iven the wide-ranging effects of marital unhappiness, and the social, emotional, and financial costs of divorce, it is appropriate that research has focused on examining the causes of declining marital quality and rising rates of divorce. But as Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1995) note, in becoming preoccupied with the dissolution of marriage and the decline in the number of people marrying, researchers are not availing themselves of what can be learned from those marriages that do stand the test of time. Do these couples do anything in particular that promotes the success of the marriage? What have they done that has protected their marriage? How have they handled crises? These are questions cited by Wolcott (1999) as of primary relevance to governments and family theorists.

In a recent edition of Family Matters, Wolcott (1999) reviewed the literature describing the characteristics of positive marital and family functioning, and examined policy strategies intended to support and strengthen marriages and families. As noted in the review, research evidence suggests that the most favourable conditions in which a child can grow up are provided by a strong and stable family (Amato and Booth 1997; Eastman 1989), but those benefits are likely to accrue only if the family is relatively free of conflict (Amato and Booth 1997) and neither spouse experiences severe mental health problems (Sanders 1995; Halford and Markman 1997).

The importance of the quality of the marital relationship to the overall functioning of the family is evident in the outcomes of numerous studies. For example, Amato and Booth (1997) report that poor marital quality is associated not only with troublesome parent–offspring relationships, but also with problems experienced by those offspring in their dating and marriage relationships. There are also negative impacts on the psychological wellbeing, education, and social integration of offspring.

However, there have been relatively few studies focusing exclusively on couples who have been married for long periods. Two of the more recent of these will be briefly described here, to provide a backdrop to the findings of the Institute’s study discussed below.

In the United States, Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1995) interviewed 50 happily married couples, all of whom had been married for more than nine years and had at least one child. On average they had been married 21 years, were 48 years old, and were well-educated, middle-upper class urban residents. Through semi-structured interviews the researchers elicited histories of each couple’s marriage, as well as information about family-of-origin, other relationships prior to the marriage, expectations of the marriage, children, and the participants’ ideas on why their marriage had worked for so long.

The characteristics of a happy marriage identified by Wallerstein’s analysis of the interview data include: respect,
integrity, friendship, trust and feeling cherished; a view of their spouse as special in some important way and someone whose company they still enjoy; and the sense that creating their marriage and family has been their major commitment and their greatest achievement. They accepted their differences and knew that frustration was inevitable, but they felt also that what they gained from the marriage outweighed ‘the frustrations over the long haul’. Recognition of the need to adapt and renegotiate the relationship, and the belief that ‘symbolically, a marriage is always much greater than the sum of its parts’, seemed to have supported and sustained the marriages through difficult times. Respondents characterised the mutual caring and nurturing of each other’s needs as ‘unique and probably irreplaceable: in this they considered themselves very lucky, not entitled’ (Wallerstein and Blakeslee 1995:330).

A comparable set of characteristics of long lasting marriages was found by Mackey and O’Brien (1995), also in the United States. Their 60 couples had been married longer than 20 years, had at least one child older than 18 years, and were from diverse religious, ethnic, racial, and educational backgrounds. In distilling the information obtained through in-depth interviews, Mackey and O’Brien identified three threads running through the data: adaptability, resilience, and commitment. In talking about their marriages, participants referred to adapting to social and relationship changes, creating a supportive relationship in which both partners could develop the capacity to deal with such changes, and the sense of surety that, whatever happened to them, their commitment to their spouse and to their marriage would keep them together.

There is a great deal of data on why marriages may not last; less is known about why they do. Identifying the specific meanings attached to marriage and the characteristics of those in long-term satisfactory marriages is a first step towards understanding how and why some marriages remain strong over time while others shatter or slowly disintegrate. Understanding of how to promote strong marriages and support couples marrying now and in the future can be drawn from the characteristics and experiences of those who have created long lasting marriages. They are unlikely to have all the answers, but as with the family strengths approach (De Frain 1999), identifying the characteristics of strong marriages provides the basis for promoting and developing lasting marriages and families.

**The Marital Perspectives Study**

As a prelude to the development of a large-scale examination of marriage and marriage-like relationships, the Australian Institute of Family Studies recently conducted a small qualitative study of marriage – the Marital Perspectives Study – drawing from the sample of respondents...
who had participated in the Institute’s major *Australian Family Life Course Study* in 1996.

