

# Current approaches to marriage and relationship research in the United States and Australia

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*American researchers Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher have launched an extensive empirical case for the promotion of marriage in the United States. But is it the right case for Australia?*



**C**hanges in the forms of adult living over the past 30 years have led more than one author to describe them as revolutionary. For example, Coontz (2004), from an historical perspective, writes about the “contemporary revolution in marriage”, and Giddens (2001), from a sociological perspective, writes about a “global revolution” in the way we form relationships with each other.

One of the more notable aspects of this “revolution” has been the dramatic decline in marriage rates over the past 30 years. According to de Vaus (2004), in 2001 only 52 per cent of the Australian population aged 15 or over were married. This compared with 64.5 per cent of the population in 1971. Since the 1970s, alternative pathways to marriage and alternative forms of partnering have become more accepted. More people are living alone and, for young adults at least, this is partly because of an expressed difficulty in finding an appropriate partner (Qu and Soriano 2004). At the same time, the rate of cohabitation is increasing – from 5.7 per cent of all couples in 1986 to 12.4 per cent of all couples in 2001. Most notable, however, is that cohabitation appears to have become the “normative” pathway to marriage: 75 per cent of all partners married in Australia in 2003 had cohabited before marriage (ABS 2004).

A similar pattern has been observed in the United States. Solot and Miller (2001) noted that 44 per cent of American adults are not married; they are either single, cohabitating, and/or in homosexual

relationships. They went on to observe that the majority of married couples live together first, Americans spend most of their lives unmarried, and the overwhelming trend is toward increasing acceptance of family diversity.

The declining marriage rate, along with the increase in alternative forms of relating and of remaining single has generated public concern (Qu and Soriano 2004). The basis for this concern varies: for some it is the impact on fertility rates (for example, Birrell, Rapson and Hourigan 2004) and for others it is the undermining of the institution of marriage itself (for example, Waite and Gallagher 2000).

This paper is concerned with the arguments about the undermining of the institution of marriage and, in particular, with the relevance to Australia of the approach of Linda Waite, a family sociologist, and Maggie Gallagher, a journalist, in their book *The Case for Marriage* (2000). They wrote their book in response to what they saw as a “sustained and surprisingly successful attack” (p.1) on the institution of marriage that has led to the very situation described above – a dramatic decline in marriage rates since the 1970s. In order to counter this “war on marriage”, as they see it, they compiled empirical evidence to show that marriage conferred a number of benefits to the spouses. As their book jacket describes it, “married people are happier, healthier, and better off financially”. (See p. 54 of this edition of Family Matters for a summary of Linda Waite’s keynote address to the Institute’s conference in February 2005.)



On the one hand, the arguments and claims of Waite and Gallagher (2000) have received some sustained criticism, as being politically discriminatory (for example, Solot and Miller 2001) and empirically inadequate (for example, Huston and Melz 2004). On the other hand, their arguments and others like them have generated quite a degree of media attention and policy interest. The topic obviously lends itself to public debate and is worthy of scrutiny in the Australian context.

Could it be the case that married Australians are better off than their non-married counterparts<sup>1</sup> as Waite and Gallagher (2000) claim for the United States? More importantly, can we follow the approach of Waite and Gallagher to establish that differences, if any, are attributable directly to the institution of marriage, as the authors also claim? This latter point is critical to their claims. It is the public commitment, social and legal reinforcement of that commitment, and the consequent expectation of long-term stability that makes marriage work as they claim.

These questions are addressed here in two ways. First, the recent (since 1998) Australian research literature is reviewed. Then the paper considers the usefulness of Waite and Gallagher's (2000) approach to promoting the case for marriage in terms of the Australian evidence. In presenting the evidence below it may be useful to bear in mind there are substantive methodological issues about the comparisons made; notably with the way in which comparisons are and are not made

between married and de facto couples. More shall be said about this later in the paper. But, in essence, neither the Australian nor the United States data treat the comparisons as well as they could.

### ***Reviewing Waite and Gallagher's approach***

#### ***Marriage and physical health***

Waite and Gallagher (2000) claim there is a strong relationship between marriage and physical health. In particular, they present evidence that shows that married people have longer life spans, although this is far more so for married men than married women. They also show that married men and women rate themselves as healthier than the divorced, separated or widowed.

