly underestimate the size of the problem, while rates obtained from self-selected surveys (for example in a

women will experience violence from a male partner and between 6 and 25 per cent of males will experience violence from a female partner over the course of a lifetime (Seth-Purdie 1996; ABS 1996).[14] It is estimated that around one-quarter of children in Australia have witnessed an incident of physical or domestic violence against their mother or stepmother (Indemaur 2001). Around six cases of child abuse per 1,000 children are substantiated annually. During 1999-2000, 8,472 children aged 0-17 were placed on protection orders of whom 44 per cent were below the age of 5 and 14 per cent were less than one year old (AIHW 2000). In addition, between four and six per cent of dependent older people are abused in their homes (Kinnear and Graycar 1999).

Increasing evidence of domestic violence in its various forms has served to undermine 'white picket fence' images of the family sanctuary. Any discussion of the 'instability' of family life, therefore, must take account of the internal instability wrought by violence and abuse.

> Family life is now typically measured in terms of something called 'stability'. Stability is good and instability is bad. But the main, supposedly objective measure of stability (namely divorce) is an exceptionally crude instrument which does not even measure co-residence, let alone the quality of relationships … The existence of violence in households as a measure of 'stability' might yield a completely different picture of how stable married life is (Smart and Neale 1999, p. 29).

3.3   Contemporary social change and family life

Until recently, social and political theory has principally focused on 'macro-phenomena' – such as the world of work, technological change, and economic development – to explain and understand social change. While these themes remain important, it is increasingly necessary to place the family and intimate relationships on centre stage as the depth and breadth of changes in personal life penetrate and alter the character of contemporary society (Smart and Neale 1999, p. 5). However, to do so, it is necessary to re-think the relationship between families and society.

The accounts of family change outlined above represent a view of 'the family' as a somewhat passive institution that reacts and responds to wider structural forces – in other words, changes in the family are a *consequence* of wider change. On the other hand, the conservative accounts of family change outlined in Section 2 tend to understand families and family members as agents who bring about or *cause* broader social changes as a result of their individual decisions. This dichotomy is a manifestation of the classic debate within the social sciences of the role of *structure* versus *agency* – that is, whether social structure or human agency is the primary determinant of social and political conditions. Over the last decade or so, as the

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phone-in), are likely to be overestimates. In addition, Australia is plagued by inconsistencies between States in terms of the way abuse and violence is defined and how the records and statistics are collected (Putt and Higgins 1997; Kinnear 1999).

[14] The estimates for female-to-male violence are the subject of considerable dispute. Some argue (e.g. Coochey 1995) that male victims of female-partner violence are more prevalent than existing data suggest. However, Taft, Hegarty and Flood (2001) argue that violence by men against women remains dominant in partner-based violence whilst men remain at greatest risk of violence from other men.

debate between structure and agency reached somewhat of a stalemate, theorists have attempted to understand the social world not according to an either/or dichotomy but in terms of the dynamic interaction between social structure and human agency. Thus, family change can be viewed as both cause *and* consequence of the confusing and complex series of changes that characterise late modernity.

Individualisation, risk and late modernity

There is broad agreement amongst most observers of contemporary life that we have entered a new epoch of economic and cultural transformation that is at least as significant as the Industrial Revolution. While it is more difficult to agree on exactly how or why societies are changing, or the extent to which such change represents a radical break with the past, the terminology to describe the phenomenon has at least settled on the fact that we are moving, or have already moved, beyond something that once existed. Terms such as post-industrial society, post-modern society, late (or advanced) capitalism, late (or high) modernity and risk society attempt to encapsulate the depth and extent of change, if not its precise characteristics.

Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, national and global economies as well as political systems have undergone large-scale changes. With the demise of communist and socialist States and the global dominance of market capitalism, late modernity is increasingly characterised by the influence of neo-liberal economics, free-trade, globalisation of economic and cultural activity and the progressive deregulation of institutional structures. This influences people most directly in labour markets and workplaces which have undergone a series of rapid transformations – de-collectivisation and the rise of individual enterprise bargaining, workplace 'flexibility', downsizing, labour market casualisation, the rise of the 'portfolio' career and the contradiction between overwork and underemployment.

Combining changes in the workplace and labour market with the increasing reach of consumer capitalism into social and personal life and the rise of identity politics, the now notorious Thatcherite dictum that there is 'no such thing as society' became the mantra for the age. Although somewhat modified and softened by the advent of 'Third Way' political ideologies, the central message of late modern Western societies is that the politics of the individual prevails over the politics of the collective. The size and reach of the welfare state, it is argued, must be reduced, and individuals must increasingly be encouraged to fend for themselves – to develop 'self-reliance' and to take individual responsibility for their personal and economic circumstances. Life in the late modern age has thus become 'risky' in new and unprecedented ways, and there is less collective or institutional guidance about how to manage such risks.

The shifts in late modernity have been the central concern of theorists of social change around the world, among the most influential of whom are English sociologist Anthony Giddens[15] and the German theorist Ulrich Beck.[16] The work of these

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[15] Especially his seminal works *Modernity and self-identity* (1991) and *The transformation of intimacy* (1992)

[16] Author of the influential work *The risk society* (1992) and author, together with his wife and colleague Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, of *The normal chaos of love* (1995) and *Democracy without enemies* (1998).

thinkers has come to exemplify much of the new philosophy in the area of social change, late modernity and family life.

In his major work *Modernity and self-identity* (1991), Giddens opens with a chapter entitled 'The contours of high modernity', a chapter clearly designed to deal with 'big picture' social changes. It is thus significant that in doing so, he begins with an account the famous study of divorce and remarriage by Judith Wallerstein and Sandra Blakesee (1988). The significance of this lies in these authors' central contention that while '(s)eparation and divorce and their aftermath can cause long lasting anxieties and psychological disturbances',

> at the same time the changes brought about by the dissolution of a marriage provide possibilities to … grow emotionally … to establish new competence and pride [and to] strengthen intimate relationships far beyond earlier capacities (Giddens 1991, p. 10).

It is this emphasis on personal growth and self-identity that Giddens argues is the defining characteristic of late modern Western societies. But rather than this being a singularly negative development caused by the rise of selfish individualism and the decline of morality, the emphasis on 'the self' is necessary and comprehensible in the social, cultural and economic conditions of late modern society – conditions that have given rise to its key feature, often referred to as the process of 'individualisation'.

It is important at the outset to distinguish between *individualisation* and *individualism*. The concept of individualisation is almost entirely unrelated to the type of 'selfish individualism' that conservatives argue is the culprit in family breakdown.

> Individualisation does *not* … mean market individualism, or Thatcherism, or atomisation, isolation, the lack of any relationships for a free-floating individual' (Beck 1998, p. 33).

Rather, 'individualisation' refers to a process by which social categories of the past (e.g., class, religion, gender, status group) no longer serve as the moral or behavioural framework for individual action, social interaction or cultural belief systems. Instead, late modernity is the culmination of a long process, well documented and analysed by a century of sociologists, of the demise of traditional life in which there were distinct identities and social groupings that determined the parameters and trajectories of people's lives. The very process of modernisation and democratisation inherent to Western industrialisation undermined the foundations of established ways of life – nuclear family, gender and labour role segregation, religious beliefs – on which it was built.

The consequence of this is that not only must individuals now shoulder much more of the burden of defining moral rules and determining appropriate ways of behaving, but individual lives are 'being burdened with the most varied and contradictory global and personal risks' (Beck 1998, p. 32). Whereas during the industrial revolution, people were 'discharged from feudal-religious certainties into the world of industrial society' (a process that had clear ramifications for the family) in the present transformations people are discharged from 'the security of industrial society into the turbulence of

global risk society' (Beck 1998, p. 32). Society may have been no less 'risky' in economic or practical terms, but the collectivisation of social life that once provided a framework within which risks were managed has broken down.

> Opportunities, dangers and ambivalences of biography that might previously have been mastered in the family group or the London street village, by recourse to status rules or social classes, must now be perceived, interpreted and worked out by the individuals themselves. … Under the conditions of individualisation, people must increasingly cope with as an individual failure that which was previously treated communally as a class fate. Statistical fates of millions of people are turning into personal guilt, conflicts and neuroses (Beck 1998, p. 35).

Despite the need for careful use and interpretation of the idea of individualisation, [17] it is hard to refute the central claim that Western modernisation has been a process by which individuals are progressively detached from pre-given rules, moral frameworks, roles and statuses that have traditionally determined their life choices and chances. Indeed, it would be fair to say that this has been a central goal of Western liberal democracies, and that the 20th century was characterised by the progressive extension of claims for emancipation from externally imposed roles and statuses.

But the process of individualisation is far from a 'fairweather' phenomenon – it applies to all and is, Beck argues, 'by no means based on free decision'. Instead, people are 'damned to individualisation' – a damnation that involves a paradoxical compulsion not just to invent their own life patterns, but also their moral, social and political commitments (Beck 1998, p. 33).

As with most major social and cultural transformations, the process of *dis*embedding older ways of life is fraught with uncertainty and the benefits are mixed. But while the disembedding of industrial society continues, at the same time it gives way to a process of *re*-embedding new ways of life in which 'individuals must produce, stage and cobble together their biographies for themselves'(Beck 1998, p. 33). Beck argues that the problem with 'conservative wailers', especially in relation to family change, is that they see only the first stage of individualisation, the process of disembedding, and they pay no heed to the second stage, the process of re-embedding (Beck 1998, p. 33).

Individualisation and family change

Under conditions of individualisation – where decisions ranging over how to behave, what to believe, what to wear and what to eat are increasingly made at the individual rather than collective level – the burning question for the post-traditional order becomes 'How shall I live?' (Giddens, 1991, p. 14). For family life, this means that

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[17] See for example Lewis (1996), who argues that 'the connection between increased individualisation and selfishness has yet to be proved and the process of individualisation has yet to be properly investigated historically'. Moreover, she argues, too mu ch focus on this development allows politicians to '[latch] onto the changing meaning of marriage and … assume a link between the trend towards relationship and individualisation on the one hand, and selfishness on the other'.

