

Changing Families in



Even in the short course of Australian history since Federation, there have been profound changes in family structure and values that continue to generate resentment and uncertainty. In order to understand where the family is heading, it helps to know whence it has come.



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In the 1970s the marriage rate declined. Young people delayed marriage and having children. They increasingly entered into de facto relationships. Openly homosexual relationships became more widespread.

The divorce rate spiralled. Sole-parent households proliferated. So did other household arrangements, such as stepfamilies and group households.

At the same time the feminist and gay liberation movements challenged the old certainties about the family and sexuality. Feminists challenged patriarchal power in the family, drawing attention to such issues as domestic violence and legal rape in marriage. Gay activists challenged the heterosexual norm, drawing attention to discrimination against homosexual relationships.

Nobody was quite sure what was happening to the family. But one thing *was* clear. The family could no longer be taken for granted. We could scarcely understand where the family was heading if we did not know whence it had come. Suddenly the history of the family became interesting, and captured the attention of historians.

In Europe, historians focused their attention on the shift from agricultural societies to industrial

societies. Historians such as Lawrence Stone (1977) and Jean-Louis Flandrin (1979) demonstrated dramatic shifts in family structures and values between the 1500s and the 1800s. Generally speaking, they emphasised the increasing importance of the domestic group of parents and children, at the expense of wider kinship and community ties.

In Australia, the historian Patricia Grimshaw (1979) observed that the Australian family was “born modern”, relatively unencumbered by kinship and community. The British transported their convicts – *and* their family forms and values. Grimshaw’s observation was a reasonable one. Yet it also deflected attention from the extent of family change in the course of Australian history.

Since the 1970s a growing body of research has demonstrated that even in the short course of Australian history since Federation, there have been substantial changes and variations in family structure and values (Reiger 1985; Gilding 1991; Haebich 2000). This article maps out the dimensions of family change over the past one hundred years in Australia. In particular, it focuses upon the changing structure of households, and the panics

Australia



1901-2001

and anxieties around families in the public sphere. Recurring anxieties around the family reflect the extent of family change over the past one hundred years.

Federation families

One hundred years ago, at the time of Federation, Australian families were relatively enmeshed in wider relationships and solidarities – if not compared with earlier times, then certainly compared with today (Gilding 1991: ch. 3). There were three aspects to these wider relationships.

First, the wealthiest households produced many goods and services in the home, which are now purchased through the market. They also subscribed to an ethic of hospitality, welcoming guests into their homes for short-term and long-term stays. In turn, they depended upon a battery of specialised servants. More commonly, middle-class households relied upon a “general” servant. In 1901, 11 per cent of Sydney households employed servants, and domestic service was the main source of employment for women.

Second, households across the class spectrum consistently accommodated extended kin as

required. Australian society was only just beginning its experiment with the welfare state and the living wage. Women and children were especially vulnerable in the absence of a welfare state, and so were the unemployed and the disabled. The family was the main welfare institution for these people, and the diaries and memoirs of the era consistently reflect the coming-and-going of extended kin, depending upon economic exigencies.

Finally, working-class households were commonly crowded and economically precarious. Crowding promoted life on the streets. The photographs of working-class neighbourhoods at the turn of the century are full of curious neighbours and children. Economic insecurity promoted flexible household arrangements. For example, in 1901 there were as many Sydney households with a lodger (11 per cent) as there were with a servant. A lodger was one way to make a household more viable in the context of economic insecurity.

In the wake of Federation there was a lively debate about the effects of economic insecurity on the family. The upshot was the cautious introduction of welfare support for the elderly and the disabled, and the introduction of a “living wage”,

based on the amount required for a man “to lead a human life, to marry, and bring up a family” (Ryan and Conlon 1975: 50).

Selfish women

The most controversial aspect of family life one hundred years ago was the declining birth rate. The birth rate started falling in the 1880s, and fell sharply in the 1890s. By the 1900s there was a growing moral panic about the declining birth rate.

The high-water mark of this moral panic was the 1903 Royal Commission on the Decline of the Birth-Rate and on the Mortality of Infants in New South Wales. The Royal Commission consisted of senior public servants, politicians, doctors and businessmen. There were no women. The witnesses before the Commission were also men, with one single exception.