In Australia, only one recent study looking at this health issue could be found, and that was confined to those aged 60 and over. Hewitt, Turrell, Baxter and Western (forthcoming 2005) do not separately consider de facto couples; nevertheless, the results of their study were striking. Hewitt et al. (2005), examined the relationship between marital status and health in a sub-sample of Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) respondents aged 60 and over, including 1195 women and 1105 men. They found that there was a strong association between marital status and health among the elderly, but this was the converse of that reported by Waite and Gallagher (2000).

The divorced, widowed and never married women reported significantly higher levels of general health compared to married women. Separated women reported significantly poorer health than the married, divorced, widowed and never married, but other data suggest this arises because of limited social and economic resources. There was no significant relationship found between health and marital status for men (Hewitt et al. 2005).

However, we have to treat these data cautiously. As the researchers themselves recognise, the research is exploratory and they probably have a sample that over-represents the healthy non-married elderly.

### *Marriage and mental health*

According to Waite and Gallagher (2000: 67): “Married men and women report less depression, less anxiety, and lower levels of other types of psychological distress than do those who are single, divorced, or widowed.” They also cite evidence that shows that the widowed and divorced are three times more likely to commit suicide than the married, and that people’s mental health improved when they married, and when they separated or divorced their mental health declined.

The Australian research is more equivocal than that presented by Waite and Gallagher. Some of the research supported their claim. For example, de Vaus (2004) compiled data from a range of sources showing married people have better mental health than never married and divorced people; although there was no comparison with de facto couples. But it is the work of Evans and Kelley (2002) in Australia that most directly matches that reported by Waite and Gallagher (2000).

Evans and Kelley drew data from the pooled International Social Science Surveys/Australia (ISSSA) over the period 1984-2001 to give them a representative national sample of over 26,000 people. Using the standard measure of subjective wellbeing in ISSSA, they investigated how this measure was affected by family arrangements. Evans and Kelley (2002: 18) concluded from their research that: “These results strongly suggest that marriage makes people happier because the security and legal recognition of formal marriage makes for committed, loving personal relationships.” Yet, notably, Evans and Kelley (2002) never measured commitment directly; instead they simply inferred its existence from the fact of marriage.

On the other hand, when measures of mental health are compared between de facto and married couples, along with other non-married categories, the findings become less clear-cut. Evans and Kelley (2002) found de facto couples were less happy than married couples and no happier than singles. In contrast, Marks and Fleming (1999) found that de facto couples were happier than singles. And then again, using the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index Survey of 2,030 adults, Cummins, Eckersley, Pallant, Okerstom and Davern (2002) found that, overall, married, de facto and widowed grouped together are those most personally satisfied with life, then the never married, and then the separated and divorced.

Other Australian research also points to the importance of a number of intermediary variables in any possible relationship between mental health and marital status. For example, while Stack and Eshleman (1998: 535), reporting on data gathered in 1981-1983 in 17 nations (including Australia), found marital status significantly related to happiness in 16 of the 17 nations, they also point out that “unhappily married persons may choose to divorce rather than remain married, resulting in a net effect of higher rates of happiness among those remaining married”. More importantly, Stack and Eshleman (1998: 535) found, contrary to Waite and Gallagher (2000), that: “Marriage was not, however, the most important correlate of happiness. Reported health and financial satisfaction were the two principal predictors of happiness.” Fleming and Marks (1998) also found income and occupational status was related to life satisfaction – albeit this relationship weakened with age.

**The main reasons for not getting married are related to concerns regarding problems with the specific marital relationship or the failure of the marriage, rather than explicit opposition to the institution of marriage itself.**

The work of Dockery (2003) also shows the effects of other non-marital status variables. Using Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth (LSAY) data for the 1997-2000 period, Dockery found a significant positive relationship between being married, being an extrovert, and being in a good job. But it must be noted here that the sample was aged only from 16-19 years. From the Housing, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey data, Dockery (2003) also found that the estimated effect of being in a totally satisfying job on the degree of life satisfaction was greater than the effect of being married.

Yet other research highlights the problems of data from earlier time periods. As Shields and Wooden (2003) point out, much of the research before theirs (including Stack and Eshleman 1998, and Evans and Kelley 2002) is quite dated, drawing as it does on data gathered in the 1980s. There have been significant social and legislative changes since then that have made de facto relationships increasingly acceptable and one would expect that this would have an impact on other measures such as life satisfaction. The impact of the social changes can be seen in the latest ABS statistic, mentioned previously in this paper, that 75 per cent of those who are married in Australia cohabited before marriage.