'no longer are kinship and its obligations taken for granted; instead relations are negotiated on an individual basis' (Pryor and Rodgers 2001, p, 258). As Beck argues,

> … even traditional marriage will have to be chosen as a personal risk from now on and justified and lived out with all its built-in contradictions. Previously, status-based marriage prohibitions and rules dominated, while today it is the anonymous requirements of wage labour and social protections but with an essential difference. While the narrow traditional patterns forced the individuals into togetherness, the norms today force people to build up and lead a life of their own, on pain of economic disadvantage … Marriage and family thus become a juggling act with diverging biographies, with no patent remedy to insure cohesion (Beck 1998 p. 34).

These dilemmas and their implications for family life have been well summarised by Australian demographer Peter McDonald in an address for the Australian Centenary of Federation seminar series. His comments are worth quoting at length:

> (I)n order to protect themselves against risk, individuals must … focus upon the acquisition of saleable skills, work experience and a marketable reputation. At the same time they need to accumulate savings or wealth as a personal safety net. They also need to maintain flexibility of time and place so that they react to opportunities as they arise. The canny player in a game that rewards market production is unwise to devote time or money to social reproduction.

> This is not the 1950s ….Young women today are equipped for market production at a level at least equivalent to young men and employers are very happy to employ women in the market economy ….The risk-averse woman of today will ensure that she is able to support herself and … will be careful not to put herself at the risk of dependency upon a man … As a result, there are very few young women today who see their future lives in terms of finding a husband and never thereafter being engaged in market work (McDonald 2000).

The consequences of individualisation for contemporary modern relationships are inherently destabilising. The 'romantic love complex', dominant in a previous era, he argues, 'helped carve open a way to the formation of pure relationships in the domain of sexuality, but has now become weakened by some of the very influences it helped create' (Giddens 1992, p. 58). In its place, a new type of 'pure relationship' has emerged, one that is

> … entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another, and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfactions for each individual to stay within it (Giddens 1992, p. 58).

The underlying sentiment of the pure relationship is of an

> active, contingent love, and therefore jars with the 'for-ever', 'one-and-only' qualities of the romantic love complex. The 'separating and divorcing society'

of today here appears as an effect of the emergence of confluent love rather than its cause. The more confluent love becomes consolidated as a real possibility, the more the finding of a 'special person' recedes and the more it is the 'special relationship' that counts (Giddens 1994, pp. 61-62).

The downside to this type of relationship is its inherent instability due to the fact that the partners continuously re-evaluate the qualities of the relationship in terms of its 'fit' with their own 'project' to realise self-identity under conditions of individualisation. But on the positive side, at least in its idealised form, by requiring democracy and equality, a pure relationship can overcome the inequality, mutual dependence and role segregation of more traditional relationships (Smart and Neale 1999, p. 11).

In the light of these developments it is hardly likely that marriage, as the primary legitimate institutional form for the conduct of intimate relations, would be unaffected. But rather than this process of change being a sign of moral decline, family relationships become the 'site where new debates about moralities and ethics are played out' (Smart and Neale 1999, p. 11). As Pryor and Rodgers argue, this has advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantage is that 'the lack of uniformity and consensus about kin and non-kin relations leads to uncertainty about how they should be' and that

> … many people no longer form partnerships with the expectation that they are lifetime commitments, so that family transitions are often an unfortunate accompaniment to the changing nature of relationships.

The advantage, however, is that

> … the fact that [relationships] can no longer be taken for granted might eventually encourage negotiation of more satisfying, committed and stable relationships that work well for the individuals involved (Pryor and Rodgers 2001, p. 258).

However, securing these advantages – that is, ensuring that new relationships are satisfying and work well – is by no means a given. The process of re-embedding of values and behaviours requires a new level and style of moral reflection, both at the level of personal decision and of public administration.

Morality and new families

A primary difference between regressive conservatives and more progressive commentators is their stance regarding what it is to be 'moral' (Smart and Neale 1999; Smart 2000). For regressive conservatives in particular, morality has an absolute character. That is, 'morality' is defined by an individual's adherence to a set of rules that are based on a collection of pre-given, universal and essential values. Such fundamental values are 'there to be recognised, not made up as we go along' (Bishop of Oxford quoted in Smart and Neale 1999, p. 112). The decline of pre-given categories and rules by which people define their lives, especially in relation to personal and sexual behaviour, has undoubtedly challenged the authority of moral prescriptions based on top-down, absolutist dictums, especially from religious and

patriarchal sources. But while this leads some to believe that 'family breakdown' is both an indication of, and a contributor to, moral decline within society as a whole, for others it heralds a new process of re-thinking what it means to be moral, of re-embedding ethical values.

Progressive commentators argue that the coerced or internalised adherence to externally imposed rules may actually be the antithesis of moral action. This is because 'rule-following' does not require people to reflect upon their actions in their decision making about right or wrong, good or bad. Thus, 'morality' is not defined as the commitment to following rules, but the ability to think actively about dilemmas and alter behaviour on the basis of such reflections.

> To be 'moral' does not mean to be 'good', but to exercise one's freedom of authorship and/or actorship as a choice between good and evil (Bauman quoted in Smart 2000, p. 10).

Moreover, Bauman (1993) argues that the decline of custom and rule-based morality in 'postmodern' society actually provides greater scope for moral development than in traditional societies as people are forced to consider and respond to ethical and personal dilemmas, through which they will be able to reach their own conclusions about the 'proper thing to do'.[18]

It is important to understand, however, as Sevenhuijsen points out, that this type of reasoning is not simply a new and convenient justification for how some people currently want to live. Rather, it is an important part of Enlightenment philosophy – particularly the moral philosophy of David Hume. According to Hume, Sevenhuijsen argues,

> Ethics is not a matter of obeying universal laws or developing a general argument which can identify such laws; rather it involves cultivating specific character traits. … Morality depends more on context-bound opinions than on universal reason. Hume does not exclude desires and emotional needs from moral reasoning, provided they are corrected by reflection, self-control and social discipline. … Morality is not based on respecting other people's rights, but on the ability to recognize their individuality (Sevenhuijsen 1998, pp. 108-9).

In this way, questions of morality are made more concrete – they are brought down from the realms of higher thought and are 'turn(ed) into an everyday activity' (Smart 2000, p. 10). Indeed, Smart points out that a by-product of family separation is that it can expose moral dilemmas that were obscured by the 'rule-based' arrangements that served as the basis of a couple's marriage (Smart 2000, p. 10). The evidence from Smart and Neale's 1999 study of 60 separated families showed clearly that:

> (f)ollowing divorce, the very nature of parenting comes under scrutiny and can no longer be taken for granted. … The experience of living in post-divorce families forms a fluid backdrop against which parents are continually

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[18] See also Finch (1989), Mason (1996) and Smart's discussion of these arguments in Smart and Neale (1999) and Smart (2000).

> evaluating and then negotiating , adjusting or changing their parenting practices, identities and relationships (Smart and Neale 1999, p. 85).

As we shall see in Section 5, through changing entrenched arrangements for financial exchanges, living arrangements, the division of labour and ways of organising care, people are pressed to develop and negotiate new ways of making decisions about how to act and relate to each other, how to balance their own needs against those of others and how to safeguard the welfare of children. This process is inherently a moral task, and is arguably more so than conventional modes of 'rule following'. Thus it is the 'quality of decisions and actions that demarcate the moral terrain, not obedience to a sedimented set of rules or conventions' (Smart 2000, p. 12).

Understanding family change as a process that requires moral action rather than assuming that it is principally characterised by immorality provides considerable scope for positive change (Sevenhuijsen 1998, p. 108). We will return to these ideas in Section 5. Before proceeding, however, we must address the central contention fuelling the argument that divorce is immoral – that is, that the decision of parents to separate has disastrous consequences for their children.

4. Living in new families

4.1 Children and separation: understanding the evidence

Most of the moral dilemmas of post-separation life are centred on children. In cases where childless couples separate there are clearly moral decisions to be made in terms of how each treats the other, the division of property and continuing contact with friends and family. However, the dilemmas for those who must continue a parenting relationship despite the end of their intimate relationship are pressing, continuous and complex.

There is much debate and criticism of Giddens' 'pure relationship' described in the preceding section. As an 'ideal type', the theory offers little assistance in understanding the ways that access to different lifestyle choices are mediated by the perennial variables of ethnicity, class, gender and various other determinants to do with social structural and differential social power. But perhaps the greatest practical difficulty with Giddens' model is the fact that it allows no space for children who are third parties to their parents' 'pure relationship'. Smart and Neale argue:

> … we therefore need to understand how a triadic relationship might alter the essentially dyadic one of Giddens' model – a sexual relationship may end, but parenting is harder to abdicate (Smart and Neale 1999, p. 13).

The apparent valuing of selfishness (parents' desires) over duty (parents' responsibilities) in the decision to dissolve a marriage fuels conservative claims that rising divorce rates represent a moral decline. The effects of divorce on children tend to serve in the public mind as a kind of 'canary in the coal mine' for assessing the merits or otherwise of family change. Because of this, understanding the effects of divorce on children has been a central task of family research over the past decade or so. The results of this research lead many to conclude that the 'canary' is not well. Children from separated and single-parent families appear to be doing worse on a range of measures than children from intact, two-parent families. These measures include a range of behavioural problems, educational and socio-economic disadvantage, criminal behaviour, substance abuse, physical and mental health and development, and future success in family and intimate relationships. But the relationship between family separation and harm to children is not as straightforward as it first appears.

The existence of a strong and consistent statistical association between family separation and diminished child wellbeing has been clearly demonstrated and confirmed by a number of scientifically rigorous studies as well as overarching reviews of studies (meta-analyses) published in recent years.[19] While the statistical association is indisputable, the simple observation that a statistical relationship *exists* tells us little about what it *means*. In particular, a statistical association does not automatically mean that parental separation directly *causes* poor outcomes for children.

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[19] These studies will be referred to extensively throughout the remainder of this section.

