

Editorial: family, work and well-being over the life course

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In the last few decades of the twentieth century major changes occurred in work and family life in Australia. Women entered the work force at unprecedented rates. This change was particularly marked for wives and mothers, who increasingly added paid work to their family responsibilities (Baxter 2002). Men's average employment hours and real wages declined (van Wanrooy et al. 2007). Households came to depend on women's earnings as well as on men's, and the dual-earner household became a normative family form. Concurrently, social attitudes became more liberal (Bittman and Pixley 1997), rates of marriage declined (de Vaus 2004), the number of couples divorcing increased (Hewitt et al. 2005), the number of couples living together before or instead of marriage rose dramatically (de Vaus 2004), young women's educational attainment outstripped young men's (Craig et al. 2010), women delayed childbearing and couples had smaller families (McDonald 2000).

Arguably, these changes meant greater personal freedom and more financial independence for women. Concomitantly, however, there was concern that the family as an institution was being undermined. A discourse emerged in popular debate about the loss of traditional values and the breakdown of family life. There was a renewed focus on the ideals of motherhood (Manne 2005; Maddox 2005). According to some opinions, family relationships had become transitory, contingent and unreliable, and the social fabric less stable as a result.

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Since the early twenty-first century, however, there has been a surprising reversal of some of the trends noted above in Australia. In 2008 divorce rates were at their lowest in 20 years (ABS 2009a); fertility rates were at their highest in 30 years (ABS 2009b); marriage rates are no longer in decline (ABS 2009c). There has been a shift in some social attitudes. Values and beliefs about work, family and gender roles are now more traditional than they were 30–40 years ago (van Egmond et al. 2010). Parental time with children, rather than diminishing as widely feared, has risen (Craig et al. 2010). Women's workforce participation has held steady, rather than continuing to increase. Although men's average work hours have continued to decline, a higher proportion of full-time employees are working very long hours than in times past (van Wanrooy et al. 2007). The gender division of labour in households with young children has become more pronounced (Craig et al. 2010).

While these recent trends may indicate a resurgence of traditional family values, other trends suggest that this is not necessarily the case. For instance, the increase in fertility is highest amongst women aged 30–39 and de facto couples (ABS 2009b); the majority of marriages now follow a period of cohabitation (ABS 2009c); and more same-sex couples are rearing children (Perlesz et al. 2006). Households continue to depend on the economic contributions of women for financial stability. Young people leave home and form independent households later than earlier cohorts, while at the other end of the age spectrum people are living longer (Pusey 2003). These latter trends have potential flow-on effects to other members of the family, who may be called upon to provide new levels of financial support, accommodation or unpaid care.

This special issue of the *Journal of Population Research* brings together contributions that examine trends and issues in family and work from a lifecourse perspective. Earlier versions of the papers were presented at a workshop at the University of Queensland in July 2011, funded by the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia. We begin the special issue with a paper by Kristy Muir and Abi Powell, which provides a comprehensive overview of the well-being of young people in Australia. The paper challenges existing approaches to understanding how well young people are faring by examining the overlap and intersections between a wide range of life domains, including unpaid work, health, social engagement, civic engagement and risky behaviour. The paper highlights the precarious position of young people who are not engaged in either employment or education, and stresses that for young people struggling to make the transition into employment or further education, there is a need for policy solutions that encompass a variety of life domains.

The next paper, by John Murray and Leanne Cutcher, also investigates issues to do with the work and family life of young people. The authors take a qualitative approach and examine the imagined family and work futures of young people enrolled in a business school at an elite Australian university. The paper demonstrates that amongst this group of university students before entering the work force, anticipated choices in relation to combining career and family are strongly gendered. For the young men in the study, the idea of combining work and family seemed relatively unproblematic. To the extent that they thought about it, they envisaged a future in which they would be the primary breadwinners. In contrast, the young women were much more likely to have given the matter thought,

and most were anticipating a clash between career and family. Some planned to be proactive by investing heavily in their careers before family formation, whereas others were more reactive and planned on targeting certain industries and jobs that were considered family friendly.

The third paper continues the theme of combining work and children for women and examines the work penalty for motherhood. Anna Zhu draws on and develops this relatively large literature and examines the direct and indirect costs to women who have three or more children compared to women who have two children. The paper demonstrates that women who have three or more children are much less likely to be in the workforce than women with smaller families. The results suggest that this is due to the propensity (or selection effect) of some women to have large families rather than because mothers with more children are more likely to have young children in the household. The paper emphasizes the additional work penalties for women who have larger families.

In the fourth paper Liana Leach and Peter Butterworth investigate work-family spillover for couples. They extend the broad literature on the interconnection of home and work by examining the ways in which job characteristics influence couples' relationships. The findings clearly demonstrate a strong negative relationship, for both men and women, between psychosocial job adversity and perceptions of support from partners. These findings suggest that in a society in which job conditions are increasingly deteriorating and becoming less secure, there are likely negative implications for couples' relationships.

The final paper by Edith Gray, Siew-Ean Khoo and Anna Reimondos broadens the scope of the special issue beyond paid employment and family, by examining unpaid work in the form of volunteering. The paper finds that the extent and nature of volunteering differs markedly over the life course. Young people have the lowest rates of volunteering. Volunteering peaks during mid-life during the core child-rearing years. During this stage of the life course people tended to volunteer in sport, recreation and education. The rate of volunteering declined slightly in older age, and people tended to volunteer in the community and welfare sectors.

While the stability of recent work and family trends is uncertain, one thing is clear, pathways through the life course now look very different from a generation ago. For many years it has been documented that the traditional life pathway that included stable employment for men over their adult life, stable marriage, family and children, and nearly universal home-ownership is a remnant of the past. As the papers in this special issue show, work and family trajectories over the life course are no longer this straightforward. This has implications for policy. Much policy formulated in the latter half of the twentieth century was based on the assumption that the life course followed a standard path but with increasing diversity this may need to be rethought. A core theme of the papers in this special issue is the need for more flexible and encompassing policies that embrace the lived reality of people's work and family lives for all stages of the life course.

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