

## Towards understanding the reasons for divorce

**Ilene Wolcott and Jody Hughes**



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Working Paper No. 20, June 1999



Australian Institute  
of Family Studies

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National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Wolcott, Ilene.  
Towards understanding the reasons for divorce.

Bibliography.  
ISBN 0 642 39466 0.

1. Divorce - Australia. 2. Family - Australia. I. Hughes, Jody. II. Australian Institute of Family Studies. III. Title. (Series : Working paper (Australian Institute of Family Studies) ; no. 20).

306.890994

Designed by Double Jay Graphic Design  
Printed by Impact Printing

ISSN 1440-4761

# Contents

List of tables	iv
Abstract	v
Acknowledgements	vi
About the authors	vi
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Social context of marriage and divorce</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Previous studies</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Australian Divorce Transition Project</b>	<b>4</b>
Aims	5
Sample selection	5
Demographic profile	5
Methodological problems and conceptual issues	6
<b>Perceived main reason for divorce</b>	<b>7</b>
Affective reasons	8
Abusive behaviours and personality traits	9
External pressures	10
Other reasons	11
Reasons: combined categories	11
Summary	12
<b>Demographic and life course factors</b>	<b>12</b>
Asset wealth	13
Summary	14
<b>Initiating separation</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Seeking assistance during the marriage</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Preparation for divorce</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Post-divorce reflections and life satisfaction</b>	<b>17</b>
Feelings of regret about separation	17
Aspects of current life satisfaction	19
Summary	20
<b>Conclusions and implications</b>	<b>21</b>
Strategies for supporting marriage and family life	22
Future research	24
<b>References</b>	<b>25</b>

## **List of tables**

1. Demographic profile (percentages) by gender
2. Demographic profile (averages) by gender
3. Perception of main reason for marriage breakdown by gender
4. Combined main reason for marriage breakdown, by gender
5. Who initiated the separation, by main reason: women's reports and men's reports
6. For those who sought help or advice during the marriage: where sought help or advice, by gender
7. Whether or not sought help during marriage, by main reason for marriage breakdown: women's reports and men's reports
8. Women's post divorce reflections by main reason for marriage breakdown
9. Men's post-divorce reflections by main reason for marriage breakdown
10. Women's reports of main reason for marriage breakdown, by aspects of life satisfaction
11. Men's reports of main reason for marriage breakdown, by aspects of life satisfaction

## Abstract

The personal, family and community consequences and costs of high rates of marriage breakdown and divorce have focused national attention on developing policies and strategies to prevent family breakdown. Among the most frequently asked questions are: Why do marriages break down? What are the reasons for divorce? How can marriage and family relationships be strengthened?

The data presented in this paper are drawn from the Australian Divorce Transitions Project, a random national telephone survey of 650 divorced Australians, conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in late 1997. The survey collected information on the perceived main reason for divorce – the focus of this Working Paper. The survey also included information about whether assistance was sought during the marriage, aspects of post-divorce adjustment, and reflections of regret. These aspects are examined in relation to the main reason for divorce.

The majority of men and women in this study mentioned affective dimensions of their marriage relationship – encompassing communication problems, incompatibility, changed lifestyle desires and instances of infidelity – as the main reason for their divorce. The dominance of relational reasons may reflect the higher expectations of self-fulfilment in marriage and decreasing tolerance of unsatisfying relationships observed by many commentators on marriage and divorce. Differences between men and women emerged where abusive behaviour was cited as a main reason.

Implications for implementing strategies to strengthen marriage and family relationships, and further research agendas, are discussed in this paper.

## Acknowledgement

Appreciation is extended to Bruce Smyth, Research Officer at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, for his contribution to the methodology section. Thanks are also offered to Institute researchers Ruth Weston, Grania Sheehan and Peter Saunders for their useful advice, and to Lawrie Maloney, La Trobe University, for providing helpful comments on an earlier draft of the paper.

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# Towards understanding the reasons for divorce

## Introduction

The personal, family and community consequences and costs of high rates of marriage breakdown and divorce have focused attention in Australia (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs 1998) and overseas ( Home Office 1998, Commission on the Family 1998) towards developing national policies and implementing strategies to strengthen marriage and family relationships.

Stable and satisfying marriages contribute to men's and women's improved physical and psychological health and longevity as well as their material wealth (Waite 1995) and to better outcomes for children's wellbeing (Silburn et al. 1996; Amato and Booth 1997). However, these protective benefits of marriage for adults and children appear to apply only in marriages that are not highly conflictual (Amato and Booth 1997) or beset by severe mental health problems in a spouse (Sanders 1995; Halford and Markham 1997). Waite (1995) also cautions that some marriages may result in no benefits and even harm to family members. Similarly, stable cohabiting relationships may also provide some of these positive outcomes for adults and children (Waite 1995; Glezer 1997).

Most young adults when surveyed about relationships indicate that they want to marry and have a committed, trusting, respectful relationship for themselves and for any children they may have (Harris et al. 1992; Barich and Bielby 1996; de Vaus 1997). Thus, among the most frequently posed questions in the literature and policy debates surrounding the incidence of divorce are: Given such high expectations of marriage, why do these relationships break down? What are the reasons for divorce? How can divorce be prevented? (Amato and Rogers 1997; Council on Families in America 1995; Commission on the Family 1998; Glenn 1998; Home Office 1998; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs 1998; Mansfield et al. 1999).

An examination of the reasons given by men and women for their marriages ending can contribute to efforts at both national and community levels to assist men and women develop the knowledge and skills that may enable them to achieve more satisfying couple and family relationships, and ameliorate the tensions and distress that can lead to relationships breaking down. The emphasis can be on strengthening relationships as much as preventing relationship breakdown (Markham et al. 1997).

This paper, based on data collected as part of the Australian Divorce Transitions Project, conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in late 1997, focuses on the reasons that 650 divorced men and women gave for their marriage ending. The paper examines the reasons for divorce in relation to selected demographic and socio-economic factors, who initiated separation, whether assistance was sought during the marriage, whether the couple prepared for their final separation, aspects of post-divorce adjustment, and reflections of regret.

## Social context of marriage and divorce

Any attempt to explain the reasons couples separate and divorce must take into account both the nature of marriage as an institution within a given social and cultural context, and its particular meaning for the individuals involved. Remarkable that the dramatic increase in the lifetime divorce probability (from 10 per cent to more than 50 per cent in

the United States and to 40 per cent in Australia since the 1960s) cannot be explained only at the personal or micro level. White (1990:904) aptly states: 'In addition to asking why some marriages are more likely to fail than others, we also need to examine changes in the social institutions that structure individual experience.'

Contemporary marriage and family relationships are formed and maintained in an environment of greater choice in how people can live their lives than has been possible for past generations (Lewis 1999; McDonald 1988). The social environment of marriage today encompasses the legal recognition of a variety of personal relationships and sexual behaviours, the removal of the social stigma of illegitimacy and divorce, the availability of effective contraception, the enactment of sex discrimination legislation to provide equal access for women to education and employment opportunities, and the availability of financial support for sole parenting (Cherlin 1992).

In such a society, individuals are not necessarily dependent on a traditional marriage or family structure to survive or to pursue productive lives (Cherlin 1992; Popenoe 1988; Chester 1980). Nye and Berardo (1973:500) argue that in an affluent society where men and women can earn higher incomes, or a welfare safety net can provide for the minimum needs of children and other family members: 'This type of society provides an alternative to unsatisfactory marriages.' Within the community, an ideological emphasis on personal growth, individual rights and choice may thus conflict with an ethos of responsibility, compromise and commitment (Bellah et al. 1985; McDonald 1988).

Contemporary expectations of marriage (Wolcott and Glezer 1989; Giddens 1992; Harris et al. 1993) place a high value on meeting the somewhat ambiguous desires for mutuality, intimacy, happiness and self-fulfilment, a more daunting task, perhaps, than fulfilling the more modest and rigidly defined expectations associated with traditional 'breadwinner husband' and 'homemaker wife' roles.

Such expectations, whether realistic or not, can be severely tested over the course of married life when couples are confronted with the reality of caring for children or elderly parents, managing work demands, paying bills and doing mundane household tasks. When these more ordinary events are compounded by employment insecurity, low income or illness, there can be added strain on the marriage (Karney and Bradbury 1995).

Several researchers (Glenn 1998; Amato and Rodgers 1999) have observed a tendency for perceived marital quality to have declined over the past several decades, a phenomenon that they suggest is associated with increased expectations of marriage and favourable attitudes towards divorce.

As Warwick Hartin (1988:10), the former executive director of the National Marriage Council of Australia (now Relationships Australia), has suggested: 'Whereas formerly marriages were held together by external pressures, economic necessity, and fear of social disapproval, now marriages stand or fall according to the strength of the emotional bonds between the partners.' Amato and Booth (1997:220) concluded that 'the threshold of marital unhappiness required to trigger a divorce' has declined over time.

Nevertheless, the structural aspects of today's environment (the impact of intensified pressures at work, insecure employment and income) in generating stress on family stability should not be overlooked (National Council for the International Year of the Family 1994; Amato and Rogers 1997; Morehead et al. 1997).

## **Previous studies**

Numerous studies have identified multiple factors associated with the risk of marital failure (Clarke and Berrington 1999; Glezer 1994; Kurdek 1993; Karney and Bradbury 1995; Ono 1998; Olson and Larson 1989; Van Widenfelt et al. 1997; White 1990) and the perceived causes of marriage dissatisfaction and breakdown (Amato and Rodgers 1997; Burns 1984; Cleek and Pearson 1985; Gigy and Kelly 1992; Gottman 1994; Kitson et al. 1985; Karney and Bradbury 1997; Wolcott 1984). These researchers have described the

factors leading to marital breakdown in terms of demographic and life course variables, psychological characteristics, and interpersonal couple and family variables.