The research literature is far from settled on the question of how much individual and social harm can be attributed to divorce itself and how much to other factors that are only indirectly associated with divorce, or not associated at all. Questions of how adjustment takes place, which children suffer most, which children do well despite their parents' separation and what factors moderate or exacerbate negative effects are complex.

Although debates continue, consistent findings from the most comprehensive and well respected studies have led to a broad consensus on two main points. First, while there are definite risks associated with separation, in general such risks are modest in size. Secondly, using a separation/intact dichotomy to explain differences in child wellbeing is unsophisticated – that it is too simplistic to assume that adverse conditions for children are an 'automatic consequence of a particular family structure' (Sanson and Lewis 2001, p. 6).

4.2   How risky is family separation for children?

In justifying his call for a return to fault-based divorce and the imposition of a 'divorce tax' on guilty partners (see discussion in section 2.4) Archbishop Pell referred to 'large increases in psychiatric problems [and] physical health problems, much higher risks of serious child abuse … large increases in learning problems for children, and increase in negative attitudes about the self and others … a much higher likelihood of drug use and sexual promiscuity and a very large proportion of criminal behaviour' (*SMH*, 24 August 2001). However, these claims considerably exaggerate the risks associated with divorce.

The research evidence has generally concluded that children from separated families have between one and a half and two times the risk of adverse life circumstances than children of intact families (Pryor and Rodgers 2001; Hetherington and Kelly 2002). Pryor and Rodgers' comprehensive meta-analysis of studies from around the world shows that the least difference between children from separated families and intact families is in areas of physical or mental health. Medium-sized differences are found in antisocial behaviour or substance abuse, while the greatest difference is found in the future success of intimate relationships. Although still of concern, in epidemiological terms, these risks are considered relatively modest. Pryor and Rodgers conclude that

> …differences between children from separated and intact families are seen in all areas considered as important aspects of individual social, psychological and physical development, *but the size of these differences is not large* (Pryor and Rodgers 2001, p. 66 emphasis added).

Of course, the accumulated effect of small differences on the population as a whole is significant, imposing considerable private and public costs. For example, Pryor and Rodgers estimate that if children from separated families have roughly double the likelihood of having a poor outcome and that around 25 per cent of children experience separation, then it is possible to calculate that one in five occurrences of that poor outcome is attributable to the increased risk seen in children from separated families (Pryor and Rodgers 2001, p. 67). Nevertheless, as we shall see below, much of the difference between intact and separated families is accounted for by pre-divorce

conditions. Thus, not all of the public and private costs of separated families will be solely or largely attributable to separation. While costs may increase to some extent as a result of the increase in negative outcomes on separation, many of the costs – both private and public – will exist whether the family separates or not.

4.3   Beyond the separated/intact comparison

Pryor and Rodgers' review of studies led them to conclude that there is wide variation in how children of separated parents fare, despite being vulnerable as a group to a range of problems. The variation in the extent to which children are affected by these problems, they argue, 'is determined not by the separation itself, but by the complex interplay of other factors that are present before, during and after separation (Pryor and Rodgers 2001, p. 257).

Before separation ...

Poor quality of marriage is one of the most consistent and well-established predictors of low child wellbeing (Cummings et al. 1989; Grych and Fincham 1990; Cummings and Davies 1994; Amato and Booth 1997; Harold and Honess 2001). Recent findings suggest that children (including very young children) are extremely astute observers of marital disharmony and respond aversely to different types of conflict ranging from non-verbal conflict to physical aggression (Cummings and Davies 1994). They are able to detect not simply overt, acrimonious forms of conflict but also emotionally 'frozen' parental relationships or relationships characterised by 'contemptuous disengagement' (Hetherington and Kelly 2002). Family conditions marked by low quality marital relationships – whether conflict is of an overt or subtle nature – may threaten children's developing sense of emotional security and later life adjustment (Davies, Harold, Goeke-Morey and Cummings, in review).[20] In contrast, parents who provide a warm, constructive family environment – generated primarily by the quality in their own relationship – assist children's healthy emotional development.

The conditions under which children benefit from parental separation are clear and are now largely undisputed. The fact that long-term and unrelieved exposure to parental conflict is highly detrimental to children's wellbeing and development means that the dissolution of high-conflict marriages can be beneficial for children. Research evidence is clear that children from families in which there are high levels of marital conflict are better off if their parents separate (Amato and Booth 1997; Amato 2001, Booth and Amato 2001, Morrison and Coiro 1999; Hetherington 1999).

It is therefore important to consider the contribution of pre-divorce conditions to child wellbeing. Studies that have done so have found that many of the problems displayed by children of separated families were evident prior to their parents' separation. Thus, much of the difference found between children of intact and separated families is attributable to the quality of the parents' marriage prior to separation rather than to the separation itself (Cherlin et al. 1991; Furstenberg and Teitler 1994; Kiernan and Mueller 1997; Furstenberg and Kiernan 2001). Analysis by Cherlin et al. of US and British longitudinal surveys provide considerable evidence for this phenomenon. The surveys included children between the ages of 7 and 11 who were living in two-parent

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[20] I am very grateful for the assistance of Gordon Harold for clarifying and providing references in relation to these points.

families and again when the children were aged between 11 and 16. Data regarding children's behaviour and development were collected at each point. Children whose parents divorced or separated between the two time points were compared to children whose families remained intact. The study found that 'much of the effect of divorce on children can be predicted by conditions that existed well before the separation occurred.' On this basis they concluded that

> …those concerned with the effects of divorce on children should consider reorienting their thinking. At least as much attention needs to be paid to the processes that occur in troubled intact families as to the trauma that children suffer after their parents separate (Cherlin et al. 1991, p. 252).

Explaining differences in child wellbeing according to whether a family is separated or intact not only overstates the effect of separation or divorce (Cherlin 1999, p. 7) but it also leads to mistaken conclusions that separating will inevitably harm children while staying together will automatically be good for them. This in turn takes attention away from dysfunctional intact families that pose serious threats to the wellbeing of children. It is not always the case, therefore, that 'staying together for the sake of their children' is necessarily in the best interests of children.

Of course, while it is important not to overstate the effects of separation on children, it is also important not to understate it. In particular, for almost all children the end of their parents' marriage is very traumatic, and they suffer a range of emotional and behavioural problems. Because of this, children and their families require appropriate and accessible support services to minimise the effects of the initial trauma and to quickly establish stability in their new lives.

Cherlin says 'much of the effect' of separation can be explained by pre-separation conditions, but how much? And how much can be explained by the conditions that prevail after separation?

Amato and Booth's now famous 1997 study, *A generation at risk*, and their subsequent follow-up work (Amato 2001; Booth and Amato 2001) found that, consistent with other research, where marriages are characterised by high levels of conflict children benefit if their parents separate and suffer considerable harm if they stay together. In contrast, however, they also found that children with parents in low-conflict marriages but who nonetheless separate have similarly low levels of wellbeing. They therefore conclude that '(t)he worst situation for children to be in is a high conflict marriage that does not end in divorce, or a low conflict marriage that does end in divorce' (Amato and Booth 1997, p. 238).

The finding that children from high-conflict families are often better off if their parents separate is not difficult to understand and is explained by the findings, described above, that bad marriages can be very damaging for children. It is, however, less easy to understand why children from low-conflict families that separate would do so poorly. Amato and Booth believe that the most likely explanation lies in the unwelcome and uncontrollable disruption caused by the sudden end of a marriage that children had perceived as 'good enough'. Most of these children, they argue, 'didn't see it coming' and many hear about their parents' separation for the first time 'when they came home from school and discovered that

Daddy has packed his bags and left' (Amato 2001). For children in high-conflict homes, the stresses associated with parental separation may be a 'small price to pay', but those from low-conflict marriages will view these stresses as an additional cost with few compensating advantages (Amato and Booth 1997, pp. 197; 207-8; Booth and Amato 2001, pp. 199-200).

Moreover, Amato argues that most children 'do not care if their parents are experiencing a mid-life crisis. And children don't care if their parents are deeply fulfilled or if their parents are soul mates to one another.' Children, he argues, simply 'want stability and regular access to both parents in the home' (Amato 2001).

On the basis of their findings, Amato and Booth conclude that divorce is an essential remedy for high-conflict families, but in marriages that are not fraught with severe conflict and abuse, 'future generations would be well served if parents remained together until children are grown' (Amato and Booth 1997, p. 238).

However, as we shall see in the following sections, Amato and Booth's conclusion may be premature. This is because there is much evidence to suggest that factors operating both during and after separation are critical in determining the success or otherwise of children from separated families. According to Hetherington, these factors are 'often difficult to determine when parents are considering divorce' and 'make it difficult to predict which separations will result in harm and which will not' (Hetherington 1999, p. 115).

During separation ...

The extent to which children are aware of their parents' marital difficulties and the way that they come to learn of the end of the marriage are important factors in children's post-divorce adjustment. Children who show high levels of anxiety and stress and who find it difficult to cope in the face of their parents' separation are often those who had been 'kept in the dark' about the state of their parents' marriage and its imminent end (Pryor and Rodgers 2001, p. 117). This suggests an alternative to Amato and Booth's explanation for poor outcomes for children from low-conflict families that separate. The poor adjustment to post-divorce life among children from low-conflict families who 'didn't see it coming' and who experience shock at the 'unexpected and unwelcome disruption' to their lives may well have less to do with the *fact* of their parents' divorce than the way the separation was managed. Thus, children's sense of disorientation and shock may be less due to being pitched from what they thought was a happy family into the chaos of divorce, and more to do with the fact that they were given very little warning or explanation for what had happened to them.