Using more recent data from HILDA gathered in 2001, Shields and Wooden (2003) found that married and de facto couples were more satisfied with life than singles and that there was no significant difference between married and de facto couples. In their Relationships Indicators Survey of 700 respondents, Relationships Australia (2001) also found the now married and de facto were equally satisfied with life (69 per cent and 70 per cent, respectively) and that life satisfaction was highly correlated with partner satisfaction (de facto or married).

The mental health evidence for Australia is clearly equivocal. In the main, there seems to be some mental health advantages of being married but not necessarily substantially better than being in a de facto relationship. There also seems to be other variables at play and there is no substantive evidence to suggest it is the act of marriage itself that

the lowest net worth. Moreover, the wealth of spouses grows with each passing year but not so for those in de facto relationships. From these data, Waite and Gallagher (2000: 123) conclude: "When it comes to building wealth or avoiding poverty, a stable marriage may be your most important asset."

A similar pattern of income and wealth distribution has been found in Australia. Baxter and Gray (2003) found that after controlling for age, education and child status, men are more likely to be employed if they are married than if they are single or in a de facto relationship and to have a large and significant marriage premium on earnings. Similarly, marriage appears to be associated with a reduction in unemployment duration for males (Marks and Fleming 1998). Married men are also more likely to be in a management or supervisory position, while men in de facto relationships are more likely to be in blue collar



is critical to a person's happiness or life satisfaction. On the other hand, lack of evidence does not rule out the possibility that marriage confers mental health benefits, particularly over time (de facto relationships tend to be shorter lived than marriages – see Weston and Qu 2004).

### *Marriage and economics*

Waite and Gallagher (2000) claim significant economic advantages for the married. They cite evidence that shows husbands earn at least 10 per cent more than single men – what they call a marriage premium – and the longer they stay married the bigger their pay cheques get, when compared with single men. De facto relationships produce some but not all of the economic benefits of marriage for men. However, marriage by itself neither increases nor decreases women's personal (as opposed to household) earnings, and motherhood actually decreases it. Waite and Gallagher (2000: 109) conclude: "Both men and women, it is fair to say, are financially better off because they marry. Men earn more and women have access to more of men's earnings."

American data cited by Waite and Gallagher (2000) also show married families have the highest net worth (assets) and single mothers and de facto couples have

or lower white collar jobs (de Vaus 2004). On the other hand, marriage has little association with the work experience of women, except for the number of hours worked (Baxter and Gray 2003).

A similar pattern of marriage advantage is suggested in data on wealth accumulation for Australians. For example, de Vaus (2004) shows that, as a group, people who live alone have higher levels of poverty and lower levels of wealth than the average household. He also shows that de facto couples are more likely to be renting than purchasing a home. But, it needs to be borne in mind here that de facto couples are also likely to be younger (Dempsey and de Vaus 2004) and thus have had less time to accumulate wealth.

On the surface, the Australian data support the claims of Waite and Gallagher (2000). There appears to be a clear economic advantage of being married for men – and also for women so long as they stay in the marriage and have access to their husband's earnings. However, there is nothing in the evidence that indicates it is marriage *per se* that brings about the advantage for men. Indeed, it is just as likely that women only choose to marry those men who are likely to be good breadwinners – as suggested by de Vaus (2004) – or that only richer men can afford to marry.

### Marriage and domestic violence

Waite and Gallagher (2000: 155) conclude from their review of relevant studies that: "The evidence is overwhelming that being unmarried puts women at a special risk for domestic abuse. A large body of research shows, for example, that marriage is much less dangerous for women than cohabitation."

The Australian research does not lead to such a clear-cut conclusion as that of Waite and Gallagher (2000). For example, data from the 1996 Women's Safety Survey (ABS 1998) indicate that women who are married or in a de facto relationship were less likely to report an experience of violence by a man than those who were not married (4 per cent compared with 10 per cent) during the past 12 months. On the other hand, de Vaus (2004) writes that the 1996 ABS Women's Safety Survey showed that women in de facto relationships were considerably more likely than married women to report a wide range of forms of domestic violence, but that this was mainly when the male partner was not employed. For example, of those with unemployed partners, 6 per cent of married women and 25 per cent of women in de facto relationships reported that their partner had physically assaulted them.