Demographic and life course characteristics most frequently linked to the risk of marriage breakdown and divorce include early age at marriage, cohabitation and pregnancy prior to marriage, low education and income, parental divorce, non-traditional family values, previous marriage, women's employment (Amato and Rogers 1997; Glezer 1994; Ono 1998; Sarantakos 1994; White 1990) and mental illness (Karney and Bradbury 1995).

Carmichael et al. (1997) suggest several of these demographic factors, such as young age at marriage, early pregnancy and low income, are interrelated. According to Kurdek (1993:238), in terms of relationship dynamics, these demographic risk factors represent 'a general lack of preparation for or doubtful competency in performing marital roles or resolving interpersonal conflict constructively' by either or both partners.

Consistently cited marital problems perceived by men and women as the cause of divorce include poor communication, basic unhappiness, loss of love and incompatibility, infidelity, mental illness or emotional problems, conflict over men's and women's roles, and spouses' personality traits (Burns 1984; Cleek and Pearson 1985; Gigy and Kelly 1992; Noller et al. 1997; Wolcott 1984).

Studies that identify or predict the 'risk indicators' and 'risk factors' (Stanley and Markham 1998) associated with marital distress and increased risk of marital failure are important because they can assist in targeting couples who might benefit from prevention programs. This knowledge can also suggest what factors or processes might be able to be modified to make marriages more satisfying and enduring. According to Bradbury (1998:30), longitudinal studies are necessary 'to help explain how variables assessed early in marriage exert their influence over time to produce dissolved versus intact marriages and marriages with varying degrees of satisfaction'.

However, in his review of previous studies of divorce predicting dissolution, Gottman (1994) claims that the effects of many of the demographic predictor variables, although statistically significant, are small. One explanation is that the impact of socio-demographic factors may be more indirect, acting as mediating or moderating variables that affect relationship expectations and behaviours including patterns of communication and conflict that may lead to divorce (Amato 1996; Karney and Bradbury 1995).

Since many demographic predictors of divorce are static dimensions that can not be altered, Gottman (1994) and others (for example, Stanley and Markham 1998; Noller et al. 1997) have concentrated on couple communication interactions as 'precursor events' that affect marital satisfaction. Gottman (1993:60) identifies a 'trajectory toward marital dissolution' in which couples who divorce 'remain unhappily married for some time, seriously consider dissolution, actually separate, and then divorce'. While admitting that he has no causal evidence, Gottman (1994:110) nevertheless proposes the following 'cascade' model which predicts marital dissolution based on laboratory observation of negative and positive couple marital interaction. In this model either partner may be the initiator or responder in ways that produce the following pattern: complaining and criticising leads to contempt, which leads to defensiveness, which leads to listener withdrawal from interaction (stonewalling). These 'Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse' result in marital distance and loneliness.

While this theory does not disregard the impact that early family of origin experiences and inherent personality traits may have on couple behaviours that lead to marital dissolution (Karney and Bradbury 1995), the focus is on the processes of negative couple interaction, whatever their cause, that leads down the pathway to divorce.

Since many marriages that appear to be unhappy or have elements of dissatisfaction still remain intact, the processes that contribute to marital unhappiness may not necessarily be the same ones that result in divorce (Gottman 1994; Wallerstein 1996). Researchers have pointed out the confusion between measuring marital stability – a precise event – and marital quality – a more amorphous condition (Levinger 1976; Karney and Bradbury 1995).

The common conclusion to all studies on prevention of relationship breakdown and causes of divorce is that a constellation of factors, not one dimension, is responsible for 'the cascade toward marital dissolution' (Gottman 1994). Hopper (1993:803) found that although divorced individuals usually mentioned only one or two motives for their divorce, in his view: 'Divorcing situations were immensely complex – so complex and indeterminate that any number of outcomes could have resulted.'

Thompson (1960:1) has noted: 'The aetiology of marital relationships is very complex, and the factors involved operate at different levels. In some marriages a given set of circumstances constitutes a threat which brings about deterioration in the relationship, while in others it calls forth a positive response and a strengthening of the ties between the couple.'

Applying social exchange theory to relationships, marital breakdown, according to Levinger (1976), is determined by a complex balance between how well each partner's expectations are met, the *attractions* and *barriers* to maintaining or dissolving the relationship, and the perceived alternatives to leaving the marital situation. South and Lloyd (1995) concluded that the risk of marital dissolution is highest when spousal opportunities for developing alternative relationships exist. Udry (1981) posited that individuals often take an 'inventory' of the advantages and disadvantages to marital dissolution. These costs and benefits may be both psychological and social in origin.

Karney and Bradbury (1995:22) emphasise that to comprehend how marriages 'develop, succeed and fail' over time, it is essential to understand the individual histories and *enduring vulnerabilities* that each spouse brings to the marriage that mediate marital outcomes. These are the demographic, historical, personality and experiential factors of individual temperament and family history that are essentially unchangeable. These researchers also emphasise that marital stability and quality are influenced by the differing *stressful events* that couples encounter, and their *adaptive processes*, or the way that couples are able to respond to these circumstances.

Arguing that the pathways to divorce can not be conceptualised as an orderly and sequential process, Hopper (1993:801) offers the view that: 'The motives people used to explain their divorces can only be understood as rhetorical devices that imposed a sense of order onto situations that were otherwise fraught with ambiguous and contradictory events, emotions, and inclinations towards behaviour.' Weiss (1975), too, asserted that partners develop an 'account' of the marital breakdown which enables them to accept and integrate the event into their lives. Events in the marriage may be reinterpreted, a partner's behaviour redefined, and reasons emerge to justify the decision to divorce. Amato and Rogers (1996:13) also suggest that 'spouses define certain behaviours as problems only when they have already given up on their marriages and are about to break up, anyway'.

Markman's (1984) longitudinal study of marriage found that initial premarital predictors of marital satisfaction could change over time with some losing salience and others gaining relevance.

Consistent differences have been found in how men and women report the causes of marital breakdown. Bernard's (1972) view that there are two versions of any marriage ('his' and 'her's) would seem to be equally applicable to perceptions of the reasons given by either spouse for the causes of their marriage breakdown (Cleek and Pearson 1985; Eells and O'Flaherty 1996; Kitson and Raschke 1981; Ponzetti et al. 1992).

## **Australian Divorce Transition Project**

The data presented in this Working Paper are drawn from the Australian Divorce Transition Project (ADTP), a random national telephone survey of 650 divorced Australians. This survey, conducted in late 1997 by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, examined the divorce transition and its consequences for parents, and investigated the impact of divorce

on an older cohort for whom the issues of employment, housing, superannuation and future security are important concerns.

The survey collected information on demographic characteristics, marital history, household composition, parenting arrangements and child support, property division, spousal support, education, work history, housing, and personal wellbeing.

As part of the survey, data were collected on the main reason given by respondents for their marriage breakdown. Information was also obtained on who initiated final separation, whether assistance or advice was sought during the marriage and from whom, whether there was any preparation for the final separation, and whether respondents regretted separating.

### ***Aims***

The main aims of the Working Paper are:

- To describe the main reason perceived by divorced men and women to be the cause of their marriage breakdown. The reasons respondents give for their marriage breakdown may provide some directions for strategies to foster more satisfying relationships (Markham et al. 1997).
- To examine the reasons given for divorce by selected socio-economic status, couple, family and individual characteristics of respondents. This may be helpful in understanding risk factors and targeting groups that can benefit from interventions to prevent marriage breakdown and promote satisfying relationships (Stanley and Markham 1997; Gottman 1994).
- To explore any associations between perceived reasons for divorce, some pathways to final separation (for example, who initiated separation, whether advice was sought, preparation for final separation), aspects of post-divorce adjustment (for example, satisfaction and wellbeing), and reflections of regret.

### ***Sample selection***

The sample comprised 650 divorced people who separated after January 1988, and who lived in all states and territories except Western Australia.<sup>1</sup> The project on which this paper is based was designed to include not only parents with children under the age of 18 years at separation, but also older divorced people, regardless of whether or not they were parents (although about half of this group had at least one child under 18 years).

Specifically, 513 parents (284 women and 229 men) had a child under 18 years of age at the time of separation, and 137 were older women and men (77 women, 60 men) from 'long-term marriages' – that is, were in marriages of at least 15 years duration, and in which the wife was aged between 45 and 65 years at separation. (See Behrens and Smyth (1999) for a detailed description of the study design and samples.)

### ***Demographic profile***

Tables 1 and 2 present the demographic profile of female and male respondents. Table 1 shows that about 80 per cent of respondents were from the parent sample. As a result of stratified sampling, 63 per cent of respondents lived in urban centres; around two-thirds lived in either Victoria or New South Wales, and most of the others lived in either Queensland or South Australia.

Women and men were of a similar age (43 and 46 years respectively), had been married for an average of 14 years, and had been separated for six years on average (Table 2). Both women and men (58 per cent and 46 per cent) were most likely to indicate that they had no post-secondary school qualifications. Women were less likely than men (18 per cent compared with 34 per cent) to report that they had received a diploma or vocational training, were less likely to be in paid work (68 per cent compared with 78 per cent), and

were marginally more likely to indicate that they were tertiary graduates (24 per cent and 20 per cent respectively).