Being 'kept in the dark' appears to be the experience of a large proportion of children. One study (Gorrell Barnes et al. 1998) reported that only five per cent of children felt they had been appropriately informed about the impending separation, and 45 per cent had simply been told with a blunt statement and no explanation (cited in Pryor and Rodgers 2001, p. 117). Other studies (Neugebauer 1989; Kim et al. 1997; Smith et al. 1997) show similar results, with only one quarter to one third of people reporting that they had known in advance that their parents were separating and why this was

occurring (Pryor and Rodgers 2001, p. 117). Speaking about her findings to the media, Pryor stated the problem simply:

> The kids say, 'We don't need the gory details, but let us know what's happening'. It's hugely important. … if kids are told and given decent explanations, then down the line they are measurably better off. They do better in a whole lot of ways because they don't feel helpless and on the outside (*New Zealand Herald* 10 February, 2002).

After separation …

As we have seen, parental separation can compound or offset the effects of unhappy families, although the evidence seems to indicate that the former is more common. There is no doubt that factors directly associated with separation and divorce – such as unresolved grief or loss of a parent from the family home – can cause considerable trauma with serious and sometimes lasting effects (Wallerstein and Kelly 1980; Wallerstein and Blakesee 1989). However, these factors appear to be less influential than the range of secondary factors associated with separation that increase the risk of poor outcomes. Where parental divorce is more influential in determining outcomes for children than marital discord, this is mainly attributable to 'stress and family processes [which] mediate much of the effect of family structure on child development' (Simons and Associates 1996, p. 203).

Secondary factors that worsen outcomes for children include geographic relocation, loss of contact with other family members or communities, continuing or increased conflict between parents, diminished financial resources, continual moving between parental residences, repartnering and step family relationships, and reduced parental capacity (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994).

A considerable proportion of the difference between intact and separated families is accounted for by reduced financial resources of the sole-parent household. McLanahan and Sandefur estimate that the level of family income accounts for about half of the disadvantage for children of sole parents compared to those in two-parent households (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994, pp. 91, 111). Of course this is complicated by the fact that financial hardship is also a predictor of separation – that is, being or becoming poor increases the risk of family separation in the first place (Kiernan and Mueller 1997). Whilst the exact extent of the income reduction that separating families experience is a matter of some dispute (Weitzman 1985; Peterson 1996), there is no dispute that most families experience a drop in income, a rise in expenses and a limited recovery from this drop in subsequent years (Pryor and Rodgers 2001 pp. 147-8).

Even so, these factors are not predictive at the individual level. An increased *risk* of harm does not always translate into an increase of *actual* harm for all who experience parental separation. McLanahan and Sandefur note that, just as many people who do little exercise don't suffer a heart attack, 'many children raised by a single mother grow up to be quite successful' (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994, p. 2). Many children from separated families do very well on a range of measures, whilst many children from intact families do not do well on these measures (Giddens 1997, p. 153).

Large numbers of children from separated families escape harmful consequences. Simons and Chao (1996) show that while children from a divorced family may have a higher prevalence of adjustment problems, the majority will not exhibit any problems at all. In fact, according to their data, in both intact and separated families the prevalence of most problems is less than 10 per cent. Perhaps the most comprehensive, large-scale study of marital breakup ever conducted, the Virginia Longitudinal Study, followed 1400 families over three decades. This study showed that while around 20 per cent of children from divorced families experience a range of problems, the remaining 80 per cent cope reasonably well with divorce (Hetherington and Kelly 2002). Moreover, being in an intact family 'did not always protect against growing into a troubled young adult'. Around 10 per cent of young people in intact families exhibited problems similar to the group of troubled young people from separated families (Hetherington and Kelly 2002, p. 228).

In summarising her 30-year career in family research, Hetherington declared:

> The big headline in my data is that 80 per cent of children from divorced homes eventually are able to adapt to their new life and become reasonably well adjusted … it should be a reassuring finding that for every young man or woman who emerged from postnuclear family life with problems, four others were functioning reasonably or exceptionally well …. Whilst most were not exactly the New Man or New Woman that the divorce revolution's supporters had predicted, they were behaving the way young adults were supposed to behave. They were choosing careers, developing permanent relationships, ably going about the central tasks of young adulthood, and establishing a grown-up life (Hetherington and Kelly 2002, p. 229).

Most of the troubled young people in the Virginia Longitudinal Study came from families where 'conflict was frequent and authoritative parenting rare' (Hetherington and Kelly 2002, p. 229). These two factors – competent parenting styles and the absence or the successful resolution of conflict – emerge from research as being consistently protective for children of separated families. Effective child development is facilitated by competent parenting, on at least the part of one parent. In particular, the evidence points to the presence of an 'authoritative' parenting style – distinct from an 'authoritarian' style – that is 'responsive, warm, firm and [providing] consistent discipline' (Amato 1987; Sanson and Lewis 2001, p. 8; Hetherington and Kelly 2002). Where this style of parenting is absent, children will be worse off regardless of whether their family is intact or not.

Of course, because of the diminished emotional and physical resources available for parenting in single-parent households and the extra complications that come with step-parented households, the authoritative parenting style may be more difficult to sustain in separated families than in intact two-parent families (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Simons and Associates 1996). Parents may make fewer demands on their children, use less effective disciplinary strategies and carry out lighter monitoring of activities, diet and school work.[21] Modelling the effect of both financial hardship and parenting competence, Simons maintains that

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[21] See a summary of this literature in Sanson and Lewis (2001).

the developmental problems seen among children of divorce are in large measure a result of the negative effect of stress on the emotional adjustment and parenting practices of custodial parents. Economic pressure is considered a determinant of family structure differences in child outcomes because of its effect on these variables. The model posits that economic pressure increases stress and psychological distress and reduces the quality of parenting. Our findings provide support for the model (Simons and Associates 1996, p. 207).

Even so, despite the extra difficulties, most families still manage to get it right. Simons found that the majority of divorced women are competent parents and that only between 20 and 25 per cent of divorced women were 'engaging in dysfunctional parenting practices' (Simons and Associates 1996, p. 208). Indeed, when faced with extra obstacles, many single or re-married parents may become particularly steadfast in their resolve to become competent parents.

If someone creates a Nobel Prize for Unsung Hero, my nominee will be the divorced mother. Even when the world was collapsing around them, many divorced mothers found the courage and resiliency to do what had to be done. Such maternal tenacity and courage paid off. Despite all the emotional and financial pressures imposed by marital failure, most of our divorced women managed to provide the support, sensitivity and engagement their children needed for normal development (Hetherington and Kelly 2002, pp. 129-30).

It is also important to realise that not only do many children escape unharmed from the experience of divorce, but many children obtain benefits that they would otherwise not have gained. Pryor and Rodgers (2001) detail studies in which children of separated families had particularly close and strong relationships with their mothers and reported experiences of psychological growth, maturity and independence (Kurdek and Berg 1987; Arditti, 1999). Other studies show that children of separated parents had developed a good understanding of people and relationships that they otherwise may never had (Walczak and Burns 1984). It is also apparent that a minority of children develop considerable personal and social attributes as a result of dealing with the challenges of divorce. Hetherington found that these young people emerge from divorced 'enhanced'. They are, she argued,

uncommonly resilient, mature, responsible, and focused. These children blossomed not despite the things that had happened to them during divorce and after, but … because of them' (Hetherington and Kelly 2002, pp. 7-8).

In an earlier paper, Hetherington (1999) succinctly summarised the emerging research consensus on harms to children from family separation. She argues that where divorce 'removes the stresses and disruptions of family processes associated with an unhappy conflictual marriage and that erode the wellbeing of children', children can benefit significantly from family separation. But in circumstances where there is a combination of 'diminished post-separation resources, inept parenting and sustained or increased conflict' separation is likely to be harmful to children (Hetherington 1999, p. 115).

4.4   Post-separation family type

The assumption that family structure is the key determinant in child wellbeing has also led policy and public debate to concentrate on the 'structure' of the post-separation living arrangements. A key focus of public policy has been on legal aspects such as with whom the child principally resides and the extent they have contact with or live with the non-custodial parent. The influence of step and blended families on child wellbeing is also of concern.

Contact, residence and co-parenting

Debates about the value of shared parenting and residence arrangements have been a central feature of legislative changes in the area of family law. Around the world the emphasis of legislative reforms has been on moving away from the 'clean break' view of divorce, in which the partners are detached from each other and custody is given to one parent – usually the mother, leaving each party free to begin new relationships and new families. Instead, the emphasis has been focused on the idea that while the marital relationship ends, both parents have ongoing responsibilities for the care of their children. The shift is designed to encourage, where possible, the ongoing sharing of parental responsibilities. In Australia these reforms were implemented under the 1995 *Family Law Reform Act*. The main objectives of the Act were:

- to shift community attitudes towards shared parenting after separation;
- to reduce disputes by removing the 'proprietary' approach to children in custody battles;
- to place the focus on the rights and interests of children rather than their parents in post-separation decision making; and
- to encourage a greater use of private agreements and direct parents away from litigation where possible (Rhoades, Graycar and Harrison, 2000, p. 14).

The call for greater recognition of shared or joint parenting has been loudest from men's groups who feel that their parental rights have been overlooked in a legal process that is biased towards mother-custody. This is probably the most fraught and contested area of family law. The push for shared residence is complicated by the gendered nature of parenting in pre-separation and post-separation family life. Conventional and common parenting arrangements in pre-separation families give primary care-giving responsibility to the mother, and the father tends to play a less central role in day-to-day care-giving. This is compounded by work roles and expectations of men as 'breadwinners', which means that their opportunities for participating in daily family life are constrained by labour market forces as well as by cultural expectations of the masculine role.

A three-year research project to evaluate the effects of the new legislation found that shared care-giving did not seem to have become a 'lived reality' for the children of separated parents who had used the family law system to negotiate post-separation arrangements. Indeed, the study found that there had been 'no real changes in practices as a result of the reforms' (Rhoades, Graycar and Harrison 2000, p. 59). Instead, while parents regularly enter workable and flexible shared residence arrangements, these arrangements are reached without reference to the 1995 Act. Significantly, they found that

> [e]ach of these parents had exercised their responsibilities jointly and co-operatively before their separation and each of the men had taken an active caregiving role (Rhoades, Graycar and Harrison 2000, pp. 59-60).