The data on homicides in Australia are also of interest. Drawing on homicide data from 1989-2002 held as part of the National Homicide Monitoring Program at the Australian Institute of Criminology, Mouzos and Rushforth (2003) show almost two out of five homicides occur between family members, with an average of 29 family homicides a year. The majority of family homicides occur between intimate partners (60 per cent) and three-quarters by men against women. While Mouzos and Rushforth (2003) could find little difference between those in a de facto relationship and married persons (34 per cent vs 33 per cent) in risk of victimisation, other data they knew of indicated that men in a de facto relationship incur a significantly higher risk (16 times higher) of homicide than married men. These two claims do not sit easily together and Mouzos and Rushforth (2003) do not reconcile them.

Further Australian Institute of Criminology data (Carcach and James 1998) show that, of the 543 intimate homicides committed between 1989 and 1996, 178 and 172 respectively were committed by married and de facto partners. According to the 2001 Census in Australia, 12 per cent of all couples are cohabiting and 88 per cent of all couples are married (less than 1 per cent of all couples are gay or lesbian) so it is clear that de facto partners are over-represented in the homicide data.

Alternatively, using Carcach and James 1998, we can say that of all the male to female intimate homicides, 35 per cent were committed by married male partners and 29 per cent by de facto male partners. On the other hand, of the female to male homicides, 45 per cent were committed by de facto female partners.

But, Indigenous status is a confounding factor in the above data. As Mouzos (2001) shows, Indigenous homicides are more likely to occur in the family environment (45 per cent compared with 24 per cent of

non- Indigenous homicides) and more likely to involve women. It is also important to note that while Indigenous people represent just over 2 per cent of the Australian population, they account for just under one-quarter of intimate partner homicides, as both victim and offender (Mouzos and Rushforth 2003). It should also be noted that the proportion of Indigenous people who form de facto relationships is much higher than in the non- Indigenous population, with 36 per cent of partnered Indigenous people cohabiting in 2001 (de Vaus 2004).

It can be concluded that women in de facto relationships are more likely than married women to experience violence. It is clear from the data that other factors, such as employment and Indigenous status, are significantly involved in these trends.

### Gender differences

In 1972, Jessie Bernard considered *The Future of Marriage* and presented data and arguments to indicate that there was a "his" and "hers" marriage, where "his" was good and "hers" far less so. Waite and Gallagher (2000) argue strongly against that claim, asserting that it was based on inadequate research and poor inferences. They claim that: "Overall, the portrait of marriage that emerges from two generations of increasingly sophisticated empirical research on actual husbands and wives is not one of gender bias, but gender balance" (2000: 163).

This notion of a gender balance is interesting. Waite and Gallagher (2000: 170-171) seem to be suggesting that males and females get different things but in a balanced way from marriage: "Both men and women get health and earning benefits from marriage, but men benefit more in physical health and earnings. Both men and women are safer, more sexually satisfied, and wealthier, if married, but women benefit more on sexual satisfaction, financial well-being, and protection from domestic violence, and they benefit about equally on emotional wellbeing." The available Australian data does not lead to such a clean, or firm, conclusion, and there certainly is no evidence for the "balance" they describe.

Of all the Australian research reviewed for this report, Evans and Kelley (2002) were the only ones to state clearly that there was no significant gender bias, one way or the other. On the other hand, differences between "his" and "hers" were observed in a number of studies, in particular, in terms of life satisfaction, domestic labour, and income and employment.

A Relationships Australia (2001: 6) survey of 700 adults throughout Australia noted that: "Throughout life, there appears to be an imbalance in male and female contentment with their relationships. Although females tend to be more satisfied in the younger age groups, they become relatively more disenchanted as the years move on." For example, for the 60 and over age group in the Relationships Australia survey, 21 per cent of females were not satisfied with their relationship while only 8 per cent of males expressed dissatisfaction. Cummins et al. (2002) found that men are more affected in terms of life satisfaction than women when separated, divorced or

living alone. On the other hand, women tend to be more adversely affected (in terms of life satisfaction) by de facto relationships and having children.

There is also a clear difference in distribution of domestic labour. Baxter and Gray (2003) found that marriage clearly benefits men and has negative consequences for women in terms of amount of domestic labour. Baxter (2001) similarly found that de facto couples are more egalitarian in domestic labour arrangements than married couples, and that women in de facto relationships spend less time on domestic labour than married women – and this is after controlling for various other socio-economic variables. Married women who lived with their partners before they married do less than their married counterparts who did not cohabit before marriage. de Vaus (2004: 126) has also noted that the data suggest “there is greater gender equity in the time spent on domestic work among cohabiting couples than married ones” – but this was mainly because the cohabiting women did less than the married women.