The primary aim of the study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of marriage of people who had been married for relatively long periods, as well as those with shorter or more varied relationship experience. This was not an attempt to learn all there is to know about marriage, or about the participants’ marriages in particular, but rather to find patterns of attitudes and opinions that would inform subsequent research. The focus was on participants’ perceptions of the meanings attached to marriage, how the institution of marriage has changed, and how it can be supported. Since 30 per cent of people currently in de facto relationships in Australia have previously been married, or are separated (ABS 1999), the input of people in de facto relationships was considered important, and therefore this group was included in the study. The de facto couples participating in this study had all had considerable relationship experience and their relationship status does not diminish the value of their views on what contributes to a successful marriage.

Naturally, any conclusions should be tempered by the limitations of the study. The sample was small and not representative of all sections of the general population. In addition, only one member of each couple participated in the discussion groups therefore the picture is essentially incomplete. However, the only criteria used in recruiting couples was that they were able to travel to the Institute and were willing to contribute their thoughts on marriage. Thus this was not intended to be a study of happily married couples.

**Marital Perspectives Study**

*What does marriage mean to you?*  
Do you think its meaning has changed since your parents married? How?  
Why do you think some people prefer to live together rather than marry?  
How do you think the reality of marriage lives up people’s expectations?  
Has it lived up to your expectations? Have your expectations changed? How?  
How would you describe a satisfying marriage?  
What are some of the difficult times, pressures, or events in a marriage?  
How do/would you cope with these?  
What would you say are the major areas of disagreement in marriage? How do/would you handle those disagreements?  
How do you think the relationship between each partner and their parents affects their marriage and family life?  
What other important influences are there on the marriage relationship?  
How could marriage be better supported? Who could or would provide that support?

**Source:** Marital Perspectives Study, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1999.

**Method and participants**

Potential participants were drawn from respondents in the Australian Family Life Course Study who resided in the Melbourne metropolitan area, and who had indicated they were willing to participate in further studies. Those who could be traced were asked if they would participate in a group discussion about marriage, to take place at the Australian Institute of Family Studies during September 1999. Reasons for refusal included: distance, travelling time, difficulties organising child care, difficulties in getting to the Institute, illness, concerns and discomfort about discussing marriage in a group, being too shy, or being too outspoken.

Forty-two people agreed to participate provided they were available at the time the group discussions were scheduled. Eight sessions were held at the Institute during September 1999. Ultimately, 30 respondents participated, comprising 22 married, five de facto, and three remarried respondents.

The 12 men in the study were aged between 28 and 73 years (average 52 years), and had been married or in their current relationship for between nine and 41 years (average 26.5). Four had experienced parental divorce and two had partners whose parents had divorced. Only one spouse had cohabited before marriage. The 18 women in the study were aged between 33 and 71 (average 48 years), and had been married or in their current relationship for between one and 44 years (average 20.6 years). Four had experienced parental divorce, and one had a partner whose parents had divorced. Two had lived with their spouse before marriage. The majority of both men and women reported being very happy in their relationship, with only three participants reporting mixed feelings or any degree of unhappiness.

The participants were generally well educated and from the middle or high socio-economic strata. Most participants reported moderately high levels of life satisfaction and moderate approval of divorce.

A set of questions was prepared (see accompanying boxed inset), but the sequence of questions during the group discussions varied depending on the group. The discussions were taped and transcribed. Responses to each discussion topic are summarised below.

**Meaning of marriage**

Responses to a broad question about the meaning of marriage generally reflected what has been found in other studies (Kaslow and Hammerschmidt 1992; Wallerstein and Blakeslee 1995). Emotions featured most strongly, with companionship and commitment the most common terms specifically mentioned. A distinct set of responses were often preceded with the phrase ‘it’s about . . . ’, and subsequent comments fell into two dimensions. The first tapped into the concept of ‘couple-ness’ or couple identity – doing things together, sharing, teamwork, joint decision-making. The second dimension encompassed the desired qualities of a marriage partner – tolerant, supportive, communicative.
The symbolism, social context, and place of marriage in the life course also featured. Marriage was seen as part of the natural progression through life, ‘the traditional thing to do’, and was considered a public declaration and a celebration of the relationship. Children were often seen as an integral part of marriage, almost the raison d’etre. As one of the younger women stated: ‘I personally don’t see a great benefit in marriage if you’re not going to have children.’

Such responses point to aspects of marriage not unlike those contained in the lists of ‘ingredients’ of good marriages given by both Kaslow and Hammer Schmidt (1992) and Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1995). What is not mentioned by those authors, but is considered an important aspect of marriage by the participants in the present study, is the public nature of marriage – the symbolism and celebration of the marital relationship. As one woman commented: ‘I think that sometimes the people who choose not to marry, that’s the thing they miss out on, that celebration.’