The research also found that cases where joint or shared residence arrangements had been ordered by the courts were characterised by a high level of disputation and a lack of flexibility. They quoted a registrar of the Family Court as saying 'the shared parenting concept is totally at odds with the type of parents who litigate' (p. 60). This, they argued, was consistent with research that demonstrated that the advantages of shared parenting were dependent upon parents having entered the agreement voluntarily, based on a previous history of co-operative parenting.[22]

Calls for an increase in shared custody are usually backed by reference to research literature that shows that children suffer from 'father absence'. The evidence is clear that children usually want to have contact with the absent parent, and the loss of contact with a parent is often cited by children as one of the worst aspects of their family's separation (Pryor and Rodgers 2001, pp. 117-8). While this is important in its own right and needs to be taken account of in policy and legal decision making, it is a different question to ask whether children's wellbeing is demonstrably damaged by the absence of their father.

On this question, the evidence is mixed and sometimes contradictory (Lye 1999; Pryor and Rodgers 2001, p. 214). Perhaps not surprisingly, whether or not father contact is good, bad or neutral for children depends less on the frequency of contact and more on the quality of that contact.[23] In particular, positive outcomes for children tend to be associated with the extent to which fathers are involved in caregiving activities such as cooking, bathing, dressing and transportation.

This would seem to lend support to arguments in favour of joint parenting. However, while joint custody may well provide greater opportunity for this type of parenting, it is by no means a given that men will be able or willing to take advantage of this opportunity. Particularly in cases where the relationship between parents is characterised by ongoing conflict, shared residence arrangements can be particularly damaging for children.

> We are deeply concerned about the use of joint physical custody in cases where there is substantial parental conflict: such conflict can create grave dangers for children. We do not think it good for children to feel caught in the middle of parental conflict and in those cases where the parents are involved in a bitter dispute we believe a presumption for joint custody would do harm… We wish to note, however, that joint custody can work very well when parents are able to cooperate (Maccoby and Mnoonkin 1994, pp. 284-5).

Even where undue conflict is not present, shared residence may not always automatically result. Because men are often not closely involved with many of the

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[22] Studies cited were: Steinman (1981) and Pearson and Thoennes (1990).

[23] The question of contact between children whose fathers are perpetrators of domestic violence towards the child's mother is particularly controversial and little research is available to assist in determining in which circumstances, if any, it is helpful for children to have contact with their fathers.

daily tasks of parenting, they may lack experience and knowledge of how to take on a more active role. As Hetherington argues, there is more continuity between pre- and post-divorce parenting for mothers than for fathers. Fathers' parenting is less predictable, she says, 'probably because their situation alters more dramatically' (Hetherington and Kelley 2002, p. 117). In addition, as Carol Smart has observed, it is equally challenging for a mother to relinquish her established role to a father whom she often has little reason to trust to do a competent task (Smart and Neale 1999, p. 50). Pryor and Rodgers argue that, while little is known about the extent to which men change their parenting practices on separation, some Australian research is rather pessimistic, showing that by their own accounts, men's post-divorce level of responsiveness to children's needs remain similar to pre-divorce levels (Gibson 1992 cited in Pryor and Rodgers 2001, p. 217).

The overall message is that research has shown that the structure of family arrangements – even post-separation families – is less important than the quality of relationships within these arrangements. But what about the increasingly common new family type, the step or blended family?

Step and blended families

Less is known about the adjustment to step and blended family life as only a limited amount of research has been conducted on this subject. The available evidence suggests that the transition to these types of families can be particularly stressful and difficult and may lead to poor outcomes for children. Children of these families are at approximately the same risk of developing behavioural and developmental problems as children from sole-parent families (Pryor and Rodgers 2001, Ch. 6). Some studies have found that the presence of step-fathers may pose a particular risk of sexual and physical abuse for some children (Wilson and Daly 1987; Gordon and Creighton 1988; MacMillan and Finkel 1995). Risk of adverse outcomes increases with the number of transitions that children experience, although it is likely that this is compounded by the fact that parents who change relationships regularly tend also to demonstrate less competent parenting styles and experience a range of personal and social problems of their own (Capaldi and Patterson 1991).

Step-family formation is a highly complex process fraught with conflicting needs for different family members and a deal of uncertainty about norms and roles (Hetherington and Kelly 2002, pp. 181-82). At the same time, however, step families also may present an

> … open and socially responsive family which challenges some of the negative aspects of the patriarchal family. … Overall there is often increased potential for equality and democratisation to occur with the step family (Gerrard and Howden 1994 cited in Martin 1998, p. 5).

Step families need good levels of support to help them to adjust to their new lives. Martin (1998) argues that few appropriate supports are available and that policy has yet to catch up with the reality of mixed family types in official data collection, whether in administrative arrangements and resourcing or in terms of research priorities. Step families also suffer from an absence of useful guiding models,

particularly in cases where the non-resident parent remains highly involved with the children.

New family arrangements in the era of the post-nuclear family may well provide a real, long-awaited opportunity for changing entrenched and apparently stubborn gendered parenting roles. As fathers become more vocal about their desire to be active and involved parents, they will be under greater pressure to demonstrate capacity and willingness to trade labour market, financial and status opportunities for the daily work of providing care. Similarly, as more single mothers move willingly or unwillingly into the labour market, they will be required or forced to relinquish their care prerogative and to find identity and citizenship status away from their role as nurturers and carers. This process, of course, is already in motion and is the cause of significant tension as men, women and children adjust, or fail to adjust, to the demands that such changes place on individual lives.

4.5   Continuing methodological problems

Despite the progress that has been made in recent years towards greater understanding of the meaning of the statistical association between family separation and child wellbeing, quantitative studies of the effects of separation on children remain hampered by methodological limitations.

First, the relationship between children's poor wellbeing and family separation is likely to be exaggerated by a 'selection effect'. In an era of high divorce rates there is a strong likelihood that, by their nature, families that remain intact are more likely to be happy than families that have separated. Not surprisingly, research commonly concludes that children are most likely to do well if they live with both biological parents who care deeply for them as well as each other (Amato and Booth, 1997; Weston and Hughes 1999; Pryor and Rodgers 2001). Thus, the further the quality of family life departs from this ideal, the greater the variation in child wellbeing. For example, if at the culmination of marital crisis, a couple decides to continue living together unhappily rather than to divorce, the quality of this family's life will be very different to that of a family that has not reached a separation crisis in the first place, and to that of a family where the couple has been able to successfully resolve marital unhappiness.

Indeed, if studies of child wellbeing and family functioning were conducted 50 or more years ago when divorce was relatively rare, the vast majority of families would be 'intact'. But it is highly unlikely that child wellbeing would be consistently high across such families – some families would be functioning very successfully, others would not. The variation in the quality of family life would thus produce similar variation in satisfaction, wellbeing and developmental indicators. Under these circumstances, researchers wanting to explain low levels of child wellbeing would be required to rely on variables other than 'family breakdown' and would have to look more closely at the nature and quality of family relationships within intact families.

Thus, in an era where obtaining a divorce is legally straightforward, relatively unencumbered by social stigma and where the decision to remain unhappily married is less common than in the past, the fact that a family remains intact may well be an indication that, on the whole, it is 'sufficiently happy to have survived' (Weston and

Hughes 1999, p. 19). Under these conditions divorce essentially functions as a proxy indicator of the quality of family life – the families that remain intact are those more likely to return positive indicators of wellbeing than the families that separate.

The second methodological limitation is that studies usually rely on data that is collected from children whose parents separated up to 20 years ago. By their very nature, longitudinal studies refer to times past, while cross-sectional studies also have a significant 'lag time' between the data collection and the publication of results (Giddens 1997, p. 153). Thus, 'at times of rapid social and economic change, we cannot assume that divorce will bear equally on each generation' (Richards 1999, p. 263). Particularly for children whose parents divorced in an era when divorce was relatively new as a social phenomenon, few cultural, emotional or institutional supports were available to assist families cope with their new conditions. Kiernan and Mueller (1997) urge caution in interpreting data from longitudinal surveys that are based on samples of 'children' whose parents divorced 20 years or so ago, arguing that it is invalid to expect that a much younger cohort would have the same experiences as those of an earlier generation. Of course, it is by no means inevitable that the story over time would be one of improvement or progress. It may well be the case that outcomes could even be worse. However, the reduced social stigma and improved institutional structures make this unlikely.

The myopic focus of empirical studies on the harms of divorce has at least three undesirable outcomes. First, there now exists a widespread presumption that children will inevitably be harmed if their parents separate. As Hetherington commented to a British newspaper:

> I've never seen a victimless divorce, but a lot of the current work makes it sound as if you've given your kids a terminal disease when they go through a divorce. One of the reasons I wanted to write this book was not only to get the figures out, but to say that if we put children through this then tell them they are never going to recover, this is damaging in itself. A child is going to spend its grown-up life thinking: 'When are these terrible things going to happen to me?' (Hetherington in *The Observer* 27 January 2002).

Many parents in Smart and Neale's study whose children were 'still outwardly happy, involved in social activities and doing well at school' were convinced that 'something would 'show' later in life' (p. 87). As one respondent noted,

> I think what worries me is that they [the children] don't seem to have shown any signs of it affecting them. I am almost looking for something (quoted in Smart and Neale 1999, p. 87).

The focus on harm also encourages simplistic answers to the question of why families are undergoing such change, thus creating simplistic policy solutions. The danger is of a 'swings and cycles' roundabout of policies that first loosen, then tighten, then loosen again the legal and social regulations that bind family members to, or liberate them from, each other. Finally, in focusing only on harms, the strengths inherent in new family arrangements are systematically overlooked and there is little basis for re-embedding new values and norms by which to conduct family relationships. The following section investigates these opportunities in greater detail.

5. Working it out: creating new families

No matter what is happening to our families, one thing is clear – however we define it, 'family' still matters intensely to people. The strong desire remains to create stable living arrangements in which individuals can find acceptance, physical and emotional security and mutual respect, and in which enduring values of reciprocity and obligation prevail. In an era when parents have fewer children and do so relatively late in life (often against the biological odds) the bond between parents and their children is perhaps stronger than ever.