Married men are clearly far better off in the income and employment stakes than married women. Married men have a clear earning advantage that married women do not (Baxter and Gray 2003) and marriage reduces unemployment duration for men but not women (Marks and Fleming 1998). In all, marriage has little effect on the work experience of women (Baxter and Gray 2003) or on their earning capacity.

### Other differences

Waite and Gallagher argue for two further advantages of marriage. First, they point to the sexual advantages of marriage. While they present evidence that shows people in de facto relationships have sex just a little more frequently than married couples, they also claim that married people are significantly more satisfied with sex than those in de facto relationships and those in de facto relationships are more likely than married people “to cheat on their partners” (Waite and Gallagher 2000: 93).

While it would seem obvious that both de facto and married couples have the “convenience” of sex, there is little Australian data to comment on the quality of that relationship for the different types of couples. At best, there is Kelley’s (2002) paper that showed no difference between married and de facto couples in terms of how much they quarrelled over sex.

Second, Waite and Gallagher (2000: 124) argue that there is significant advantage to children of being in a family with married parents: “On average, children of married parents are physically and mentally healthier, better educated, and later in life, enjoy more career success than children in other family settings.” The authors then go on to argue that married parents are better than anything.

Findings from a significant comparative study in Australia (Ruschena, Prior, Sanson and Smart 2005), drawing on longitudinal and concurrent data from the Australian Temperament Project, do not support Waite and Gallagher’s conclusions. Ruschena et al. (2005), found that there were no significant differences with regard to behavioural

and emotional adjustment, academic outcomes and social competence between Australian children and adolescents whose parents had separated (either through divorce, death or separation) and those whose biological parents remained together.

However, it is important to note here that neither the research used by Waite and Gallagher (2000) nor the Australian study by Ruschena et al. (2005) compares children whose parents are married with those whose parents are living in a de facto relationship. As such, it is not possible to establish that the results are or are not due to marriage *per se*.

### In sum

Waite and Gallagher (2000: 186) conclude that: “The scientific evidence is now overwhelming” in support of the importance of the institution of marriage to the health and welfare of the individuals in it, and to society at large. We, however, cannot make the same claim for Australia, at least in relation to outcomes for individuals.

There was certainly evidence for an economic advantage associated with marriage, especially for men. There was also some evidence to suggest a mental health advantage associated with marriage, but not necessarily substantially better than that arising from a de facto relationship. On the other hand, there was no substantive support for the claim that married people have better health. In all, the evidence suggests some benefits, with the nature of these benefits varying for men and women. Importantly, however, there is no substantive support for the claim made by Waite and Gallagher (2000) that it is marriage *per se* that confers what benefits there are.

With unresolved social issues of this nature, the temptation is to continue to gather more data in an attempt to shore up support that shows either there is, or there is not, a case for marriage. However, just gathering more data in this instance would not be sufficient. It needs to be *better* data.

In what follows, the approach adopted by Waite and Gallagher (2000), and the quality of the evidence used, is considered more critically. Arguments are also made as to what may constitute better data in this regard, and what may also constitute a better approach to a case for marriage in Australia.

### What sort of case is it really?

#### Better than ...? The problem of comparisons

On the jacket of Waite and Gallagher’s (2000) book, *The Case for Marriage*, it is claimed that “married people are happier, healthier and better off financially”. But the critical question is, better than whom?

In a cogently argued paper, Huston and Melz (2004) expound on all the things we would need to find in order to promote a case for marriage from social science data. As they say, the idea that marriage is beneficial requires, at a minimum, that we compare married, single and divorced people on a variety of indicators and we must find that those who are married are consistently better off. That would establish

the advantages of being coupled. But then, in order to make the further claim that it is the institution of marriage that is important, we would also need to establish that married couples are consistently better off than de facto couples.

Unfortunately, the comparison point in *The Case for Marriage* is not always de facto and the groups used for comparison purposes shift. As an example, consider the following two statements regarding mental health on page 67: (a) “married men and women report less depression, less anxiety, and lower levels of other types of psychological distress than do those who are single, divorced, or widowed”; and (b) “the previously married tend to be considerably less happy and more distressed than the married”. Generalisations about the benefits of marriage are undermined by these shifting comparison points.