Women were more likely than men to rely on social security as their main source of income (33 per cent compared with 12 per cent), to have significantly lower personal and household incomes (for example, median personal annual gross income of \$20,000 compared with \$30,000 for men), and to be single (71 per cent compared with 58 per cent). These differences are consistent with prior research conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (for example, Weston 1986, 1993).

### ***Methodological problems and conceptual issues***

Several methodological problems and conceptual issues warrant brief mention. First, while the survey design can detect associations between the main reason given for marital dissolution and other factors, it cannot determine the direction of these associations –

**Table 1. Demographic profile (percentages) by gender (N=650)**

	<b>Females (n=361)</b>		<b>Males (n=289)</b>	
	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Sample</b>				
Parent sample	284	79	229	79
Long-term marriage	77	21	60	21
	361	100	289	100
<b>State / Territory</b>				
VIC	117	32	75	26
NSW	123	34	100	35
QLD	62	17	63	22
SA	34	9	33	11
TAS	13	4	7	2
ACT	8	2	7	2
NT	4	1	4	1
	361	100	289	100
<b>Geographical location</b>				
City* (including ACT)	216	63	174	63
Country (excluding NT/TAS)	128	37	104	37
	344	100	278	100
<b>Education</b>				
No post-secondary school	209	58	132	46
Diploma/vocational training	66	18	98	34
Degree	85	24	58	20
	360	100	288	100
<b>Employment status</b>				
In paid work	246	68	225	78
Not in paid work <sup>#</sup>	114	32	64	22
	360	100	289	100
<b>Marital status</b>				
Single	254	71	167	58
De facto	44	12	54	19
Re-married	61	17	68	24
	359	100	289	100
<b>Main source of income</b>				
DSS recipient	116	33	40	12
Not a DSS recipient	238	67	245	88
	354	100	285	100

Notes: Major metropolitan cities were defined in line with Australian Bureau of Statistics Statistical Divisions. <sup>#</sup> includes those looking for work. Sub-totals may not sum to respective n because of missing information. Source: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1999.

**Table 2. Demographic profile (averages) by gender (N=650)**

	Females (n=361)			Males (n=289)		
	Median	Mean	SD	Median	Mean	SD
Age (years)	42.00	42.83	8.26	45.00	45.8	9.34
Years of marriage	13.00	13.97	7.83	13.00	13.96	8.18
Number of years since separation	6.00	5.84	2.29	6.00	5.93	2.26
Personal gross income	\$20,000	\$23,328	\$15,467	\$30,000	\$37,622	\$50,583
Household gross income	\$26,250	\$34,252	\$25,775	\$40,000	\$49,508	\$55,307

Source: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1999.

that is, causality. Thus no claim can be made that certain factors *lead to* the marital dissolution or vice versa.

Second, as the focus of the study was post-divorce transitions and consequences, it did not examine how the quality and stability of marriages may change over time, an important consideration in the development of early intervention strategies to prevent marriage breakdown (Gottman 1994; Karney and Bradbury 1995; Stanley and Markham 1998). The focus of the study was on those who had experienced divorce. No assumption is made that our results generalise to de facto relationships.

Third, since respondents were asked to nominate only the main reason for their divorce from a pre-coded checklist, there was no opportunity for the analysis to cluster responses into more thematic dimensions which could further illuminate the multiple threads to perceived marriage breakdown (Gigy and Kelly 1992). The category 'other' did provide for an open-ended response which resulted in several codes being added to the checklist and to the ability to infer meanings from the codes.

Fourth, as with most studies of divorce, the information is based on retrospective self-reports. The accuracy of the information is thus dependent not only on respondents' candour, but also on recollections of facts and feelings that may have occurred years before and at a time when respondents were under stress (Hopper 1993). However, current perceptions of these reasons can be important in their own right for they may well influence evaluation of current and future circumstances, including subsequent relationships.

Fifth, the unit of analysis was a spouse – not a couple – from a dissolved marital union. Moreover, scant information was obtained about respondents' former spouses. Thus there are limits to checking the accuracy of the data or to clarifying whether men's and women's understanding and perceptions were shared (Cleek and Pearson 1985; Amato and Rogers 1997).

Finally, since not everyone is accessible by telephone, the omission of certain groups of people in the population available through telephone surveys sets limits on the generalisations that can be made from the data to the Australian population at large. Among those who are often systematically excluded in such surveys are the very poor, those with unlisted numbers, and those who have hearing or English language difficulties.

## Perceived main reason for divorce

Respondents in the Australian Divorce Transition Project were asked, 'What would you say was the main reason for your marriage ending?' The 17 respondents who did not reply to this question are excluded from the remaining analysis.

For simplicity of discussion, and later to extend the analysis, the majority of responses have been grouped under three major dimensions that correspond to those described in the literature (Gigy and Kelly 1992; Cleek and Pearson 1991; Kitson with Holmes 1992). The categories are: 'affective reasons', 'abusive behaviours' and 'external pressures'. Additional responses have been coded in a category called 'other'.

### *Affective reasons*

Consistent with most other studies of marriage breakdown (Burns 1984; Eells and O’Flaherty 1996; Wolcott 1984; Ponzetti et al. 1992), Table 3 shows the most common reasons given by respondents for their marriage ending centred around the affective qualities of the relationship including communication problems (27 per cent) and incompatibility/drifted apart (21 per cent). Communication problems was the most commonly cited cause for both men (33 per cent) and women (23 per cent). Similar proportions of men and women felt that incompatibility/drifted apart was the major cause.

Some studies have found that higher proportions of women than men mention complaints about communication (Gigy and Kelly 1992). Others have also reported gender agreement on this dimension (Burns 1984; Cleek and Pearson 1985). Such differences may be related to how respondents’ reasons are expressed and then interpreted into specific codes. For example, Burns (1984) included ‘lack of common interests’ in the ‘lack of communication’ category. In the ADTP, the category of ‘incompatibility/ drifted apart’ included statements originally coded as ‘other’ that expressed loss of love, trust and changed values and lifestyle demands or desires. For example: ‘There was a lack of love, we grew apart emotionally.’ ‘We had completely different ideas on our way of life and the way we lived.’ ‘We changed differently and grew separately.’ ‘Just basic incompatibility with different interests.’ Or more simply: ‘Just two people growing apart.’

Only a small proportion of men and women (less than 2 per cent) specifically mentioned sexual incompatibility as a main reason for divorce.

As with incompatibility or drifted apart, communication problems can be either a shorthand or a global attempt to verbalise an array of situations connected with emotional erosion in the relationship – not being understood, feeling that needs are not being met, loss of affection and companionship, feeling lonely and unappreciated. Such reasons are likely to be symptoms of problems with deeper psychological or social roots (Simons 1999).

### *Infidelity*

While often categorised separately, as in this study, infidelity often connotes a deterioration in the affective and emotional realm of the marriage associated with loss of love, betrayal of trust, indifference and growing apart (Glass and Wright 1997).

**Table 3. Perception of main reason for marriage breakdown by gender (n=633)**

Main Reason	Women (n=354)		Men (n=279)		All (n=633)	
	%	n	%	n	%	n
<b>Affective issues</b>						
Communication problems	22.6	80	33.3	93	27.3	173
Incompatibility / ‘drifted apart’	19.8	70	22.6	63	21.0	133
You or former spouse had an affair	20.3	72	19.7	55	20.1	127
<b>Abusive behaviours</b>						
Physical violence to you or children	9.6	34	0.4	1	5.5	35
Alcohol/drug abuse	11.3	40	2.5	7	7.4	47
Emotional and/or verbal abuse	2.5	9	1.1	3	1.9	12
<b>External pressures</b>						
Financial problems	4.0	14	5.7	16	4.7	30
Work/time	1.7	6	3.9	11	2.7	17
Family interference	0.3	1	1.1	3	.6	4
Physical/mental health	4.2	15	5.4	15	4.7	30
<b>Other</b>						
Spouse’s personality	0.8	3	1.4	4	1.1	7
Children problems	2.0	7	.7	2	1.4	9
Other	.8	3	2.2	6	1.4	9

Notes: Missing cases=17 (no reason given).  $\chi^2(11)=59.38, p<.001$  (women’s reports versus men’s reports). Source: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1999.

Infidelity was perceived as the main provocation for divorce by 20 per cent of both men and women. For the majority, it was a spouse's infidelity that was the precipitating factor. Only 11 respondents, eight of whom were men, claimed their own infidelity as a reason.

The discrepancies between reported spouse and self attributions of infidelity as a major reason for divorce can be influenced by a respondent's reluctance to admit that his or her own behaviour may have been involved (South and Lloyd 1995). Respondents may also have been more inclined to see personal infidelity as the consequence of other problems (such as incompatibility) that led to the marriage breakdown.

However, the impact of infidelity as a reason for divorce may depend on the meaning individuals attach to its importance. Some may tolerate an affair in the relationship for a variety of reasons, while for others infidelity is a fundamental and unforgivable breach in the marital contract (Vaughn 1986; Hartin 1988).

The dominance of affective reasons given by respondents as the main perceived cause of their marriage breakdown confirms the emphasis placed on the emotional closeness and companionship dimensions of relationships that appear to define contemporary marriages (Wallenstein and Blakeslee 1995; Gottman 1994; Giddens 1992).

### *Abusive behaviours and personality traits*

A range of personality characteristics and behaviours attributed to oneself or, more frequently, one's spouse, have been mentioned in the literature as reasons for marriage breakdown. Often included in this category are alcohol and drug use problems, jealousy, dominance, immaturity, gambling, physical and emotional violence, and mental illness (Thurnher et al. 1983; Burns 1994; Wolcott 1984; Amato and Rogers 1997).