**Expectations of marriage**

Responses to questions about participants’ expectations of marriage were immediate and definite, with participants either saying that they had no idea what to expect and simply ‘fell’ into marriage, or else they had known exactly what they were doing.

Those who didn’t realise what they were getting into made comments such as: ‘It just sort of happened’ (man, married 30 years); ‘We learned as we went along’ (man, married 40 years); ‘I think we all thought we were going off into the sunrise’ (woman, married 44 years); and ‘I had no idea, I don’t think I even thought about it at the time’ (woman, married 35 years). What is striking about almost all of the responses to this question is that they came from people who had been married for 30 or more years.

In comparison, the few who said they had known what to expect were the younger group members. They had not encountered any surprises, and were indeed quite matter-of-fact about the experience: ‘I just expected to get on with the person I’d chosen to live with’ (woman, married 10 years). Another woman (married 9 years) said she had drawn on her previous experience in de facto relationships and her own family of origin to prepare her for married life.

There were two exceptions to the above observation: two of the long-term (very happily) married had very definite ideas about what to expect. One of these participants was a woman, married 33 years, who had grown up in foster homes and orphanages who said: ‘I knew exactly what I was doing.’ The other was a man who had lost both his parents as a child and had had no strong marital role models on which to base his perceptions of marriage; now married for 31 years, he said: ‘It was a matter of how would I behave with that person that I love and care for, rather than being a husband.’

**Influences on expectations**

Clearly, family-of-origin had exerted a strong influence on the expectations of some participants. Marital role models had been absorbed and accepted by some as a basis for their own marriage. One man (married 30 years) commented that both he and his wife had come from ‘traditional, stable backgrounds’ and they both had expected to take on similar roles to those they had seen in their parents’ marriages. However, he noted that those role models they had commenced their marriage with had not endured the passage of time. He and his wife had had to negotiate new roles to adapt to the changes in their work and family circumstances, and their growth as individuals.

Reactions against parental role modelling were clear in some responses. A younger woman (de facto relationship 11 years), whose parents were divorced and who had watched both her parents negotiate subsequent significant relationships ‘just kept hoping my relationship wasn’t like any of that’.
Changes to the education system, such as the introduction of family life education, were felt by one man (married 40 years) to have contributed to younger people being more open and better prepared for marriage than those of his generation had been. This sentiment was qualified in another group, however, by a comment from a man who had been married for 41 years. He noted that: ‘After all, they teach them about sex, maybe they should teach them a bit more – that marriage is part of this.’

The view that younger people are better equipped for marriage was also countered by some who expressed concern that young people are too demanding and expect too much from marriage, and from their marriage partner: ‘Everyone expects personal satisfaction and . . . if you’re not getting what you want then you can always walk away from it’ (woman, married 44 years). The same woman was concerned that younger people have the notion that a spouse can meet every need: ‘I think you’re expecting too much of one other person. You need your own resources . . . but you need that stable base to return to.’

The sense that there is less commitment to marriage among younger people at times permeated the discussions. One woman, married for 37 years, said: ‘There’s really not too many things wrong sometimes – there are things they can sort out. I don’t know, these young children, they can’t put up with things.’

Several participants were of the view that some social forces that previously compelled partners to stay together, such as the expectation that marriage was for life, had disappeared. These participants also felt that the trend towards replacing the traditional engagement period with cohabitation was depriving the younger generation of a mechanism that provided a structure within which a relationship could develop – an important opportunity to build their relationships on a more solid foundation.

**Perceptions of young people’s attitudes towards marriage**

There was clear concern for young couples trying to balance work and family life and the pressure this places on young marriages, especially in a climate in which divorce is common and considered easy to achieve. This reflected in the perception that young people are wary of marriage, and a sadness that such conditions have led to ‘a great deal of insecurity in relationships these days’ (woman, married 44 years). The few negative perceptions of how young people viewed marriage were typified by the comment of one man (married 26 years) that marriage was seen as ‘entrapment rather than as a feeling of security’.

Generally though, participants felt that young people valued marriage more highly than cohabitation. Given the options that are available these days, to women in particular, the decision to marry was seen as indicating a ‘greater commitment’ to the relationship than a decision to live together (woman, married 23 years).