However, keeping de facto as the stable comparison point may not be the best, or even a sufficient, answer to this problem of comparisons. There is substantive American and Australian evidence to

facto relationships are the least religious. And in their review of the literature, de Vaus, Qu and Weston (2003: 2) concluded that: “Those who cohabit before marriage have more unconventional backgrounds, attitudes and values than those who marry directly – characteristics that lead the former group to be more ‘divorce-prone’.” This proneness is also evidenced in the fact that de facto relationships are more likely to break up than marriages (de Vaus 2004).

Notwithstanding the above, to reiterate, 75 per cent of those who were married in Australia in 2003 lived together before marriage. Are they still the same people or does marriage change them somehow?

Other research suggests that differences are maintained. For example, those who live together and then get married (the pathway of an “indirect marriage”) are less likely to have completed tertiary or post-graduate courses and more likely to have experienced parental separation or divorce than those in direct marriages (Craddock 1998). While Craddock

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suggest that those who marry and those who live in de facto relationships are quite different from each other in many ways.

For example, in the United States, Solot and Miller (1999) note that research has shown that couples who cohabit are less religious and more likely to believe divorce is an acceptable choice in a marriage gone bad. On the other hand, people who marry without living together first tend to be more religious and more likely to be strongly opposed to divorce. These differences mean that people in de facto and married relationships are also likely to behave differently.

In Australia, those living in de facto relationships also have a different demographic profile from those who are married. Those in de facto relationships are younger, more likely to be divorcees than never-married, less likely to be religious, and more likely to be Anglo (Dempsey and de Vaus 2004). We also know that Indigenous people form de facto relationships far more than marriages (de Vaus 2004). In addition, Craddock (1998) found that those in de

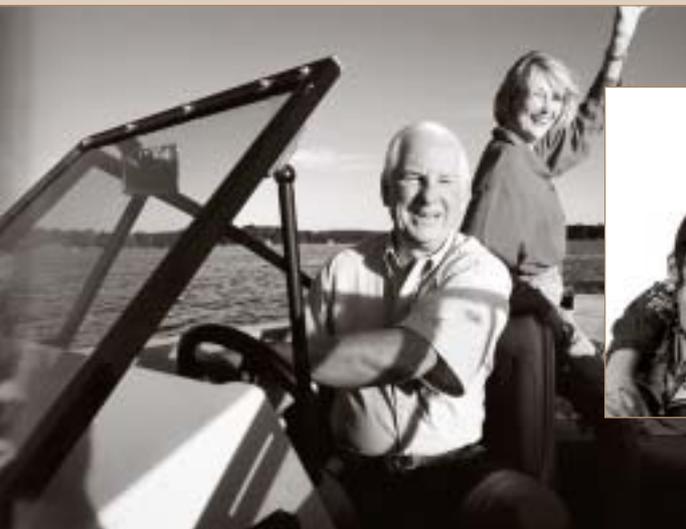
(1998) found no difference in the life satisfaction of those in indirect and direct marriages, de Vaus, Qu and Weston (2003) found that there is an increased risk of instability for indirect marriages compared with direct. Nevertheless, as de Vaus (2004: 232) notes: “This enhanced risk is not due to premarital cohabitation but to the characteristics of those who cohabit.”

Such differences between people in de facto relationships and people who marry “directly” have led some (for example, de Vaus, Qu and Weston 2003) to suggest that there is a self-selection process at play here. Those who get married are different types of people, demographically, socially and psychologically, from those who enter de facto relationships, even if those in a de facto relationship later marry.

All in all, comparing people in de facto relationships with people who are married is not a straightforward task. At the very least, if those comparisons are made, the different demographic statuses of the separate groups needs to be taken into account.

However, there is a little more to it than this. Huston and Melz (2004) convincingly argue that controlling for select demographic variables is not sufficient. We should also find that the apparent advantages of marriage do not disappear when the psychological and social factors that select people into and out of marriage are fully considered.

By way of illustration, and argument, Huston and Melz (2004) propose at least four psychological qualities that would seem important and have not been considered – at least in the Australian literature. These qualities are self-efficacy, secure attachment style, socio-sexual orientation, and conscientiousness. According to Huston and Melz (2004), these qualities are likely to be associated with successful people who confidently enter intimate relationships and, for all we know, are the key reasons why marriages are beneficial, not the characteristics of the institution itself or the commitment implied in the act as Waite and Gallagher (2000) argue.



practical reasons after having decided to marry. Others may opt for cohabitation, expecting to marry if and when they want to have children, while other committed cohabiting couples may view marriage as redundant.” Moreover, as these researchers also argue, the meaning of cohabitation is likely to change over the course of the relationship.