The findings of the Royal Commissioners were never in doubt. Their final report observed that “the reason invariably given by people for restricting procreation is that they cannot con-

declared that the use of birth control was an attack on the “value of the family as the basis of social life”. It also warned that birth control jeopardised Anglo-Saxon sovereignty in Australia and imperial prospects in the nearby region.

There are several interesting points about the debate over birth control in the early 20th century. First, here was a debate about the future of the family, warning that the family was in dire peril. In other words, there is a long history of moral panics around the family.

Second, the point of departure in this debate was what was “natural”. The family was understood as a realm of nature. Having an unlimited number of children was “natural”. Birth control of any sort

was “unnatural”, and nature would wreak its revenge in this event.

Finally, the public debate about the future of the family at the turn of the century was overwhelmingly



niently afford to rear more than a certain number of children”. This was “not the real reason”. Expert witnesses referred to an “unwillingness to physical discomfort, the strain and worry associated with childbearing and childrearing”, and a “love of luxury and of social pleasures, which is increasing” (Royal Commission 1904: 17, vol.1). These elements added up to “selfishness” – by which they really meant women’s selfishness.

The Royal Commissioners warned about the “dire consequences” to health of contraception for women. “The nervous system is deranged; frequently distress of mind and body are caused; the general health is often impaired, and sometimes ruined; and inflammatory diseases are set up which disable the reproductive organs” (Royal Commission 1904: 20, vol.1). Abortion caused illness, sterility and death.

The Commissioners also warned against the moral consequences of birth control. For example, it quoted the Archbishop of Sydney, who commented that birth control “lowers the whole view of what marriage is for; it turns the marriage into a mere sexual compact” (Royal Commission 1904: 26, vol.2). In general terms, the Commissioners

conducted by men. Some commentators have described this regime in terms of “public patriarchy”. Such a situation is inconceivable today. There may be a long history of moral panics around the family, but the character of these moral panics has certainly changed.

The postwar family

By the postwar decades of the 1950s and the 1960s the family had undergone substantial change. Consider, first, the structure of the family. In the postwar decades the nuclear family reached its high-water mark, with the nuclear family being more widespread than ever before in Australian history (Gilding 1991: chs 3-4). There were several reasons for this.

First, households with domestic servants had all but disappeared. Only the very wealthy now kept servants. The main agents of this transformation seem to have been the servants themselves. On the whole, young women did not enjoy domestic service. As the manufacturing, retail and service sectors expanded, young women left domestic service in droves. As they left, the upper and middle classes had no choice but to reorganise their homes and their lifestyles. In turn, more women of all classes became “housewives”.

Second, the growth of the welfare state meant that the family was less often required to accommodate extended kin in times of difficulty. The family was still a crucial welfare institution for most people. But it was no longer the first port of call. Government pensions, for example, promoted the ability of the elderly and disabled to support independent households.

Third, the “long boom” of the 1950s and 1960s promoted marriage and family formation. Men and women married younger than ever before. More men and women married than ever before. By implication, there were fewer unmarried women (and to a lesser extent men) who stayed at home looking after their parents. There were also fewer unmarried men (and to a lesser extent women) who entered into lodgings with another family.

In this context, the idea of “the family” became much more important in public discourse. “The family” became a common reference point in government reports and the social sciences. More than this, the reference point was heavily normative. The counterpoint of “the family” was the “broken

on the sociology of the family – *Marriage and the Family in Australia*, edited by the anthropologist and Anglican lay preacher Professor A.P. Elkin. The publication was precipitated by the visit to Australia of the English founder of the marriage guidance movement. It emphasised that the family could *not* be taken for granted.

Marriage and the Family in Australia was especially concerned with the changing character of marriage and the rising divorce rate. In the last years of World War II, the divorce rate had risen to unprecedented levels. The demographer W.D. Borrie, a contributor to the book, observed that divorce – and juvenile delinquency – had replaced the birth rate as “maladjustments now threatening family”. He drew comfort from the fact that the divorce rate had fallen since the end of the war.

Harold Fallding, another social scientist, reported on pioneering research about the roles of husbands and wives. Fallding (1957) observed that the majority of couples in his small-scale sample were in “patriarchal” marriages. They accepted the division of labour between breadwinner and housewife as

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family”. By definition, the broken family was not really a family. It was a fragment of the family, caused by “family breakdown”.