However, participants also felt that young couples were not reaping the benefits of the hard work it takes to maintain a relationship over long periods, and the added strength gained from getting through difficult times. While some worried about a lack of patience and tolerance, feeling that young couples were less prepared to ‘weather those rough areas’ (man, married 30 years), others felt that young people were far more realistic about marriage than they themselves had been.
Keys to long-lasting marriages

Acceptance of the place of marriage and children in a fulfilling life formed the basis of participants’ marriages. For them, getting married was a natural thing to do, especially if they planned to have children. Not only did they view marriage as the forum for raising children – creating ‘a loving family that children know they can come back to’ (woman, married 23 years). The presence of a supportive extended family nearby was also considered important as a means of providing further stability for the children and ‘breathing space’ for the spouses.

For all participants, the quality of the friendship between the spouses was the foundation for the marriage. The genuine liking of their partner provided sustenance to help them ride out the difficult times. One man (married 30 years) attributed the longevity of his marriage to ‘pot luck’ in that his spouse was a woman with whom he had been able ‘to grow as a person’. Similarity of personality was seen to contribute to marital success by enhancing the way partners related to each other and their children.

Practical assistance was seen to involve access to child care, financial counselling and, in particular, allowing families time together. Participants felt that the lack of time families have to spend together was largely responsible for the decline in family wellbeing, with both spouses having to be employed to provide a ‘reasonable’ quality of life (for example, school and family outings, sporting and leisure activities, maintaining the home). This was often mentioned in reference to participants’ own children’s families.

Participants felt that couples today, especially those with children and/or on low incomes, or who are unable to call on extended family for assistance, are living in a complex world that affords them little breathing space. The introduction of seven-day-a-week, around-the-clock retail trading, for instance, was seen to have provided opportunities to increase family incomes by allowing family members to take on, or increase, part-time work. However, these same opportunities also removed one or both partners from the family environment for increasing amounts of time during evenings or weekends, to the detriment of family wellbeing. Having to open the family business seven days per week in order to compete with other traders places further pressure on families owning small businesses. As a family activity, spending Sunday afternoon wandering around a shopping mall was not perceived by several participants to be ‘quality time’.

However, important as they are, shared activities were felt to be less critical to the positive wellbeing of the family than the simple presence of the parents around the home. Several male and female participants had changed their work pattern and/or location in order simply to ‘be there’ when their children arrived home from school, because it was important to their children. One man (remarried 15 years) suggested that there was a need to recognise the monetary value of the work women do at home: ‘It’s so undervalued by society. I think if we’re truly serious about family issues we need to say, okay, some of the tax dollars . . . go into

If young people are to have a chance of developing strong marital relationships themselves, they need to see strong marital relationships in their parents.
supporting people who choose to stay home.’ Helping couples achieve a balance between work and family commitments was seen as a way of promoting strong marital relationships, which in turn lead to positive marital role models and better outcomes for children.

The second kind of support system discussed was one that would help potential partners and couples to understand each other better, to have more realistic expectations of marriage and marriage partners, and to provide strong, positive marital role models to their children. Preparation for marriage, both at school and prior to marriage, was suggested as a way of helping young couples planning or expecting to marry. Specifically mentioned were communication and financial management skills, and the need to ‘discover there is a companionship basis of a relationship’ (male, married 31 years).

A comment by a man (married 31 years), sums up the many comments made in response to this question: ‘Leading by example is the best way.’ According to participants, if young people are to have a chance of developing strong marital relationships themselves, they need to see strong marital relationships in their parents: when both parents are working their children ‘don’t see them getting along with one another’ (man, remarried 15 years).

**Discussion**

To this group of Australians, marriage means much the same as it does to the American couples interviewed by Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1995) and Mackey and O’Brien (1995) in that commitment, love, friendship, and companionship were cited as key aspects of being married. Communication, understanding, and tolerance were important characteristics of a spouse, and children were largely regarded as an integral part of, if not the primary reason for, being married.

However, the Australian group also talked about the symbolism of marriage, and of marriage as a celebration of a relationship. Participants didn’t speak of entering into an institution per se, with its legal, social, and behavioural benefits and constraints. They spoke of the celebration of marriage as a public declaration of the relationship: the legal status and consequences of formalising the relationship in that particular way was seen essentially as a by-product of the process.

For those who married 30 or more years ago, life choices had been limited in the sense that marriage was the main framework in which one was immediately recognised as an adult. (Other pathways to adulthood for men were going off to war, joining the priesthood, or ‘going bush’ to work on the land, and for women, joining the teaching or nursing professions.)

Marriage was also the only socially acceptable way of having an intimate relationship and children (Lewis 1999). Older participants recalled that they did not really think too much about what getting married involved. But they were certain of some things, primarily that marriage was a commitment for life, and that once married the only option was to make it work. These rules they had accepted.