#### *Alcohol and drug abuse*

In the ADTP, 11 per cent of women and 3 per cent of men reported alcohol or drug abuse as the main reason for divorce. Although the responses did not distinguish between whether it was the respondent or their partner who had an alcohol or drug abuse problem, previous studies have found that wives are more likely than husbands to nominate negative personality traits of their spouse including alcohol and drug use and emotional and physical abuse (Kitson and Sussman 1982; Cleek and Pearson 1985).

#### *Physical, verbal and emotional violence to self or children*

Of the 6 per cent of respondents who reported that physical violence was the main reason for marriage breakdown, all but one of the 35 were women. In six of these cases, physical danger to a child was the reason.

Since respondents were only asked if physical violence to themselves was the main reason for marriage breakdown, men would not have had the opportunity to indicate that their own aggressive behaviour toward their wives was a main cause of divorce, a more commonly reported situation in the literature (Holtzworth-Munroe et al. 1997).

Verbal and emotional abuse was cited as a main reason by only 2 per cent of respondents, in the main, women. Again, depending on how respondents interpreted the meaning of this reason, aspects of this form of abuse could have been subsumed in other responses related to a spouse's personality traits or communication problems.

The presence of physical violence or emotional abuse may not be alluded to as the main reason for divorce. A recent Australian survey of the incidence of spousal violence during marriage and/or after separation (Sheehan and Smyth 1999) found fairly similar proportions of men (55 per cent) and women (62 per cent) reported experiencing physical violence including threats by their former spouse. Emotional abuse was reported by 84 per cent of women and 75 per cent of men.

Marital therapists report that between 40 to 60 per cent of couples seeking marital therapy have experienced episodes of violence in their relationship although only between 6 and

10 per cent of clients spontaneously mention violence as an issue. Incidents of violence often emerge during the course of interviews or through responses to checklists on dealing with conflict (Wolcott and Glezer 1989; Ehrensaft and Vivian 1996; Holtzworth-Munroe et al. 1997). In this context it may be useful to note that definitions of violence can be narrow or broad incorporating a wide range of behaviours (Sheehan and Smyth 1999).

### *External pressures*

Factors outside the interpersonal relationship may impinge on the relationship generating stress leading to marriage breakdown.

### *Mental and physical health*

Physical and mental health reasons were not recorded as separate complaints in the ADTP, so mental health conditions were not able to be interpreted as aspects of other behaviours such as alcohol abuse or extreme jealousy which some respondents may have assumed in their responses (and other studies have so categorised). Physical illness and mental health problems have often been incorporated within the category of external pressures and are so included in this analysis (Kitson and Sussman 1982).

Approximately 5 per cent of both men and women reported physical or mental health as the main reason the marriage ended. It is not possible to determine whether, in some cases, respondents would have included alcohol and drug use, or some forms of emotional abuse, as a mental health reason.

Physical and mental illness can increase stress in relationships and lower marital satisfaction. Poor health can strain finances, affect sexual relations, and create tensions around caring and the division of labour – leading to diminished marital satisfaction (Booth and Johnson 1994). Illness can also bring couples closer together, depending on the nature of the illness, supports available and levels of marital cohesion. Depression and other mental health illnesses appear to have a greater impact on marital satisfaction than many physical illnesses (Schmaling and Sher 1997).

According to Halford and Bouma (1997:293): 'Marital distress and psychological disorder reciprocally influence each other.' Marital problems can generate or exacerbate some psychological disorders but individuals with psychiatric disorders are also less likely to develop satisfying marriages (Kurdek 1998).

### *Financial problems*

Only 5 per cent of respondents claimed financial problems were the main cause of their marriage ending. Some studies have attached greater importance than this to financial problems as a reason for marriage dissolution (Burns 1984; Cleek and Pearson 1985, 1991). This discrepancy could be explained by the fact that respondents in the ADTP were asked to nominate the *main* reason for divorce whereas other studies allowed multiple reasons to be given without ranking them in order of priority.

It is also possible that couples may not recognise that concerns about income or insecure employment may underline some of the stresses and tensions in the relationship that contributed to its breakdown. Financial hardship can increase isolation, emotional stress, depression and lower self-esteem, which, in turn, can generate or exacerbate marital tensions (Kinnunen and Pulkkinen 1998; Yeung and Hofferth 1998). Marriage counselling and family support agencies have suggested that financial strains have a negative impact on relationships and family life (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs 1998; West-Meads 1993).

Responses did not allow the analysis to tease out the control of money as a possible concern as distinct from inadequate finances. The way finances are handled in a marriage can represent underlying issues of power and authority in a relationship that may contribute to overall dissatisfaction (Scanzoni 1982).

## Work

Despite recent attention to increased pressures and hours of work in a competitive economic climate, and the effect on families attempting to balance work and family life (Glezer and Wolcott 1998; Morehead et al. 1997), work issues and work and family time were cited by only 3 per cent of respondents as the primary reason for divorce. Work-related demands and pressures that generate tension and stress may go unrecognised. However, they can spill over into family life in the form of lack of time, emotional and physical energy to invest in the partnership and children, which can lead to marital conflict and dissatisfaction (Thompson 1997; Glezer and Wolcott 1998).

Approximately 63 per cent of women were in the workforce at the time of separation. Again, disagreements over appropriate gender roles and the allocation of work and family tasks, and autonomy and independence in the relationship, while not specifically mentioned as a reason for the marriage ending, may have been incorporated into responses of incompatibility or aspects of a spouse's personality (Greenstein 1995; Heaton and Blake 1999).

## In-laws

Interference from in-laws as a main reason was mentioned by few respondents.

## Other reasons

Although the intensive years of child raising has been associated with a decrease in marital satisfaction (Glenn 1998), few respondents (2 per cent), either men or women, mentioned problems with children as the main reason for the ending of the marriage. Several respondent comments referred to a partner's attitude to children as the cause. It is possible that concerns about parenting values and disagreements about raising children were subsumed in responses of communication, incompatibility or spousal personality issues.

## Reasons: combined categories

The individual perceived causes of divorce were collapsed into three broad categories (affective issues, abusive behaviours, external pressures) to create a better opportunity for meaningful statistical differences to emerge. The 'affective issues' category included: communication problems, incompatibility/drifted apart, an affair by you or former spouse. The 'abusive behaviours' category included: physical violence to you or children, alcohol/drug abuse, and emotional or verbal abuse. The 'external pressures' category included: financial problems, work/time, physical/emotional health issues and family interference.

The responses 'spouse's personality' and 'problems with children' did not fit clearly within this conceptual framework given the way interview responses were recorded. Therefore, all the cases in which these reasons were reported, plus those coded as 'other', were excluded from the analysis ( $n = 25$ ).

As Table 4 shows, 71 per cent of all remaining men and women perceived affective issues as the main reason for marriage breakdown. Abusive behaviours were mentioned as the

Table 4. Combined main reason for marriage breakdown, by gender ( $n=608$ )

Main Reason	Women ( $n=341$ )		Men ( $n=267$ )		All ( $n=608$ )	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Affective issues	65.1	222	79.0	211	71.2	433
Abusive behaviours	24.3	83	4.1	11	15.5	94
External pressures	10.6	36	16.9	45	13.3	81

Notes: Missing cases=25 (problem children, spouse's personality and other problems) + 17 (no reason given).  $\chi^2(2)=48.13$ ,  $p<.001$  (women's reports versus men's reports).  
Source: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1999.

main reason by 16 per cent of these respondents, while 13 per cent noted external pressures.

There were, however, significant differences between men and women in their perceptions of the main reason for divorce ( $p < .001$ ). Women were significantly more likely than men to report abusive behaviours as the main reason for divorce (24 per cent of women compared with 4 per cent of men). Although more men (79 per cent) reported affective issues than women (65 per cent), the difference was not significant.

As discussed previously, studies consistently report that women are more likely than men to attribute the reasons for marriage breakdown to the abusive behaviours of their spouse (Cleek and Pearson 1985; Gigy and Kelly 1992).

### **Summary**

Over the past two decades researchers have observed a change in the nature of marital complaints perceived as the cause of divorce (Kitson and Sussman 1982; Gigy and Kelly 1992). Some of this change is attributed to 'no-fault' divorce legislation which, in Australia, for example, introduced irretrievable breakdown of a marriage after separation of 12 months as the sole ground for granting divorce. Marital misdeeds such as cruelty, desertion, adultery, were no longer necessary to be established as the only acceptable grounds for divorce (Carmichael et al. 1997).

Reviewing the reasons for divorce over several decades, Gigy and Kelly (1992:186) aptly observed: 'Whereas before, divorce was a solution more often limited to such stark and specific circumstances as desertion or chronic alcoholism, in the mid-80s, divorce appears to be most commonly sought because of a more general dissatisfaction with the emotional or affective deficiencies and tenor of the marital relationship.'

As discussed at the beginning of this paper, higher expectations of self-fulfilment in marriage and decreasing tolerance of unsatisfying relationships, combined with greater social and personal freedoms, have been reflected in the current predominance of the affective dimensions of relationships as reasons given for divorce by the study respondents.

Differences between men and women emerged mainly in relation to specific spousal behaviours. Women were significantly more likely than men to mention abusive behaviours, their spouse's drinking and drug use, and being the victim of physical violence, as the main reason for divorce.