Despite assertions that relationships have become 'disposable', adults who experience the breakdown of their marriage or long-term relationship often describe the experience as the most traumatic of their lives and they usually hope and plan to try again to find a fulfilling life-long committed relationship in which they can make a 'home'. Most parents who separate deeply desire that their children be protected from harm, although it is sometimes hard to agree on how to achieve this goal and they don't always get it right. Times have changed and we are still adjusting. We are acutely aware of what might be going wrong, but we know little about what we are doing right, nor of what lessons we are learning along the way that can provide a basis for building families of the future. In this section we explore some of these lessons and opportunities.

5.1 Family strengths

> *If researchers study only family problems, they are likely to find only family problems. Similarly, if [they] are interested in family strengths, they look for them. When these strengths are identified, they can become the foundation for continued growth and positive change in a family and a society* (De Frain, 1999 p. 6).

The emphasis on 'family strengths' has been a key plank of contemporary family policy. It is the central pillar of the 'Third Way' family policy exemplified by the British program of social reform under Tony Blair as well as the Australian Government's *National Families and Communities Strategy*. In practice, however, the emphasis on 'family strengths' in these policies is almost exclusively directed towards prevention of the 'breakdown' of nuclear families. For example, in announcing the National Strategy, the then Minister Senator Jocelyn Newman said:

> Common sense tells us prevention is better than cure and that keeping families together should be one of our major social objectives. And that's just what the Australian government is determined to achieve … we're putting in very substantial resources to help prevent families splitting up in the first place (Newman 2000 p. 5).

While there is no question that policies to shore up intact families are of value, a 'family strengths' approach need not be restricted to these family types. Indeed, the sentiment expressed above by De Frain is equally applicable to the study of non-nuclear families.

'Strong families' are, however, not necessarily the same as happy families. Of course, there are large numbers of families whose strength lies in the fact that they are broadly happy and relatively conflict-free. But 'strengths' can also be the product of difficult times – when mistakes are made, when conflict is resolved, when attitudes and pre-suppositions about selves and others are challenged, and when people learn important lessons and alter their behaviour. Research shows that it is not the presence of conflict between parents *per se* that causes problems for children, but the nature of the conflict and the way it is managed. Conflict that is handled well can have positive implications for children. They are able to observe and learn from instances where issues are successfully negotiated and difficulties resolved without threatening wider family relationships. However, living with unresolved conflict that threatens to escalate is particularly damaging for children. This is especially so when it results in parental withdrawal either from the children, other family members or the daily life of the household (Cummings and Davies 1994).

Giddens has observed that even if we admit that all is not well within marriage, the family and the care of children, 'going back' is not an option. Instead, we need to take account of the contemporary critique of the traditional family model, decide the type of family for which we wish to strive and identify effective strategies to achieve this goal. While older models were based on inequality, patriarchal power and rigid role segregation, new models should be based on equality, mutual respect, autonomy, decision-making through communication and freedom from violence (Giddens 1998, p. 93). To this end, parents, children, extended families and communities are altering ways of thinking and re-embedding new moral frameworks as they negotiate their way through new and unfamiliar territory. The process of *dis*embedding past values and ways of being and behaving continues, bringing in its wake considerable uncertainty and confusion. But it is clear that the process of *re*-embedding values has also begun.

So how is this re-embedding operating in practice? What opportunities are available to build forms of family life that are consistent with contemporary conditions? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to shift our focus away from what families are and learn instead what families are doing in their everyday lives.

5.2 Families *are* what families *do*

> *A family is a group of people which all care about each other. They can cry together, laugh together, argue together and go through all the emotions together. Some live together as well ...* (13 year old boy) (Morrow, cited in Pryor and Rodgers 2001, p. 139).

We have seen in Section 4 that, despite the risk of adverse outcomes for children in separated families, most families are able to significantly or completely offset the risks. Moreover, many children from intact families will suffer despite the apparent stability of their family structure. This suggests that it is what families do, regardless of their structure or type, that primarily determines whether children develop poorly or well.[24] Section 4 also demonstrated that children can be largely protected from the

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[24] Of course, it is also important not to ignore the contribution of non-family related factors to child development outcomes. Variables such as hereditary, peer group pressures, poor access to services

inherent risks of family separation if they are informed in an appropriate manner of the impending separation and not excluded; if their parents are able to manage constructively their post-separation conflicts and if at least one parent is able to exercise competent, authoritative parenting. A number of other factors also protect children from harm in separated families. These include financial security, moving house, and whether they are able to stay connected to networks of family, friends and community.

The importance of this for policy, family law and therapeutic intervention is clear. Rather than spending time, energy and resources making sure that family structure remains stable in the hope that such 'stability' will eliminate or reduce problems associated with child wellbeing, resources would be better spent in supporting all types of families to parent in a competent fashion, to resolve their disputes in constructive ways and to ensure as much as possible that they are economically viable and well connected to community networks and supports.

It is not surprising that children from separated families in which conflict is absent or rare will do better than those which have ongoing high levels of conflict. However, the observation that it is not conflict *per se* that determines poor outcomes, but the way conflict is managed, suggests that there would be little benefit to the children of a marriage in which parents 'stayed together' but were unable to successfully manage their conflict. Rather than concluding that parents should 'stay together' for the sake of the children, a more satisfying conclusion might be that parents should be encouraged to attempt to resolve conflict in constructive ways for the sake of the children – preferably within, or if not possible, outside of their marriage.

It is, of course, somewhat unrealistic to expect that separated parents who are hurt, angry, grieving and exhausted will be able to deal with complex negotiations regarding finances, property and child care without encountering heightened levels of conflict. Because of this, there is a need for the development and implementation of appropriate support structures to assist them to deal with this conflict in a constructive, rather than destructive manner.

Understanding families in terms of what they do rather than what they are also has the advantage of enabling us to move beyond the claim and counter-claim of public debates. Instead of seeing the family as an institution that is under threat or being undermined, it is possible to

> … sidestep the interminable debate about whether this institution is in decline or not. We can stop imagining that all change is either simply good or bad. We can also locate change differently, ceasing to blame economic forces on the one hand or rampant individual self-interest on the other (Smart and Neale 1999, p. 22).

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for developmental issues, poor teaching and lack of access to education also play an important role in child development and behaviour.

5.3   What families do: taking a deeper look

While it is undoubtedly useful to know which factors insulate children from adverse consequences, we are still left wondering what distinguishes families that are able to maximise protective factors from those that find it difficult.

The work by British sociologist Carol Smart and her colleagues, Bren Neale and Amanda Wade goes some way to illuminating this question and is worth examining. Their departure from approaches that simply seek to identify causal factors and their employment of in-depth qualitative research methods allows a deeper understanding of the world of post-separation family life. Rather than assuming that separating parents have abandoned moral commitments in their decision to dissolve their marriage, Smart and her colleagues investigate and outline the ways that adults and children are negotiating and developing moral criteria to inform their decisions and to build the quality of relationships in their new but confusing families (Smart and Neale 1999; Smart, Neale and Wade 2001; Wade and Smart forthcoming 2003).

The ethic of justice and the ethic of care

Drawing on an extensive field of literature, Smart and colleagues apply a distinction between an 'ethic of justice' and an 'ethic of care' to the field of family change. The 'ethic of justice', they argue, has dominated debates about the rights and wrongs of post-separation arrangements, especially in relation to matters of custody and of access to children (see also Sevenhuijsen 1998, Chapter 4). Intrinsically linked to the old paradigm of divorce as a matter of 'fault' and as a 'clean break', the ethic of justice is principally concerned with the rights and duties men and women derive from their biological status as parents or their level of individual culpability in the dissolution of the marriage 'contract'.[25]

Sevenhuijsen (1998) argues that an ethic of justice is essentially a rights-based position bounded by contractarian moral reasoning (often referring to the idea as an 'ethics of individualistic rights'). This is seen clearly in the case of child custody and post-separation family arrangements, especially where fathers' rights groups and their lawyers argue that if the government obliges men to pay then in return they should be granted visiting rights. Despite its surface appeal, this model of reasoning has two main difficulties. First, it leads to a perception of children as 'goods' or entities to be possessed, and to which the law has a duty to guarantee access. Of course, this perception is inherent to the contractarian model of reasoning that was formulated and developed as a framework for establishing property rights and thus cannot be convincingly applied to the politics of child custody.[26] Second, these rights may be awarded, or at least argued for 'even if this is against the interest of others' (Sevenhuijsen 1998, p. 100).

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[25] Although at the level of family law this is balanced by a predominant consideration of the 'best interests of the child'.

[26] Sevenhuijsen convincingly argues that even the work of contractarians such as Rawls – who sought to extend the vocabulary and principles of contract theory beyond property rights to apply to matters of distributive justice, freedom and access to social services – is inappropriate in the area of child custody (Sevenhuijsen 1998 p. 105).

It is, however, difficult to dismiss a role for rights-based arguments in the field of family law. This is because legally established rights are often what we rely on in circumstances where decisions about people's lives based on ethics of care, compassion or mutual agreement have manifestly failed. Moreover, by their very nature, rights-based legal arguments are in the business of weighing up the competing 'rights' of separate parties. Even so, adhering exclusively to an ethic of justice can obscure the existence of complex moral dilemmas. 'As long as we can tell ourselves that we are acting within our rights' Sevenhuijsen argues, we can 'shut ourselves off from the suffering of others' (Nedelsky 1988 cited in Sevenjuihsen 1998, p. 100).

In contrast, an ethic of care starts from a different set of principles, focussing more on responsibilities and the quality of relationships than on the adherence to rules and individual rights. An ethic of care is also less concerned with abstract principles and more interested in concrete situations. Caring is viewed as a moral activity rather than simply a set of principles to be followed. Where an ethic of justice principally asks 'what are the highest normative principles and rights in situations of moral conflict' the central question of an ethic of care is 'what is the best way to deal with dependency, vulnerability and responsibility in specific situations?' (Sevenhuijsen 1998, pp. 107; 109). Smart and Neale argue:

> There are rarely solutions to disputes over children, but it may be possible to treat mothers, fathers and children with more care than is currently the case. The ethic of justice promises dispute resolution, but the ethic of care seeks to sustain a dialogue without diminishing the sense of worth and the dignity of the individuals involved. … [C]ircumstances continue to change … there can be no way that things are 'put right' once and for all. Once it is possible to see post-divorce parenting as a process rather than a contract, it becomes feasible to think in terms of flexible guidelines which emphasise the need for ethical procedures rather than final adjudications (Smart and Neale 1999, p. 197).