At the turn of the new millennium conservatives often hark back to the “traditional” family of the postwar decades. There is an implication that the “traditional” family is the nuclear family, with the male breadwinner and the housewife. Yet the family of the postwar decades was not really “traditional” in any meaningful sense of the word. It was certainly a far cry from the “traditional” family of pre-industrial societies. In particular, it was much more uniform in its nuclear composition across social classes.

Family maladjustments

Looking back today, it often seems that the postwar family was stable and uncontroversial. Marriage was more popular than ever, nuclear households were more widespread than ever, and there was a “baby boom” underway. It was easy to see the family as a “natural” and taken-for-granted institution.

In close connection, the moral panic around the declining birth rate had all but disappeared. This was partly because of the baby boom, fuelled by more marriages and earlier marriages. It was also because birth control was no longer seen as a threat to the family. Indeed, birth control was increasingly viewed as an instrument of “family planning”, facilitating a better quality of family life. It was symptomatic that in 1948 the Racial Hygiene Association – a eugenics organisation responsible for Australia’s first birth control clinic – renamed itself the Family Planning Association.

Yet there were still anxieties in the postwar decades around the family. This was reflected in the publication in 1957 of the first Australian study

natural, justifying the authority of men. This view of marriage was being challenged by couples who framed their marriages in terms of “partnership”. These “partnership” couples emphasised equality, at least in principle. At the same time, their marriages were more unstable than patriarchal marriages – at least to the extent that they really did involve partnership and equality.

For his part, Elkin observed that the primary functions of the family had changed. The main function was now “the provision of an emotionally satisfying centre” for the development and health of the individual. This new function called for a more “democratic partnership form of marriage”, which was more demanding than the “former authoritarian form”. He urged that marriage be understood as “a vocation”, requiring “special training”.

The most striking aspect of the new approach was its emphasis upon the family as a social institution. At the turn of the century, the main criticism of birth control was that it was “unnatural”. By the 1950s nature was no longer a point of reference for healthy families. Rather, as the sociologist Kerreen Reiger (1985: 3) has observed, the family was “a set of rational and manipulable social practices”. It was now too important to be left to the vagaries of nature.

There was also a substantial change in the attitude towards authority in the family. At the turn of the century, the public discourse on birth control was overwhelmingly masculine, assuming patriarchal authority in the family. By the 1950s patriarchal authority was no longer taken for granted. There was growing attention to partnership and democracy in families.

New millennium families

From the 1970s there was increasing diversity in household and family types, at the expense of the nuclear family. There were five main reasons for this diversity.

First, women increasingly joined the workforce and, in turn, depended less on the institution of marriage for their welfare. There was the breakdown of the old division of labour between breadwinner and housewife. Women increasingly delayed marriage and having children, and they were also more willing and able to leave marriages.

Second, governments in the 1970s introduced supporting parents' benefits for women (in 1973) and men (in 1979). This was the last major extension of the welfare state. From the 1980s the tide turned. There was now pressure to roll back welfare benefits, but the supporting parents' benefits survived. Supporting parents' benefits meant that single mothers were more able to keep their children. It also meant that women were more able to leave violent and unhappy marriages.

view emphasises the ebb and flow of family relationships. In particular, it highlights that the postwar family of the 1950s and 1960s is not a reliable benchmark against which to measure the families of the new millennium. It is neither "natural", nor "normal".

We can see the same ebb and flow in marriage. One hundred years ago there was widespread delayed marriage, and marriage was far from universal. In the postwar decades there was a marriage boom. Today, marriage rates are more like those of one hundred years ago than those of the 1950s and 1960s. Again, the postwar family is not a reliable benchmark.

Of course, the picture is more complicated than this. At the time of Federation, never getting married living with parents or extended family, or working as a servant, or living in lodgings. Nowadays it often means living in a de facto relationship, or living in serial relationships, or living in a gay relationship.

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Household diversity at the time of Federation involved relationships and solidarities beyond the nuclear family – including extended kin, neighbours, servants and lodgers. One hundred years later diversity is associated with single-parent families, stepfamilies, and childless couples.