## **Demographic and life course factors**

Demographic and life course variables can generate a profile of people who have divorced compared with those who remain in intact marriages (Clarke and Berrington 1999; Waite 1990). Socio-demographic variables have also been associated with specific reasons given for marital breakdown (Amato and Rogers 1997; Clarke and Berrington 1999; Cleek and Pearson 1991; Kurdek 1993). It is this dimension that is mainly explored in the following discussion.

For example, marrying at a young age is usually associated with having fewer resources – educational, financial, personal and interpersonal – which can exacerbate a range of marital problems as well as constrain finding solutions to these marital tensions (Kurdek 1993; White 1990). Those who marry at a younger age may not be mature enough to gauge their emotional needs and values which may alter over time and lead to feelings of incompatibility (Kurdek 1993; Gottman 1994; Wallerstein 1996).

The length of marriage may affect couples' perceptions of problems. According to Karney and Bradbury (1995:16): 'The duration of marriages is an important dimension in ascertaining the course of marital change – the variables that lead to a marriage breaking down after three years are probably different from those that lead to marriage ending after 15 years.' While some problems may be recognised early in the marriage, other

complaints may develop as the marriage progresses. Values and aspirations once shared may diverge over time (Kaslow and Robinson 1996). Some situations such as poor communication or sexual incompatibility may be able to be tolerated for longer periods of time than, for example, abusive behaviours. Alternatives to the marriage (either financial or personal) may appear (Levinger 1976; South and Lloyd 1995).

Socio-economic status as measured by financial resources, education and occupational status have been associated with different constellations of problems in marriage and the reasons for divorce. Higher levels of education, for example, often equate with expanded employment opportunities and higher incomes which can provide greater personal resources, choices and opportunities. A number of researchers (Kitson and Sussman 1982; Burns 1984; Greenstein 1995) have suggested that the types of marital complaints may reflect greater options available, particularly for educated women with higher status jobs or job prospects, to leave or remain in an unhappy marriage.

The literature is inconsistent in judging whether a wife's employment enables her to contemplate divorce because she is less economically dependent on her marriage or whether her income contributes to the stability of the relationship (White 1990; Greenstein 1995; South and Lloyd 1995). Ono (1998) suggests that if the wife's income is not sufficient to live independently, but provides enough additional or discretionary income, it may prevent marital breakdown by increasing her choices and reducing financial pressures and consequent tensions in the relationship. Others posit that combining employment with women's inequitable responsibility for household tasks and child care increases stress and conflict within marriages (Greenstein 1995). Perhaps both processes apply; increased income can allay stresses caused by financial problems, but tensions may increase when the division of household responsibilities is considered to be a burden on one spouse (Heaton and Blake 1999).

Traditionally, feelings of incompatibility, changed interests, unfair division of labour, or no longer feeling romantically attached as reasons for leaving a marriage were considered more likely to be the province of those in higher socio-economic status positions while partners with lower socio-economic status would require more dire instrumental reasons, such physical violence, alcohol abuse or lack of financial support, to leave a marriage.

Children growing up and becoming more independent may be a catalyst for reassessing an emotionally unsatisfying relationship tolerated while children were more dependent (Presland and Gluckstern 1993). As children grow up, affective concerns may be allowed to become more central in the decision to leave a marriage. While children are young, it may require more 'extreme' circumstances for parents to separate (Amato and Booth 1997; Clarke and Berrington 1999).

To explore if there was any association between the perceived main reason given for divorce by respondents and selected demographic and life course variables, the following variables mentioned in the literature cited above were tested for statistical association with the combined main reasons for divorce: age at marriage; length of marriage; age at final separation; education; in work at separation; asset wealth; age of youngest child at separation.

Only one of these selected demographic variables was significant. For women, higher marital assets at the time of separation was significant.

### ***Asset wealth***

Information on respondent's income was only collected at the time of the interview, not at the time of separation or during the marriage, although the combined asset wealth of the partners was collected at the time of final separation. For this reason asset wealth was used to determine association of income with the main reason for divorce. Its limitations in this respect are acknowledged.

The combined asset wealth of the former marriage was the only variable examined that was significantly related to women's perceptions of the main reason for marriage

breakdown ( $p > .05$ ). The asset wealth of women who reported abusive behaviours was significantly lower than that of women who reported either affective issues or external pressures. There was not a significant difference between the asset wealth of women who cited external pressures and those who mentioned affective reasons.

This pattern is consistent with recent research (Sheehan and Smyth 1999) in which divorced women who reported severe abuse were more likely than divorced women who reported no physical abuse to be 'poor'. Other studies (Kitson with Holmes 1992; Burns 1984; Cleek and Pearson 1991) have associated lower socio-economic status with alcohol and physical/ emotional abuse as a reason for marital breakdown.

### **Summary**

The perceived main reasons for divorce mentioned by respondents did not appear to be strongly associated with the selected demographic variables examined. This is not surprising as many of these variables such as education, employment, and age at marriage would have indirect or mediating rather than direct effects on marital distress which could lead to divorce (Clarke and Berrington 1999; Kurdek 1993). White (1990) has suggested that further research is necessary to understand how socio-demographic and life course variables relate to the reasons recognised by those who do divorce.

## **Initiating separation**

The attribution of who was the 'leaver' and who was the 'left' in the decision to separate has been associated with how individuals perceive the reasons for the relationship ending (Kitson and Sussman 1982; Pettit and Bloom 1984) and, in turn, with differences in emotional adjustment after divorce. Whether a spouse initiates the separation because of the existence of perceived attractive alternatives, or feels coerced into leaving because of the untenable behaviour of the other partner, makes the interpretation of both 'leaver' or 'left' and the reasons given for the marital breakup somewhat equivocal. Kitson with Holmes (1992:117) note: 'Some changes in perceptions of the reasons and responsibility for the breakup may be expected as time passes from the decision to divorce.'

Presland and Gluckstern (1993), for example, found that one-third of women aged 45 and over who had been married for at least 15 years and who had initiated the final separation also had not wanted the marriage to end, or were uncertain about it. A husband's affair was a main contributing reason for initiating separation for those women who had not wanted the marriage to end while a reassessment of the marriage's meaning and children becoming independent were main reasons given by women who both initiated separation and preferred the marriage to end.

A number of researchers (Pettit and Bloom 1984; Hopper 1993) have also observed that people who divorce seldom see the decision as a mutual one although, according to Black et al. (1991:806): 'Both initiators and non-initiating partners describe similar experiences and feelings of indecision and ambivalence.' Pettit and Bloom (1984) also found comparable levels of difficulties and complaints were identified by initiators and non-initiators of separation.

Overall, 45 per cent of respondents in the ADTP indicated that they had mostly made the decision to separate, 34 per cent thought the decision to separate was made mostly by their spouse, and 21 per cent perceived it to be a joint decision.

Nearly two-thirds (64 per cent) of women compared with one-fifth (21 per cent) of men indicated that it was mostly themselves who had made the decision to separate. Conversely, more than half (53 per cent) of men compared with 20 per cent of women said that the decision had been mostly made by their former partner. According to 26 per cent of men and 16 per cent of women, the decision was jointly made.

These results are consistent with other studies of marriage breakdown where women appear to be the partner who initiates divorce or who is the 'leaver' within the

**Table 5. Who initiated the separation, by collapsed main reasons: women's reports and men's reports (n=608)**

	Affective issues (n=433)		External pressures (n=81)		Abusive behaviours (n=94)		Total (n=608)	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
<b>Women's reports</b>								
Mostly me	55.4	123	63.9	23	88.0	73	64.2	219
We both did	19.8	44	16.7	6	6.0	5	16.1	55
Mostly him	24.8	55	19.4	7	6.0	5	19.6	67
<b>Men's reports</b>								
Mostly me	22.0	46	11.1	5	36.4	4	21	55
We both did	25.4	53	33.3	15	18.2	2	26	70
Mostly her	52.6	110	55.6	25	45.5	5	53	140

Notes: Missing cases=25 (problem children, spouse's personality and other problems) + 17 (no reason given). Women's reports:  $\chi^2(4)=27.91, p<.001$ . Men's reports:  $\chi^2(4)=4.83, p>.05$ . Source: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1999.

relationship (Black et al. 1991). According to some researchers (Thompson and Walker 1989), women are more oriented toward the intimate qualities of the marital relationship and have more responsibility for children and domestic tasks; thus they may be more inclined to leave an unsatisfactory relationship.

The main reason given for divorce was examined in relation to whether or not respondents identified themselves as the one who had mostly initiated separation. As Table 5 shows, for women, the main reason for divorce was significantly associated with who made the decision to separate.

As would be expected, when women mentioned abusive behaviours as the main reason for divorce, they were significantly more likely than those who reported other reasons to have 'mostly initiated' the separation (88 per cent).

Since a joint decision could be interpreted as incorporating an element of mutual initiation, it could be said that three-quarters of women who gave affective reasons and 81 per cent who mentioned external pressures were also in some sense 'leavers'.

A similar pattern was observed for men where affective complaints were the main reason for divorce. Over half (53 per cent) of men who mentioned affective complaints said their wife was the initiator and one-quarter said it was a joint decision. Abusive reasons were mentioned by too few men to analyse by initiator status.

## Seeking assistance during the marriage

Among the puzzling questions concerning marriage breakdown is why couples do not seek help for problems in their marriage early on when assistance might be most useful, or at least at the time when they are considering separation (Wolcott 1986). For example, Amato and Rogers (1997) found that husbands' and wives' reports of specific problems in their marriage during interviews conducted several years prior to marriage breakdown consistently predicted future divorce.