Using an ethic of justice

In their study of separated parents, Smart and Neale found that the language and framework of the 'ethic of justice' is often counterproductive in establishing workable and positive post-separation relationships. The 'classic view of family law courts in England in the 1950s' is still active in the moral reasoning of some of the participants in their study:

> We found that some parents took the view that a marriage was akin to a contract and that the one who broke the contract – or 'guilty' partner – should be punished, often by not having contact with the children (Smart 2000, p. 13).

The case of a man whose wife left him provides an example of this reasoning:

> … as far as I'm concerned, as little time they spend with her the better. Because she keeps saying 'I love them, I miss them' But if she did love them like I do, then I don't think she'd have done what she's done… If it's a mutual separation, which this one wasn't then, yeah. But in this case, no – she'd made her choice and that's it (quoted in Smart 2000, p. 14).

Another example of this reasoning is from a woman whose husband had left her:

> I wouldn't want my husband to have shared responsibility. … He walked out
> on me, he walked out on the kids. So to me he doesn't have a say in their lives
> … and probably a lot of people would feel the same where they've walked out
> and they've lost everything (quoted in Smart 2000, p. 14).

Using an ethic of care

Although questions of power, justice, fairness and rights remain important
components of post-separation family life, Smart and Neale found that relinquishing
an ethic of justice in favour of an ethic of care was a vital factor in establishing and
sustaining successful post-separation arrangements (Smart 2000, p. 12). In attempting
to establish initial arrangements and re-negotiate when circumstances change, many
parents were able to use very different moral reasoning, reasoning that is more
consistent with an 'ethic of care'.

The ideal of genuine co-operative parenting on separation may often be difficult for
parents to achieve, largely because the ideal was never achievable in the parent's
marriage. However, despite this, some parents manage to keep their parenting
'quarantined' from their other marital struggles. Even so, the ideal itself challenges
family members to alter their 'moral horizons', requiring them to 'take account of
each other much more self-consciously than before' even though this must occur 'at a
time when the other is often most disliked' (Smart and Neale 1999, p. 71).

The key skill in making this difficult adjustment, is the ability of parents to self-
reflect. In Smart and Neale's study, parents who are able to self-reflect were more
flexible and successful in their post-separation parenting. This flexibility enabled
them to alter previously fixed ideas of how they 'should' behave or what they were
'entitled' to in any given situation, both in terms of their responsibilities to the other
parent and in terms of their access to and relationship with their children.

As Table 4 shows, the cases described by Smart and Neale do not paint a rosy picture
of post-separation life, either for the parents or the children. Indeed, some of the
pictures painted in the case studies are far from pleasant. But what they clearly
identify is that while many parents do not always behave in a constructive fashion,
many are able to reflect on their parenting and their behaviour towards the other
parent in ways that lead them to change for the better their attitudes, beliefs, and
behaviour. As individuals were confronted with unprecedented personal decisions
and dilemmas, rather than drawing on old prescriptions for behaviour they were
forced to ask new questions, come up with new answers, challenge old beliefs and
tolerate ambiguity.

The ability to create positive post-separation family environments, then, depends to a
large extent on the ability of family members to be moral actors. 'Moral action' in
this instance refers to critical self-reflection and behaviour modification rather than to
absolutist principles of following pre-given rules about how to behave. Thus the
capacity to ask and answer – according to a moral framework – the central question of
post-modern individualisation, 'How shall I live?', appears also to be an essential
ingredient determining the success or otherwise of new living arrangements and

relationships in post-separation families. Understanding post-separation families through the framework of morality, or the ethic of care, it is possible to see that

> … parents are making difficult moral decisions when they plan how to care for the children after divorce. ...Some take more care over these decisions than others and ... sometimes, even by their own admission, they may make unwise decisions. But they are operating within a moral framework not, as the moral absolutists would argue, simply enacting 'selfishness, egoism and destructiveness' (Smart and Neale 1999, p. 135).

Thinking differently about children

In trying to identify the characteristics of parents who were self-reflective and those who were not, Smart and Neale found few common themes. Although at times there appeared to be a relationship to social class, educational differences, and gender these relationships could not be fully supported by the data, although a reasonably strong relationship seemed to exist between the capacity for self-reflection and being the primary carer of children. The primary difference, however, was the way parents viewed their children. Ultimately, they concluded that 'it was the parents' understandings of what a child was and what a child was 'for' that made the most difference to the nature of post-divorce childhood' (Smart and Neale 1999, p. 111). In other words, families that recognised and valued children as active, rather than passive, agents were particularly successful in their post-separation relationships.

> The extent to which parents were willing to see their children as separate persons with their own needs and perspectives strengthened or undermined the 'real' relationships which the children sought. The children appreciate that their wishes often had to be subordinated to the 'larger' claims and demands of their parents' lives. But when parents consistently refused to allow them room for negotiation or eroded their sense of personhood children sometimes abandoned the effort to make co-parenting 'work' by voting with their feet and reducing, or even terminating contact (Wade and Smart, forthcoming 2003).

Concerns about the effects of divorce on children often rely on a concept of childhood as a passive condition that requires protection from the harsh realities of life. This is especially true in relation to the unpleasant details of parents' marital relationship, the complexities of which children are considered to be incapable of understanding. Whilst in many ways this is a reasonable position to take, very often it leads to the phenomenon discussed in Section 4 – that being 'kept in the dark' about their parents' impending separation can cause later adjustment difficulties. Instead, as Pryor and Rodgers argue:

> … children's understandings and views are remarkably accurate and sophisticated. Their preferred form of families is essentially conservative; they want to live with both parents in a family that is happy and supportive. Where this is not their situation, or it changes, they are both pragmatic and resilient in adapting to family change and incorporating altered family structures into their understanding of families (Pryor and Rodgers 2001, p. 258).

Table 4   Reflecting on family change: Case studies[a]

Changing gender roles	Caring about the other parent	Prioritising the children	Caring about the self	Changing behaviour
Leon: "If we were still together I would be doing the usual stereotyped father role. … I'd have said, you look after them today, I'm going to play golf. … But I made a conscious decision … that I was going to see my children grow up and give them the best that I can. …. She had a view of what a typical father was … (s)he didn't want me to be around too much. For her the divorce was not seeing me any more. … Now her mum says 'Oh you're a good father to them. It was a new experience for both of us." (p. 78)	*Felicity*: "I think the very , very important thing is to respect each other and to show a commitment that you are – although you don't love each other any more – you care about the two children that you are bringing up together and there's that element that I think is beginning to move out of our family unit. Dan is stopping that caring for how I feel about what's happening to the children." (p. 131)	*Leon*: "My priority is for the children, to see them every day and it makes it very difficult for me to have a separate life. My life away from them doesn't really exist. Everything I do, they are at the core of it and I don't want to do anything that would jeopardise the relationships with the kids." (p. 81)	Nick suggested to his ex-wife, Stella that that they get back together. Stella's reaction was as follows: *Stella*: "I thought 'I can't afford not to consider this because of the boys … I thought, 'I don't want to open all those boxes that I've dealt with and put away and ... look at all of that again.' And I thought, 'Well I'm going to have to. And for a couple of weeks I got very depressed and I did … look at everything and then I just thought 'That's the best decision I ever made in my life and I'm really glad I did it…' sometimes he's really dangerous, really aggressive and frightening … I didn't realise how submissive he'd made me". (p. 122)	*Bella*: "I was having various boyfriends and so on. … And a work colleague said 'What do you think your daughter's gonna think of you?…All of a sudden the penny dropped and I stopped and I thought 'I'm not getting anywhere ... I was scared of being lonely actually. … [I]t's difficult not see your own problems … it's easy to blame everything but it's more difficult to sit and say 'Well, it's me …' But I was lucky because I went into a shop and I saw this book and I ... read it and it clicked for me and – I thought 'Oh yeah, right, change your ways,' but not everyone can do that.' " (pp. 127-8)
Delia: "He's probably better with them now than he was when we were married. He actually spends time with them which he didn't do before." (p. 104)	*Ingrid:* "I think it's hard for me to say but I think it's probably [Andrew (son) and John (father)] have a really close relationship… I do not want to deprive Andrew of it. [At the time of separation] I was anxious about how he would retain his contact with his father. …[H]e's got a good relationship with his father and he's got me working really hard to ensure this side [of the arrangements]." (p. 132)	*Felicity*: "I still feel a little bit odd if I've had three days on my own and then suddenly the house is full of children. But I've got very much better at not pouncing on them the second they get in the door and bombarding them with questions…I know I used to do that a lot and I think it was not helpful and I'm much better at just letting them be there … generally I think I'm better with the changeovers. I'm better at letting them go too…" (p. 83)		
Keith: "I think I've been more loving towards them, more soft … probably because I'm the one looking after them … Its changed in that way." (p. 93)				

[a] All quotations are taken from Smart and Neale (1999).

Another common view of children is that, as passive subjects, they are silent and powerless victims with little agency of their own. In one sense this is a reasonable position to take because they have little direct say in the parents' decision to separate and only limited say in how their post-separation lives are to be arranged. Within these limits, however, children can be active agents with capacity for moral reasoning and reflection about themselves and their situation. Indeed, the capacity for moral action in post-separation family relationships is not to restricted to adults. Contrary to popular belief, children are not simply passive objects in a game over which they have no control, but rather, are active moral agents who play an important role in post-separation family functioning.