Third, there was the prolonged education of children, with more children completing secondary school and more children going on to university than in the past. Prolonged education meant that children joined the workforce at a later age. The cost of having children progressively rose and, in turn, the fertility rate progressively declined. It became more acceptable to have one child or no children at all.

Fourth, the sexual liberation movements challenged the traditional family. Feminism promoted equality and democracy in marriage, encouraging women to leave violent and oppressive relationships. Gay liberation promoted openly gay relationships. The Sydney Gay Mardi Gras became one of the largest community parades in Australia, celebrating alternative sexualities and relationships.

Finally, the ethic of "individualisation" – the pursuit of personal autonomy and self-fulfilment – became progressively more widespread (McDonald 1988: 40-7; Beck 2000: 164-74). Individualisation fuelled the exploration of new relationships, lifestyles and sexualities. It also provided a new rationale for getting married and having children. Marriage and children were increasingly understood as personal choices, not destiny – or necessity.

In the wake of family diversity, it became less common to make the distinction between "the family" and "broken families". Instead, there was a growing tendency to speak of "families", and different types of families. The different types included sole-parent families, stepfamilies, blended families, gay families, extended families, couple families – and not least, intact families.

There is a sense in which family structure has gone a full circle – from diverse families, to nuclear families, and back to diverse families again. This

kin, neighbours, servants and lodgers. One hundred years later diversity is associated with single-parent families, stepfamilies, and childless couples. Often it involves "fragments" or recombinations of the nuclear family.

These are big changes. No wonder that there is such a passionate debate about the dynamics of these changes, and whether they are for better or worse!

Family stories

There are two main stories that are told about the family over the past one hundred years. These stories are told not only in Australia; they are told across western societies. Increasingly they are told in other societies also.

The first story is a conservative view, framed in terms of the "breakdown" or "fragmentation" of the family (Eastman 1989; Popenoe 1993; Lyons Forum 1995). Once couples got married and had children. Strong families were the basis of strong nations. In the course of the last one hundred years there has been a decline in cultural and moral values. Nowadays individuals pursue their own selfish goals at the expense of the family. The most obvious losers are children. But there is a wider social cost in terms of alienation, crime and drugs.

The second story is a liberal view, framed in terms of "choice", "flexibility" and "democracy" (McDonald 1988; Gilding 1991; Giddens 1998: 89-98). Once men ruled public and private life. The rules around marriage and sexuality were prescriptive. Women and children were immensely vulnerable. In the course of the last one hundred years there has been a transformation in the role of women. Nowadays individuals choose whether or not they will get married, what type of sexual

relationship and lifestyle they will have, whether or not they will have children, and whether or not they will stay married.

Conservatives and liberals agree that individuals have become more important at the expense of families. They disagree about the implications of this shift, and whether it should be welcomed or not. Conservatives mobilise around the restoration of “family values”, although they are not always sure about how far back this restoration should go. Liberals mobilise around “choice”, although they are not always sure how far this choice should extend.

Whatever the case, the changes in the family are deep-seated and international – similar to the decline of the birth rate one hundred years ago. As the British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1998: 91) has observed: “We are dealing with profound processes of change in everyday life, which is well beyond the capacity of any political agency to reverse.”

By the same token, the changes in the family are not



running along a pre-determined pathway, impervious to political and social agency. Different countries have very different histories, and they have different patterns of fertility, marriage and divorce. Conservatives and liberals mobilise around changes in the family because there is something at stake.

The American sociologist Francis Fukuyama (1999) thinks that the dramatic changes in the family over the past three decades – what he calls “the great disruption” – are over, at least for the moment. He may be right. The moral panic around the family seems less shrill now than was the case in the 1970s and 1980s. In close connection, the interest in the history of the family has fallen away. The brief flurry of histories of the family in Australia is well and truly over.

Then again, dramatic developments in biotechnology may unleash a new wave of family change and controversy. There will certainly be new anxieties and moral panics concerning the future of the family. And just as our (great) great grandparents would be surprised – and perhaps appalled – by the families we have fashioned for ourselves at the beginning of the new millennium, no doubt we would be no less surprised – and perhaps appalled – by the families fashioned by our descendants another one hundred years down the track.

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