Work by Sarantakos in the early 1980s (described in Carmichael and Mason 1998) also found different types of de facto couples. Sarantakos distinguished between trial cohabitation (not expected to lead to marriage), liberal cohabitation (flaunting marriage), and de facto cohabitation (entered into as if marriage). Each of these different groups had different demographic characteristics along with different belief systems. Work by Glezer in the early 1990s (described by Carmichael and Mason 1998) found that the motivation for forming de facto relationships varied between couples and ranged over the emotional, economic and pragmatic. She also found that the level of commitment varied, as did the intention to formalise the relationship.

The key point here, then, is that the group of “cohabiters”, or de facto couples, is not homogeneous.

Couples in this broad category vary – at least, in terms of demographic variables, motivations for relating, and levels of commitment. This variability is of such a nature that to treat them all as one group is to obscure potentially important understandings. The same could equally be said of the group of married people.

Huston and Melz (2004: 946) came to a similar conclusion in their consideration of the use of broad-scale statistics that treat the groups as homogeneous: “This national portrait obscures substantive differences in family-building behaviour for different racial and income groups in the United States.” It is also likely to obscure a whole lot more.

### *One size fits all? The problem of heterogeneity*

Implicit in the claims of Waite and Gallagher is the assumption of an homogeneous group of married people, along with an equally homogeneous group of people in de facto relationships. Indeed, one of the concerning aspects of Waite and Gallagher’s argument is the almost caricatured treatment of those in de facto relationships, or cohabitation as they call it.

For Waite (2003: 17): “Cohabitation is a tentative, non-legal, co-residential union. It does not require or imply a lifetime commitment to stay together.” Thus, for Waite and Gallagher, all those who live together do so tentatively and non-legally, without commitment. This may or may not be so in the United States, but the Australian evidence would seriously question such an assertion.

Qu and Weston (2001: 78-79) describe a number of different ways that people come to live together in Australia: “Couples may decide to cohabit early in their relationship when first ‘going steady’, or they embark on cohabitation as a trial marriage, or for

### *Is marriage the cause? Confusing correlation and causation*

According to Huston and Melz (2004), in order to be able to claim that marriage is the cause of any health, economic or other benefit, it is necessary to meet four further criteria. First, marriage’s beneficial effects cannot be limited to those who establish good marriages: we should find the same benefits for those, for example, in conflict-ridden marriages. Second, we should find that good marriages are better for people than good versions of other lifestyles, such as good de facto or gay relationships. Third, the benefits of marriage should prevail regardless of the couple being rich or poor, or any other demographic difference. Finally, any differences between comparison groups should matter: significant effects do not count if they are not substantive.

While it is not possible to examine the data used by Waite and Gallagher (2000) in any detail, there is no evidence that they have attempted to address any of

the above criteria. When it comes to the Australian research, only one study was found that attempted a more sophisticated comparison – the study of Evans and Kelley (2002). When it comes to life satisfaction, Evans and Kelley were able to demonstrate that married couples were more satisfied than all others, including de facto couples. They could also demonstrate that the level of satisfaction for those in bad marriages was still higher than those who were divorced and the same as for those in de facto relationships. So, from their point of view, even a bad marriage is better than divorce, and no worse than a de facto relationship (Evans and Kelley 2002).

However, not even Evans and Kelley addressed the further criteria given above. Most importantly, they did not attend to the possible effects of other potentially important variables. One of the more notable lacks in their work, and others, has been a full consideration of the role of economics. As Solot and Miller (2001) have noted for the United States, it is known that marriage rates are tied to economics and if this is not controlled for, then any study purporting to compare happiness or domestic violence rates between married and unmarried people is actually seeing the effects of income or wealth.

Australian data already presented also suggest that economics could be the more important variable here. Data shows de facto couples are more likely to have a working class background and/or to be too young to have accumulated wealth (for example, de Vaus 2004). Dockery (2003) also showed that work has a very large impact on feelings of wellbeing – more so than being married. And Birrell and Rapson (1998) and Birrell, Rapson and Hourigan (2004) showed that there are strong relationships between men's working and their partnering.