In general, young couples were seen to be more realistic, down to earth, informed, and better prepared for marriage than the participants themselves felt they had been. Far from attributing current divorce rates solely to a lack of commitment, most acknowledged that the extent of social changes in recent decades has meant that relationships are now being formed and maintained in a climate of unrestrained choice (Lewis 1999), with a degree of complexity unknown to previous generations.

Yet from the point of view of those in long-lasting marriages, young people have not benefited from having so many options available to them. Rather, participants felt that many young people don’t have or are not being provided the opportunity to develop the necessary resources to make good choices – or deal with the consequences of poor ones. Nor do they seem to have, or take, the time to consider fully the ramifications of the paths they choose.

Several options for supporting marriage were suggested by participants. One of these, programs to teach couples planning to marry skills such as financial management and communication are already available. The well-established field of pre-marriage education is currently receiving added assistance from the Federal Government through the National Families Strategy.

As well as supporting young couples planning marriage, participants were concerned that in attempting to balance work and family commitments many who are currently married are losing sight of themselves as a couple. In the midst of attending to the requirements of work and family life, little time seems to be left for the couple, and yet the most powerful influence on future marriages was seen to be the modelling of marital relationships provided by parents. As the cornerstone of the family, it makes sense that supporting existing marriages will contribute to the positive functioning of the family. As one female participant (married 34...
years) pointed out, simply by seeing their parents take time out to be together, children learn to see their parents ‘as important people and not just the givers’.

It can be argued that the amount of ‘couple time’ is a decision made by the couple. But clearly, from the perspective of these participants, this is also constrained by external pressures. One particular pressure on couples was seen to be the double-edged sword of extended retail trading hours – simultaneously providing opportunities for increased family income and reducing the time couples (and families) have available to spend together.

Accommodating some suggestions made by participants would require substantial and ‘expensive’ shifts in policy. It is difficult, for instance, to see any government initiating a reduction in retail trading hours, as was suggested by some participants. It is also debatable whether and how governments ought to intervene at this level at all. However, greater resources can be channelled into existing programs that are aimed at married couples. While less well-known than premarriage education, post-wedding programs are available to married couples to assist in the transition to marriage and through the various stages of married life during which the marital relationship is often vulnerable, such as around the time of the birth of the first child.

For all participants, and as Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1995) found, ‘making it work’ involved actively learning about and accepting their spouse’s idiosyncrasies, consciously adapting to changes in themselves, each other and their circumstances, and being prepared to weather the storms because they understood the relationship would be stronger for having survived the inevitable difficult times.

As their relationships evolved, the changes were not seen in terms of loss but as a natural progression that neither threatened the relationship nor detracted from it. The sense was that participants felt that their overriding responsibility was to the couple. As one woman (married 35 years) put it, ‘when they married they had considered themselves to be a partnership, and although each had a career they worked through how they could ‘do that and still work together as a couple’. Perhaps, then, one of the legacies of individualism is a decline in the sense of ‘couple-ness’, rather than perceiving themselves as couples who need to work out how to be individuals within that marriage, perhaps younger couples see themselves as individuals who happen to be married.

**Conclusion**

If couples marrying today are better informed and prepared than those who married in the late fifties and sixties, we are left wondering why present-day marriages on average have such a relatively short shelf life.

Does the answer lie in the increasing emphasis on individuality, or the declining influence of traditional external authorities (such as legal barriers, social expectations, and religion)? Is it that the erosion of such prescriptions undermines the personal commitment of individual partners to the extent that it is overwhelmed by the external forces that tug at the fabric of marriage (Lewis 1999; Wallerstein and Blakeslee 1995)? Can the capacity to withstand or resist those external forces be enhanced? What role is played by attitudes towards marriage and divorce, expectations of marriage and spouse, and individual personalities in the maintenance or decline of marital satisfaction?

The findings from the Marital Perspectives Study will help to steer future research at the Australian Institute of Family Studies in the direction of the sorts of issues mentioned above. The meaning and symbolism of marriage and commitment, the perceptions of the benefits and costs of getting married, and the differential impact of a range of demographic factors are of primary interest. The effect of the quality of the parents’ marriage, clarity of relationship expectations, and couple identity add further dimensions to the exploration of the processes involved in the long-term wellbeing and stability of a marriage.

The Institute’s forthcoming Australian Family Panel Survey will allow the Institute to address the issues raised in these group discussions about marriage in a large representative sample, and offers the scope to conduct further qualitative studies of couples in both marriage and marriage-like relationships. The data we obtain will improve our understanding of several kinds of relationships, and pinpoint the events and stages at which a relationship is most vulnerable so that appropriate strategies, at all levels, can be implemented.

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