Smart and Neale's 1999 study prompted two further studies exploring children's experiences of post-separation life. The first study was a follow up of 52 children of parents interviewed in the 1999 study now living in a variety of arrangements (Smart 2002). The second study examined the experiences of 60 children who were in some form of shared care that required them to move between households (Smart, Neale and Wade 2001; Wade and Smart forthcoming 2003). The rationale behind these studies was not simply to give children a 'voice' in ways that had previously been overlooked, but also to explore the idea of 'children as social actors' and their current experiences of family change rather than focusing on the difficulties that they may experience at separation, or on how they turn out as adults. This means,

> … moving beyond the developmental and dependency paradigms which have dominated previous research in this field. We do not assume, for example, that children should be regarded as the passive victims of their parents' divorce, nor that differences in their intellectual, moral or social capacities mean that their views and experiences are of less value than those of adults. Thus we have looked at how children rise to the challenge of their new childhoods, exploring their perceptions of the positives as well as the negatives of co-parenting, and their means of influencing their families and actively contributing to family life (Wade and Smart forthcoming, 2003).

Through these studies, it became apparent that children as well as parents can readily be considered to be moral actors in the post-separation family. Despite the relative powerlessness of children in the face of their parents' decision to separate and their parents' power to shape the conditions of their everyday lives, children nevertheless 'have considerable scope for influencing and impacting upon those around them and are faced with a range of situations and choices about which they make decisions' and can thus be regarded as 'social and moral actors' and 'active participants in the family'. As such they play a role in re-negotiating their relationships with their parents after separation as well as with new family members such as partners and new siblings (Smart, Neale and Wade, 2001; Wade and Smart forthcoming 2003). Children are able to do this re-negotiation in accordance with ethical principles that they modify, learn and create.

Children often interpret their new situation and the accompanying decisions and dilemmas in terms of 'fairness'. Their concept of what is fair often begins as a quite rigid framework of dividing themselves more or less equally between their parents, taking account of their parents' other obligations, especially their work commitments.

For example:

> James (9): I think … when they split up they decided that I should spend equal time at both houses or else it wouldn't really be fair. [This way] nobody's got an advantage with me.

> Josh (9): It's fair to everybody I think. Because I see the same amount of my mum and my dad (in Wade and Smart forthcoming 2003, p. 11).

However, depending on the situation, the quality of the relationships and the child's perceptions of their own needs, their assessment of what is fair in a given situation will be modified. Thus, on a day-to-day basis children are faced with moral decisions and dilemmas that require them not only to take account of the needs of others but also of themselves:

> Beth (14): Dad doesn't think its fair me spending more time at mum's. But it does work out fairly because he's got all his meetings to go to and I'd be really fed up and wanting to go home and see my friends (in Smart, Neale and Wade 2001, p.92).

What was 'fair' was far more complex than it may have seemed initially, to the point where a parent who stuck to a rigid division of time was eventually considered by the child to be 'unfair'.

> What [children] sought was to achieve a settlement capable of accommodating the varying needs of different family members in as flexible and reasonable a way as possible (Wade and Smart forthcoming 2003, p. 18).

Children also think hard about the quality of relationships between their parents and their parents' happiness. For example:

> Selina (16): I'd love to have one permanent base and have mum and dad living there because I want to spend time with those two people … [But] I'd much prefer this moving house every week, and them to be happy than to have it the other way (in Smart, Neale and Wade, 2001, p. 93).

> Nick (14): It's almost made it easier, however, our mum and dad not living together, because before there were arguments and things like that and it was really difficult to live. But now that they've moved apart, they're both much happier and much more relaxed (in Smart, Neale and Wade, 2001, p. 77).

For these children, their definition of what a family is focuses on the quality of its relationships rather than whether it conforms to a particular structure or pattern:

> Louise (9): My family is nice, friendly, kind, present-giving. I can make friends with my family [No contact with non-residential parent] (Smart, Neale and Wade 2001, p. 58).

Q: What's it like living in your family?
Bobby (8): We laugh a lot. We've got a new cat and a garden … Its' quite an ordinary family … It was good when they splitted up because they use to argue a lot … It's better now, lots better (Tenuous contact with non-residential parent) (Smart, Neale and Wade 2001, pp. 58-9).

Q: What would be an ideal family?
Karl (14): It's important to be … sort of open … [you can] just be yourself. (Smart, Neale and Wade 2001, p. 58).

To the extent that children are interested in the 'normality' of their family life, however, some describe their situation as 'normal'.

Quentin (13): We're a normal divorced family (Smart, Neale and Wade 2001, p. 65).

Q: Can you tell me what your family is like?
Ursula (18): I don't know, I'd say, like, really normal, I'd say, yes, just normal
Q: What makes it normal?
Well, we've never had any big family feuds in the street, which I would class as a bit weird … My mum and dad get on alright, they don't have big arguments ... they sit and talk, there's no tension there (Smart, Neale and Wade, 2001, p.64).

These findings have some bearing on Amato's conclusion, referred to in Section 4, that children prefer that their parents stay together and do not *care* about their parent's wellbeing. In commenting on this conclusion, Amato asks a rhetorical question about morality and the transfer of values in the process of family change.

If we assume that children learn about social relationships from observing parents, then what lessons do these inexplicable divorces teach children about commitment, fidelity, and the long-term dependability of intimate relationships? (Amato 2001).

The implication of this rhetorical question is that divorces, especially in marriages that don't on the surface seem to be too bad, will distort or diminish these basic values of commitment, fidelity and dependability in the eyes of children and will herald a generational demise in moral education and development. However, the work of Smart and her colleagues suggests that children do, in fact, care about their parents' wellbeing *and* about themselves. They are fully capable of learning and applying an ethic of care and by doing so they, too, are learning to become adept moral philosophers. They thus become equipped with the skills to deal with and negotiate, according to a moral framework, the complexities of a reflexive life under the uncertain and risky conditions of late modernity.

Moreover, it is equally possible that by not *expecting* or *requiring* children to care about their parents as individuals children may learn that moral action – the task of weighing up the interests of self and others in any particular context – is unimportant and irrelevant to them. Ironically, expecting that children should not have to care that

the most important people in their lives are miserable appears to be an excellent way to teach children selfish individualism – that they can always get what they want without regard for the needs of others. By watching their parents 'hanging on in quiet desperation' (in the words of the famous song by *Pink Floyd*),[27] they may well learn that the price of commitment, fidelity and the long-term dependability of intimate relationships is far too high. This price is especially high in a society where future citizens must be skilled at fashioning their own sense of identity and biography in the face of new and uncertain risks.

Given the undesirability of 'being alone' in a hostile world, new moral foundations for establishing and maintaining satisfying and relevant relationships must be found. These foundations are best forged out of the experience of living under new conditions rather than attempting to revive systems that served as the foundation for old and long past social and economic conditions.

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[27] 'Time' (Words by Roger Waters) from *The Dark Side Of The Moon*, Pink Floyd. June 1972

6. Conclusion

In my twelve years of counselling separating couples, I have only known of one person that I could honestly say was not trying hard enough.

Relationship Counsellor[28]

In recent years public debate, policy development and research has been preoccupied with the concept of 'family breakdown'. This focus may provide some limited benefits. For example, it may assist in preventing the breakdown of families that could otherwise be supported to stay together happily and learn new skills to resolve their difficulties. It may also assist in supporting children who are experiencing significant difficulty and trauma as a result of their parents' breakdown. In the few cases where parents are less inclined to consider the impact of their decisions and behaviour on their children, it may encourage them to think more carefully.

But if the downside to family change remains the sole or predominant focus of policy, research or debate, we are unlikely to make significant progress in facilitating the development of robust new forms of family life that work in an ever-changing and increasingly complex world.

Family separation is clearly not an either/or situation in which children 'lose' when parents 'win'. Although the pitfalls of separation mean that it is also not accurate to describe family change as a 'win/win' situation, it is nevertheless true that

> … (a)n element in family success is creating a situation in which adults can live with some self-respect and some measure of personal fulfilment. It does no good to talk about successful families in terms of child development if meeting those goals destroys the adults who must bear and care for those children (Garbarino 1995, pp. 52-3).

For the vast majority of parents who separate, the decision is extremely difficult and one in which they carefully weigh up their own needs, their children's needs and very often those of their estranged partner. Separated parents make choices that 'risk loss to themselves or agree to arrangements which are … inconvenient in order to reduce the stress on the children' (Mark 1987, p 62), but these choices are not necessarily achieved by abandoning responsibility for self-care or denying their own needs or desires.

The increasing awareness that parents have continuing responsibilities to their children despite the dissolution of the marital relationship is an important development in family and social policy and has the potential to improve the situation of many post-separation families. However, this responsibility is not limited to parents 'staying together for the sake of the children' as some would argue, nor is it simply limited to providing financial support or ensuring greater equality of access parents to their children. Rather, as Burnard argues, parental responsibility in both intact and separated families 'requires adults to work at becoming psychologically

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[28] This comment was made during a session to workshop the ideas in this paper with a large and long-established relationship counselling agency.

mature parents' (Burnard 2000). An important aspect of psychological maturity is the ability to self-reflect – to critically review one's own behaviour and attitudes according to its consequences for others as well as for self. Children, too, are emerging from family separation with a new agency – as active, moral agents and not simply as passive victims of their parents' decisions. In light of this, policy that seeks to improve family relationships would do well to heed the lesson that, despite rapid and diverse change in family life,

> … a basic core remains which refers to the sharing of resources, caring, responsibilities and obligations. What a family is appears intrinsically related to what it does…While there are new family forms emerging, alongside new normative guidelines about family relationships, this does not mean that values of caring and obligation are abandoned. On the contrary, these are central issues which continue to bind people together (Silva and Smart 1999, p. 7).

Families are changing, but they are doing so for reasons far more complex than a decline in moral values and the rise of selfish individualism. Modern parents face a complex world with competing pressures, unique risks and fewer collective guidelines about how to live their lives and about what constitutes moral action. But far from selfishly sacrificing children on the altar of parental sexual and personal gratification as conservative commentators would have it, for the most part, parents and their children are engaged in an intense project of re-inventing family life in a rapidly changing world.

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