Neither Waite and Gallagher (2000) nor any of the Australian data reviewed here make a sufficiently strong case for marriage to confidently assert that marriage is the causal mechanism in any documented benefits. Any benefits observed are likely to be associated with other more important variables, especially economic and health related.

On the other hand, there may well be merit in further research that systematically explores the criteria proposed by Huston and Melz (2004). In particular, there is an argument for much greater attention being paid to the role of economic factors. For example, Hewitt et al. (2005: 16), with particular reference to health, made a note of the need "to move beyond simply describing the association between marital status and health, and increasingly direct our research efforts at better understanding how or why social and economic resources differentially impact on the health of married and separated."

### **Where to from here?**

The case for marriage, and there can be no doubt that there is one, is not well served by Waite and Gallagher's (2000) approach. There is insufficient empirical rigour employed in the arguments of Waite and Gallagher and insufficient corroborating evidence from the Australian data.

In essence, Waite and Gallagher (2000) have tried to show that scientific evidence supports the value of marriage to the individuals in the marriage. But they have let the case for marriage down by treating a very complex question overly simply. As demonstrated in the preceding section, they have not rigorously considered and accounted for their points of comparison and the substantive differences between them, especially between married and de facto couples. They have also oversimplified their approach by assuming homogeneity of married couples and of de facto couples. Further, they have not been able to demonstrate any causative mechanism for the act of marriage itself.

To identify more productive approaches we need to take a step back and ask two different types of questions about what Waite and Gallagher (2000) were trying to do, and then see where else this could lead.

First, Waite and Gallagher (2000) were trying to garner evidence to convince people that getting married is good for them. Yet, people seem to be convinced already. A number of authors have noted that the falling marriage rates over the past three decades have little to do with a loss in the value of marriage. For example, Seddon (2000: 321) has observed that: "The main reasons for not getting married are related to concerns regarding problems with the specific marital relationship or the failure of the marriage, rather than explicit opposition to the institution of marriage itself." Huston and Melz (2004) also note that Americans still value marriage but are doing it less because, amongst other things, of problems in finding a viable mate. Qu and Soriano (2004) found a similar phenomenon for Australia.

Gillis (2004) sheds an interesting light on this phenomenon of valuing marriage but delaying marriage or not marrying. He suggests that we have too great an expectation of "big marriages" and thus opt for "little marriages". These "little marriages", or de facto unions, offer a downsize version of the full marriage in such a way that what the proponents of marriage view as the limitations of living together are in fact its attraction to a growing number of people. These people would marry if they had what they believe it takes to make a perfect couple but, as their expectations are too high, they opt for something without such an impossibly high standard. As Gillis (2004: 989) concludes: "Clearly the barriers to marriage are not only material but mental."

Such observations would suggest that the problem may well be with our models of marriage and Seddon (2000) argues that we may need to create "new relationship maps". This is an interesting proposal and one that could well be explored further. What could new relationship maps look like? How could they help couples with impossible expectations or ideals of marriage? More specifically, what new constructions of marriage could we offer to allow couples to maximise their fulfilment in our real and changing world?

Second, Waite and Gallagher (2000) were also trying to promote a case for the benefits of marriage to society as a whole by showing its value to individuals. But the value of marriage and its role in society

cannot be directly addressed by showing that individuals benefit. Rather, the case needs to be argued from a broader, macro level. Instead of saying people should get married because it is good for them, we need to be asking what the conditions are under which the institution of marriage can be fostered and sustained for society's good?

There was no doubt from the Australian evidence reviewed that to ask these broader questions we need to be considering, among other things, the interrelationships between economic and social variables. For example, what is the relationship between economic conditions and marriage rates? We also need to recognise that marriages have a good chance of achieving stable household environments for their members who are also likely to be financially self-sufficient. Married couples are more likely than cohabiting or single people to have children.

Asking these broader questions about the role and value of marriage in society feeds more directly and appropriately into questions of policy. And it is at the level of policy that the real case for marriage needs to be addressed. It is not so much that marriage may or may not have various individual benefits, but that marriage, as a whole, is of value to society.

### Endnote

1. Various phrases are used for those who are living together but not legally married reflecting, among other things, different political sensitivities and the historical remnants of a less than acceptable form of relating. These terms include cohabitation, consensual partnering, unwed couples and de facto couples. Here, the phrase "de facto relationship" or "de facto couples" is used in order to avoid the particular, and limiting, meaning of "cohabitation" used by Waite and Gallagher (2000).

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