Awareness of counselling and mediation services does not seem to be the reason for not seeking these sources of assistance. A recent national poll in Australia concluded that 'marriage counselling had become an established part of the Australian social landscape and almost all Australians were aware of the services' (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs 1998:229). While there are issues of availability and access to services for all who might take advantage of them (ARTD Management and Research Consultants 1996), a range of marriage education, counselling and mediation services to assist couples has received increased funding by the Commonwealth Government in recent years.

Consistent with most studies of seeking help for marital problems (Burns 1980; Wolcott 1986; Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department 1993), women in the ADTP (58 per cent) were significantly more likely to seek some form of help or advice than men (48 per cent).

Researchers have reported that women tend to have more complaints about marriage than men (Gigy and Kelly 1992; Cleek and Pearson 1991). Women are also considered to be better 'monitors' of marital stress and aware of problems earlier than men (Wolcott 1986; Gottman 1994). Since women tended to be the partner who initiated separation, they may then either have sought assistance in resolving some of the recognised difficulties or looked for support during their anticipated separation and divorce. Culturally, women may have been socialised to reveal feelings more than men and to be comfortable with seeking assistance about problems without a loss of self-esteem (Mayer and Timms 1970).

Respondents could name several sources of assistance. As Table 6 shows, of the 53 per cent of all respondents who had sought help, the majority of both men and women mentioned counselling or mediation (72 per cent). Friends and the church were each sources of advice for around 14 per cent of men and women. Between 8 and 10 per cent of both men and women had approached either a general practitioner, a mental health professional or marriage educator.

While it might have been expected that specific problems such as an affair or abusive behaviour might have been a catalyst for seeking advice or counselling, as Table 7 shows, perceptions of the combined main reasons for divorce were not significantly related to whether men or women sought help or advice during the marriage.

**Table 6. For those who sought help or advice during the marriage: where sought help or advice, by gender (n=338)**

Where sought help	Women (n=206)		Men (n=132)		All (n=338)	
	%	n	%	n	%	n
Counselling/mediation	71.8	148	71.2	94	71.6	242
Church	16.0	33	10.6	14	13.9	47
Friends	15.0	31	12.1	16	13.9	47
Mental health professional	8.7	18	12.9	17	10.4	35
Marriage education	6.3	13	12.1	16	8.6	29
General practitioner	8.3	17	8.3	11	8.3	28
Other	12.6	26	6.8	9	10.4	35

Note: Missing cases=295 (147 female respondents and 145 male respondents said they did not seek help or advice during the marriage, and 1 female and 2 male respondents could not say whether or not they sought help or advice during the marriage) + 17 (no reason given).  
Source: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1999.

**Table 7. Whether or not sought help during marriage, by main reason for marriage breakdown: women's reports and men's reports (n=608)**

Whether or not sought help	Affective issues (n=433)		External pressures (n=81)		Abusive behaviours (n=94)		All (n=608)	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
<b>Women's reports</b>								
Sought help	55.2	122	61.1	22	65.1	54	58.2	198
Didn't seek help	44.8	99	38.9	14	34.9	29	41.8	142
<b>Men's reports</b>								
Sought help	46.4	97	51.1	23	54.5	6	47.5	126
Didn't seek help	53.6	112	48.9	22	45.5	5	52.5	139

Notes: Missing cases=25 (problem children, spouse's personality and other problems) + 17 (no reason given). Women's reports:  $\chi^2(2)=2.55, p>.05$ . Men's reports:  $\chi^2(2)=.553, p>.05$ .  
Source: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1999.

## Preparation for divorce

The perceived main reason for divorce, in addition to influencing whether partners sought help or advice prior to separation and divorce, could also affect whether or not individuals had prepared for the breakup of their marriage in other ways. Respondents were asked: 'How much preparation had you done for living without your partner?'

Around one-quarter of men and more than one-third women reported that they had made at least some preparation for living without their partner. Of these, only 7 per cent of men and 18 per cent of women said they had made 'a lot' of preparation.

Respondents who had made at least some preparation for living without their spouse, were asked specifically about whether they had made financial preparations for separation. Forty per cent of women and 34 per cent of men said they had made some financial provision. The main reason given for divorce did not make a difference in whether either men or women reported they had prepared for living without their partner or had made financial preparations.

Across all the main reasons for divorce, women more than men tended to initiate the separation and be more likely to have sought counselling advice prior to separation. The perceived reason for divorce did not appear to influence whether men or women made preparations for living without their partner.

## Post-divorce reflections and life satisfaction

The components that comprise emotions of regret, wellbeing, life satisfaction or happiness after divorce are complex and multidimensional (Kitson with Holmes 1992; Weston and Funder 1993). Veevers (1991) suggests that the extent of psychological distress may depend on each partner's ideological beliefs about marriage and divorce.

The perceived reasons for divorce have been shown to affect post-divorce adjustment (Gigy and Kelly 1992; Petitt and Bloom 1984). For example, if one partner has left the relationship because of perceived desired alternatives, they may feel less distress than the partner who was left confronting a more lonely life. Alternatively, a spouse leaving a conflictual and abusive marriage may feel relief and anticipate a better life (Weston 1986; Veevers 1991; Kitson with Holmes 1992; South and Lloyd 1995).

### *Feelings of regret about separation*

Among the factors that can mediate psychological adjustment to divorce is the intensity of an individual's attachment to their former spouse and their emotional investment in the marriage (Weiss 1976; Berman, Marcus and Berman 1994). Adjustment to divorce is defined by Kitson with Homes (1992:21) as 'being able to put the end of the marriage in enough perspective that one's identity is no longer tied to being married or to the former spouse'. The reasons for divorce, therefore, could affect post-divorce attachment to a former spouse.

According to Kitson (1982), attachment theory (Bowlby 1977) can also explain why a person can suffer grief over the loss of their spouse and marriage even if they were pleased at the ending of the relationship, as well as if they believed the reasons for ending the marriage were warranted.

In the ADTP, one level of attachment to the former spouse was illustrated by responses to the question: 'Do you ever feel that you'd like to get back with your former spouse?'. The majority of men (82 per cent) and women (88 per cent) claimed they 'never' felt they wanted to get back with their former spouse, while approximately 15 per cent of men and 11 per cent of women admitted that they 'sometimes' or 'rarely' wanted to be back with their former spouse.

In addition to specific feelings about their former spouse, feelings of regret about the separation were elicited by the question: 'If you had your time over would you still have

separated?' Women (83 per cent) were significantly more likely than men (67 per cent) to affirm that, in retrospect, they would still have separated.

Jordan's (1996) research on the effect of marital separation on men more than ten years after divorce found men still reported strong feelings both of anger at having been 'left' and attachment towards their ex-spouses.

**Table 8. Women's post divorce reflections by main reason for marriage breakdown (n=339)**

	Affective issues (n=220)		External pressures (n=36)		Abusive behaviours (n=83)		All (n=339)	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
<b>Divorce better for whose happiness?</b>								
You	38.6	81	56.3	18	63.9	53	46.8	152
Former spouse	20.5	43	9.4	3	6.0	5	15.7	51
Same for both	41.0	86	34.4	11	30.1	25	37.5	122
<b>In retrospect, would you still have separated?</b>								
Yes	77.9	155	79.4	27	97.5	79	83.1	261
No	22.1	44	20.6	7	2.5	2	16.9	53
<b>How often do you feel you would like to get back?</b>								
Often	0.5	1	5.6	2	1.2	1	1.2	4
Sometimes/rarely	13.6	30	11.1	4	2.5	2	10.7	36
Never	85.9	189	83.3	30	96.3	78	88.1	297
<b>Divorce outcomes fair?</b>								
Fair	26.4	56	28.6	10	28.4	23	27.1	89
Mixed	53.8	114	57.1	20	51.9	42	53.7	176
Unfair	19.8	42	14.3	5	19.8	16	19.2	63

Notes: Missing cases=15 (problem children, spouse's personality and other problems) + 7 (no reason given). Divorce better for whose happiness?:  $\chi^2(4)=19.59, p<.001$ . In retrospect, would you still have separated?:  $\chi^2(2)=16.20, p<.001$ . How often do you feel you would like to get back?:  $\chi^2(4)=14.53, p<.01$ . Divorce outcomes fair?:  $\chi^2(2)=.74, p>.05$ . Source: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1999.

**Table 9. Men's post-divorce reflections by main reason for marriage breakdown (n=265)**

	Affective issues (n=209)		External pressures (n=45)		Abusive behaviours (n=11)		All (n=265)	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
<b>Divorce better for whose happiness?</b>								
You	30.3	60	25.6	11	45.5	5	30.2	76
Former spouse	21.7	43	39.5	17	-	-	23.8	60
Same for both	48.0	95	34.9	15	54.5	6	46.0	116
<b>In retrospect, would you still have separated?</b>								
Yes	69.1	130	58.5	24	72.7	8	67.5	162
No	30.9	58	41.5	17	27.3	3	32.5	78
<b>How often do you feel you would like to get back?</b>								
Often	2.9	6	2.2	1	-	-	2.6	7
Sometimes/rarely	14.8	31	20.0	9	9.1	1	15.5	41
Never	82.3	172	77.8	35	90.9	10	81.9	217
<b>Divorce outcomes fair?</b>								
Fair	20.0	41	9	20.5	27.3	3	20.4	53
Mixed	55.1	113	20	45.5	63.6	7	53.8	140
Unfair	24.9	51	15	34.1	9.1	1	25.8	67

Notes: Missing cases=14 (problem children, spouse's personality and other problems) + 10 (no reason given). Divorce better for whose happiness?:  $\chi^2(4)=10.10, p<.05$ . In retrospect, would you still have separated?:  $\chi^2(2)=1.87, p>.05$ . How often do you feel you would like to get back?:  $\chi^2(4)=1.51, p>.05$ . Divorce outcomes fair?:  $\chi^2(2)=3.54, p>.05$ . Source: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1999.

As shown in Tables 8 and 9, for women, these post divorce reflections on their separation were significantly related to the combined main reason given for divorce. Not surprisingly, women who mentioned abusive behaviours as the main reason for divorce were significantly less likely to lament the loss of their former spouse or regret their separation than women who mentioned affective and external reasons for the breakdown. Since so few men mentioned abusive behaviours, any differences by reason for divorce were not statistically reliable.

### *Aspects of current life satisfaction*

Similar to feelings of regret about divorce, general life satisfaction, wellbeing or happiness after divorce will be influenced by multiple factors. These include financial and social circumstances, psychological characteristics, and attitudes towards divorce, as well as the perceived reasons for separation (Pettit and Bloom 1984; Veevers 1991; Kitson with Holmes 1992; Weston and Funder 1993).

#### *Fairness and equity*

Feelings of equity, whether one has felt deprived, benefited or over-benefited within the marriage relationship and in divorce settlement negotiations may be related to the reasons for divorce and to subsequent levels of regret and satisfaction (Buunk and Mutsaers 1999).

When respondents were asked: 'Do you think the way things worked out were fair?', over half of both men and women (54 per cent) had mixed feelings about the fairness of things as a result of their divorce – a response that could have applied to either financial or emotional outcomes, and outcomes relating to children.

Feelings of fairness were not significantly associated with the reasons given for the divorce (Tables 9 and 10). Whatever the main reason given for divorce, only one-quarter of women and between 20 and 27 per cent of men felt the divorce outcomes were fair, while around one-half of women and men thought the results were mixed.

In terms of current happiness, women (47 per cent) were significantly more likely than men (29 per cent) to feel that the divorce had worked out better for themselves. Men were more inclined to think that the divorce had worked out about the same for both partners as far as their present level of happiness.

When it came to feelings about who had benefited most from the divorce in terms of current happiness, the main reason for divorce made a significant difference to how women felt (Table 9). Women who reported abusive behaviours as the main reason for marriage breakdown gained the most in current happiness. A sense of relief to be out of such situations may have contributed to these feelings (Kitson with Holmes 1992).

When affective reasons were cited, similar proportions of men (48 per cent) and women (41 per cent) seemed to feel that both spouses had gained in happiness, perhaps reflecting how respondents had felt about the absence of such feelings in the relationship that had led to the divorce.

#### *Satisfaction and wellbeing*

It has been suggested that feelings of distress and adjustment after separation and the ability to recover from the collapse of the marriage and start creating a new life can be affected by the circumstances in which the divorce occurred, including perceptions of the cause of divorce (see for example Kitson with Holmes 1992). This view was not strongly supported in the study data.

Overall, as Tables 10 and 11 show, the majority of men and women were satisfied with their life as a whole, their personal and emotional life, and their children's wellbeing. More than three-quarters of women and almost two-thirds of men indicated that they were satisfied or 'happy' with their life as a whole while only about 4 per cent of women

and 8 per cent of men admitted to being unhappy. These feelings of satisfaction seemed to extend to their feelings about their children. Over 80 per cent of mothers and two-thirds of fathers claimed to be content with their children's wellbeing .

However, we do not know what level of acrimony or trauma accompanied these particular divorces. Time as a healer may also have played a part in post-divorce reflections since the majority of these divorced men and women had been separated for more than five years.

For women, the main reason people gave for their divorce was not significantly associated with their post-divorce levels of happiness or satisfaction. For men, overall life satisfaction and satisfaction with personal and emotional life was significantly associated with the main reason for marriage breakdown with men who reported external pressures least satisfied.

Moreover, two-thirds of women were happy with their current standard of living as were more than half of the men. Given the evidence that women suffer financially post-divorce (Weston 1986), and men feel hard done by financially (Weston 1993; Jordan 1996), regardless of the main reason for divorce it is surprising that less than 10 per cent of women were 'unhappy' with their standard of living, no different from the proportion of men overall (9 per cent) who were dissatisfied.

These findings are consistent with studies of life satisfaction and wellbeing post-divorce that suggest that the majority of individuals experience improvement in wellbeing and satisfaction after reaching a nadir of unhappiness either prior to separation, at the time of separation, and for a time after the divorce (Jordan 1996; Kitson with Holmes 1992; Weston and Funder 1993).

### Summary

Whatever the perceived reasons for divorce, the majority of women and men appeared to be generally satisfied with their life as a whole, with their children's wellbeing and their standard of living post-divorce. In retrospect, women, particularly those who reported abusive feelings, more than men, did not regret their separation and believed the divorce

**Table 10. Women's reports of main reason for marriage breakdown, by aspects of life satisfaction (n=339)**

	Affective issues (n=220)		External pressures (n=36)		Abusive behaviours (n=83)		All (n=339)	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
<b>Overall life satisfaction</b>								
Unhappy	4.5	10	5.7	2	2.4	2	4.1	14
Mixed feelings	17.7	39	20.0	7	19.3	16	18.3	62
Happy	77.7	171	74.3	26	78.3	65	77.5	262
<b>Satisfaction with personal/emotional life</b>								
Unhappy	11.8	26	8.3	3	9.6	8	10.9	37
Mixed feelings	25.5	56	30.6	11	27.7	23	26.5	90
Happy	62.7	138	61.1	22	62.7	52	62.5	212
<b>Satisfaction with living standards</b>								
Unhappy	6.4	14	11.1	4	7.2	6	7.1	24
Mixed feelings	26.9	59	33.3	12	27.7	23	27.8	94
Happy	66.7	146	55.6	20	65.1	54	65.1	220
<b>Satisfaction with children's wellbeing</b>								
Unhappy	3.0	6	6.7	2	5.3	4	3.9	12
Mixed feelings	15.5	31	10.0	3	6.7	5	12.8	39
Happy	81.5	163	83.3	25	88.0	66	83.3	254

Notes: Missing cases=15 (problem children, spouse's personality and other problems) + 7 (no reason given). Overall life satisfaction:  $\chi^2(4)=1.09, p>.05$ . Satisfaction with personal/emotional life:  $\chi^2(4)=.88, p>.05$ . Satisfaction with living standards:  $\chi^2(4)=2.01, p>.05$ . Satisfaction with children's wellbeing:  $\chi^2(4)=5.19, p>.05$ . Source: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1999.

**Table 11. Men's reports of main reason for marriage breakdown, by aspects of life satisfaction (n=267)**

	Affective issues (n=211)		External pressures (n=45)		Abusive behaviours (n=11)		All (n=267)	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
<b>Overall life satisfaction</b>								
Unhappy	6.2	13	20.0	9	-	-	8.2	22
Mixed feelings	28.9	61	31.1	14	27.3	3	29.2	78
Happy	64.9	137	48.9	22	72.7	8	62.5	167
<b>Satisfaction with personal/emotional life</b>								
Unhappy	11.8	25	31.1	14	-	-	14.6	39
Mixed feelings	26.1	55	20.0	9	18.2	2	24.7	66
Happy	62.1	131	48.9	22	81.8	9	60.7	162
<b>Satisfaction with living standards</b>								
Unhappy	8.5	18	15.6	7	-	-	9.4	25
Mixed feelings	33.2	70	35.6	16	36.4	4	33.7	90
Happy	58.3	123	48.9	22	63.6	7	56.9	152
<b>Satisfaction with children's wellbeing</b>								
Unhappy	7.5	13	22.0	9	22.2	2	10.8	24
Mixed feelings	19.1	33	17.1	7	11.1	1	18.4	41
Happy	73.4	127	61.0	25	66.7	6	70.9	158

Notes: Missing cases=12 (problem children, spouse's personality and other problems) + 10 (no reason given). Overall life satisfaction:  $\chi^2(4)=11.36, p<.05$ . Satisfaction with personal/emotional life:  $\chi^2(4)=13.76, p<.01$ . Satisfaction with living standards:  $\chi^2(4)=3.78, p>.05$ . Satisfaction with children's wellbeing:  $\chi^2(4)=8.65, p>.05$ . Source: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1999.

was better for their own happiness. While these findings suggest that the reasons for divorce are not associated with levels of happiness and satisfaction as Kitson with Holmes (1992) suggest, the absence of information about the circumstances of these divorces and the meanings respondents attached to 'affective' or 'other' reasons does not allow definitive conclusions to be made. Both the passage of time since separation and the desire to consider one's life after divorce as positive, as a means of justifying the situation, may also influence post-divorce contemplation (Weston and Funder 1993; Jordan 1996).

## Conclusions and implications

A major aim of this paper was to describe the main reasons given by divorced men and women for the breakdown of their marriage as one means to point to directions for strategies to foster more satisfying and stable family relationships.

The majority of men and women in the Institute's Australian Divorce Transition Project mentioned affective dimensions of their marriage relationship – an umbrella category that could encompass communication problems, incompatibility, changed values and lifestyle desires, and instances of infidelity. The dominance of relational reasons may reflect the higher expectations of self-fulfilment in marriage and decreasing tolerance of unsatisfying relationships observed by many commentators on marriage and divorce (Reynolds and Mansfield 1999; Amato and Booth 1997; Coontz 1997; Council on Families in America 1995).

On the other hand, the mediating effects of demographic or socio-economic factors on attitudes, opportunities and constraints, and patterns of behaviour that may have profound influence on marital satisfaction and stability, are less likely to have been recognised by respondents as underlying causes for the perceived main reasons for divorce (White 1990; Clarke and Berrington 1999).

Differences between men and women emerged mainly in relation to specific spousal behaviours. Women were significantly more likely than men to mention abusive

behaviours – their spouse's drinking and drug use and being the victim of physical/emotional violence as the main reason for divorce.

Although ending a marriage can never be easy and may be traumatic or have detrimental consequences for either or both partners and any children involved (Waite 1995; Amato and Booth 1997), the majority of women and men, whatever the perceived reason for divorce, claimed that in retrospect they still would have separated and felt they never wanted to get back with their former spouse. Again, women who mentioned abusive behaviours as a reason for divorce were most emphatic in their agreement with this statement.

More than half of women and almost half of men indicated that they had sought some form of help or advice about their marriage prior to divorce, mainly counselling. One-third believed that they had specifically prepared for life post-divorce.

Despite the much documented deleterious consequences of divorce for adults and children (Rogers and Pryor 1998; Amato and Booth 1997; Waite 1995), across all reasons for divorce around two-thirds of men and over three-quarters of women reported that they were presently happy with their life as a whole. In the same way, as noted earlier in this paper, that individuals over time may evolve a new interpretation of the reasons for marriage breakdown in order to integrate the divorce into their lives, so too may people be hesitant to admit that their divorce may have been a mistake and that they are not happy as a consequence. Since the majority of the respondents had been separated for at least five years, time may also have softened some of the negative effects.

These responses raise important questions of what happens over the course of marriage that leads to an erosion of satisfaction and commitment for some couples and what enables other couples to weather the inevitable stresses and strains that occur in all families (Lindahl et al. 1997). Or as Bradbury (1997) asks: 'How is it that happy newlywed couples change so often to become unhappy couples later in marriage?'

Studies of long-lasting marriages (Kaslow and Robinson 1996; Levenson et al. 1993; Wallerstein and Blakeslee 1995) identify the following attributes of healthy couples: a sense of respect and feeling appreciated; trust and fidelity; good sexual relations; good communication; shared values; cooperation and mutual support and enjoyment of shared time; a sense of spirituality; and the ability to be flexible when confronted with transitions and changes.

Researchers have also described similar characteristics of strong families (Schlesinger 1998; Curran 1983). According to Stinnett and Defrain (1985), strong families promote each other's welfare and happiness, show appreciation for each other, have good communication skills and talk a lot to each other, spend time together, have a sense of spirituality, and use crises as an opportunity to grow.

The perceived reasons for the breakdown of their marriage described by respondents in the ADTP reflect a mirror image of these positive attributes of satisfying marriages and healthy family life.

If, as Gottman (1993:60) posits, there is an identifiable pattern of communication that predicts the 'cascade toward marital dissolution', then are there any realistic interventions than can be made to stem or reverse this tide?

### ***Strategies for supporting marriage and family life***

Whatever approach is advocated to strengthening marriage and family life and preventing family breakdown, the consistent refrain is that men, women and especially children benefit from a secure, stable and nurturing marital partnership and family environment. Public policy strategies for strengthening marriages and families tend to take several directions: reforming family and social welfare legislation; providing interpersonal skills education and counselling; and increasing access to economic and other resources.

One approach is to review the objectives and consequences of changes to family law governing divorce and marriage to determine its possible role in undermining marriage and attitudes towards marital breakdown. Family law, social security legislation and taxation codes may be examined for the ways they may discourage couples from exploring avenues that could improve their relationship and provide stability for children.

Within the provenance of government initiatives are recent proposals to remove economic disincentives for marriage through fiscal and welfare reform and to strengthen marriage by making alternatives to legal marriage less favourable and obtaining divorce more difficult, even punitive (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs 1998; Council on Families in America 1995; Maley 1996; Popenoe 1996; Whitehead 1992).

The degree to which family law reform may influence rates of divorce is debatable (Mansfield et al. 1999) given the profound social and economic changes of the past decades (Giddens 1992; McDonald 1988; Nye and Berardo 1973). In many respects, marriage is no longer the only source of financial security (particularly for women), social status in the community, sexual activity and social companionship (Popenoe 1998; Reynolds and Mansfield 1999). As Coontz (1997:107) observed in her historical and contemporary analysis of family life: 'And the fact remains that we will never again live in a world where people are compelled to stay married "until death do us part".'

However, promoting understanding of the emotional and social benefits to men, women and children, as well as to society as a whole, of long-lasting marital relationships would be a positive and important component of a policy goal to support marriage and discourage divorce (Waite 1995; Amato and Booth 1997; Mansfield et al. 1999). Community organisations, the media and the workplace are essential partners in such a strategy.

A second approach to supporting marriage and family life would be to expand the provision of services such as marriage education, marriage counselling and mediation, parenting education and family life education in schools. The aims of these programs are to encourage greater understanding about the responsibilities of families, to teach the interpersonal skills that foster positive couple and family relationships, and to assist couples when problems arise. Such programs would enable couples to develop greater understanding and awareness of ways to enhance their relationship and parenting through improved communication, conflict resolution and problem solving skills (Gottman 1993; Markham et al. 1993; Noller et al. 1997).

While research suggests that many couples benefit from awareness of potential difficulties that arise in relationships and from learning how to enhance interpersonal skills (Halford and Markham 1997; Gottman 1999), others in the field (Karney and Bradbury 1995; One Plus One 1999; Simons 1999) caution that training and education in relationship skills may not be able to affect the consequences of early family experiences and personality traits that influence dysfunctional relationship patterns that precipitate breakdown.

Since relationships are dynamic and family circumstances alter over the life course (birth of a child, dealing with teenagers, a change in employment, illness of a family member), couples may benefit more from ongoing opportunities for a range of education and counselling options across the different stages of marriage and family life than from brief pre-marriage education sessions (Halford and Markham 1997). A range of programs and services can be made available to develop understanding and skills in interpersonal relationship and parenting competence.

Human relationship education during the school years that provides skills in communication, problem solving and conflict resolution, and which encourages self-esteem, may also prepare young people for mature relationships as partners, parents and community members.

While recognising that divorce may be necessary for children and parents in extremely high-conflict households, Amato and Booth (1997:207) express concern that 'the

threshold for unhappiness at which parents abandon marriage is declining' leading to situations where 'people may be leaving marriages that are only moderately unhappy', depriving children of homes that 'still provide many benefits'. The authors advocate public policies that provide access to services such as marriage and family life education and counselling that ensure parents understand the consequences of divorce for their children and are provided with the information, skills, encouragement and support to assist them in maintaining a satisfactory or at least 'good enough' relationship.

A third approach to prevent marriage breakdown and promote strong families emphasises the provision of access to adequate income, employment, housing and health care to reduce the stresses and pressures on families that can make families more vulnerable to breakdown (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs 1998; United Kingdom Home Office 1998; Commission on the Family 1998; National Commission on Children 1993). Family supportive workplaces and child and elder care facilities would be components of these supports to families (Mansfield et al. 1999; Halford and Bouma 1997; Family Policy Studies Centre 1997; Coontz 1997; Cass 1994).

Although financial concerns did not figure largely in the reasons for marriage breakdown mentioned by ADTP respondents, economic pressures and the stresses they engender are recognised to have an impact on marital functioning and stability (Family Policy Studies Centre 1997; Mansfield et al. 1999; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs 1998; Yeung and Hofferth 1998).

Thus the several avenues that may encourage and support strong and satisfying marital and family relationships are legislative reform, provision of educational and counselling services, and access to adequate economic and welfare resources.

### ***Future research***

Future research seems necessary to increase understanding of the processes and events in relationships over time that set couples on Gottman's (1994) 'cascade towards marital dissolution' and to use this knowledge to design the most appropriate strategies to support marriage and family life. A longitudinal approach is considered essential to understand how marriages and families are affected by life events and circumstances that alter over time (Amato and Rogers 1997; White 1990; Karney and Bradbury 1995). Such studies would need to follow the relationship pathways of couples from the time they are formed across the various life course stages. Questions would have to be framed as well for those in de facto relationships and for those who have divorced. The methodological complexities and costs of doing such studies are acknowledged.

Studies that explore the meaning and expectations that men and women have of marriage and marriage-like relationships are important as these images and values contribute to perceptions of marital satisfaction and may influence relationship stability (Levinger 1976; Wolcott 1984). Given today's social environment where marriage is one of several possible ways to live an adult life, questions that should be asked of couples include: Why did they marry? What do they consider to be the benefits of marrying and staying married? Why do they stay married and what would make them consider divorce?

It would be useful to ascertain what couples think help to achieve and maintain a satisfying marriage and family life. Are there any resources (personal, family or community) that helped them when there were some difficult times in their relationship or some stressful event had occurred? Was there anything that might have helped if there were some rough spots in their relationship in the past or they might turn to if they needed help in the future?

An Australian Institute of Family Studies pilot study of Positive Family Relationships to be conducted in mid-1999 will address some of the questions posed above. The pilot study will incorporate case studies and focus groups of individuals in married and de facto relationships to explore how and why some couples are able to attain and maintain

satisfactory and committed couple and family relationships while others deteriorate and disintegrate. Questions will also focus on the ways that couples feel marriage and family life can be supported.

### Note

- <sup>1</sup> Households from Western Australia were not sampled due to some differences between the law on child-related issues in that state and the rest of Australia.

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