ork and family life: Contemporary realities, current expectations and future prospects

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The relationship of work and family life is increasingly complex. Many families are forced to create a complicated patchwork of child care arrangements to accommodate the demands of their work. The average hours worked per week are increasing and part-time and casual work are becoming the norm for many workers, particularly women. Recently, there has been a nostalgic appeal by some politicians and their constituents for a return to a simpler world where work and family life were less intricately interwoven. While appealing to its adherents, the call for a return to the comfortable nuclear family flies in the face of some fundamental contemporary demographic realities. This paper reports the results of a survey of the attitudes to caregiving and career of women enrolled in a university-based early childhood program. The paper is in two parts. The first sets the context for the survey, by exploring the origins of the contemporary patterns of relationship between work and family life. The second describes the survey and its results. The results indicate that attitudes to maternal care and career roles are more traditional among younger, less experienced students than among their older peers with greater experience of parenting and employment. The implications of the results and future trends in the relationship of work and family life are discussed, in the light of contemporary features of families and demographic trends.

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There has been a nostalgic appeal by some politicians and their constituents for a return to a simpler world where work and family life are less intricately interwoven. Such appeals reflect an enduring belief in the nuclear family as the optimal family form. This perspective on family life nicely illustrates Luhmann's (1995) distinction between cognitive and normative expectations. Unlike cognitive expectations that are 'changed if reality reveals other, unanticipated aspects' (Luhmann, 1995, p.320) normative expectations are not modified in the face of contradictory evidence.

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Examination of some of the population changes that have occurred both in Australia and throughout the Western world over the last two centuries provides irrefutable evidence of the reduction in the prevalence of the nuclear family form and the resultant shifts in the relationship of work to family life. These trends have widespread implications for policy and practice in the early childhood field and for the futures of Australian children, families, and communities. And yet belief in the nuclear family and traditional divisions of labour between women and men remain, despite the evidence in everyday experience of the diversity of family forms and the complexity of work and family relationships. Within this nostalgic frame, policy and practice are based on myth rather than

an accurate appreciation of current family and demographic realities.

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Changes in family forms and functions

The changes in the forms of families and their distribution in the population—across the past two centuries—have been little short of revolutionary. A clear understanding of these shifts in the prevalent family forms is fundamental to any productive discussion of the current relationships of work and family life.

Two hundred years ago, two-parent-farm-families were the most prevalent type (Hernandez, 1997). In this family form, work and family life were closely integrated. Children spent the bulk of their childhood in the presence of their parents, their siblings, and members of their extended family. Unlike contemporary children, they spent comparatively little time in schooling or other activities beyond the family farm.

At the turn of the century, farm families were being progressively replaced in prevalence by father/breadwinner, mother/homemaker, non-farm-families (Hernandez, 1997). The resultant change in fathers' work was accompanied by the rise of compulsory education, and children were now also spending long periods away from home. In the past two decades, the proportion of father-breadwinner-families has markedly dropped. They have been replaced by dual-income- and one-parent- non-farm- families, as the most prevalent family form. While the majority of Australian children aged under five years still live with both natural parents (84.5%), this drops to 73.2% by the age of 10–14 years, with a little over 15 % of the latter age group living in natural-mother-only households (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996).

Within families, there has been a dramatic reduction in the numbers of children. In less than a century, the median number of children has dropped from 7.3 to 2.6 (Hernandez, 1997). The impact on the children's experiences of family life has been equally dramatic. Hernandez talks of 'children's new lives' in families with a reduced range of sibling relationships, a better educated mother with an increased care role and reduced options for dividing the labour, and a largely unavailable father.

The relative unavailability of fathers has been exacerbated by recent changes in the average hours of work. The overall hours of work have increased in recent years, with two thirds of employees working more than 38 hours. A third now work in excess of 49 hours per week and the average working week is now 42.6 hours (Brennan, in press). In addition, the proportion of women who are employed has increased dramatically in recent years, with 72.3% of those aged 35–44 years now employed outside the home. As the hours worked by mothers increase, there is not a commensurate increase in the share of care and household responsibilities accepted by other family members (Bittman & Pixley, 1997).

Australian families are now also highly mobile with one in five families, on average, moving residence each year, often interstate in work related transfers (Newton & Bell, 1996). As a result, families are now much more likely to live apart from their extended family than in previous generations. Many families have unmet needs for child care (Maas, 1990) and workplaces vary in the extent to which they accommodate the family responsibilities of their employees (Kilmartin, 1990; Russell, 1994). Taken together, these changes have direct implications for children, their families, and the communities in which they live.

Population trends

The reduction in the median number of children per family reflects the rapidly declining fertility rate. For example, from the 1860s to 1995, ABS statistics show that the fertility rate has dropped from 6 per thousand female population to under 2 per thousand (1.85) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1996). The trend has been steady apart from the rapid decline around the years of the Great Depression and the steep rise in the postwar 'Baby Boom'. In the last two decades, the decline has again accelerated. This decline in fertility has been explained in economic terms as a result of a

change in the relative balance between the increased cost of time and the reduced return from children over an increasingly longer period of dependence, given that children are residing with their parents for longer than in previous generations (Bittman & Pixley, 1997). In this view, children have moved from being seen as a real asset to agrarian families to either a luxury or liability for contemporary families, depending on one's perspective.

Related to the decline in fertility rate, there has been an increasing delay in family formation. In the twenty years from 1971 to 1991, the first marriage rate for those aged 20–24 fell by 60% for women and 64% for men and the proportion of women aged 30 years or more giving birth to their first child increased from 7.1% to 30.1% across these two decades (Boss, Edwards & Pitman, 1995).

Female and male life expectancy have also increased considerably over the century. Of greater concern, however, is the marked bulge in the distribution of the population by age as the 'Baby Boomer' generation gets older. The rise of lobbying for aged care, and the relative decline in advocacy for children, exemplify Philippe Aries' astute observation in the 1980s that the generation under-40 [as they then were] is creating a new epoch, in which children occupy a smaller place (Aries, 1980).

At the same time, there has been an increase in mother-only households that reflects the combined impact of the steady rise in female employment, the dramatically improved educational participation rates of women and the increase in divorce rates. The economic impact of divorce, in part, explains the accumulating evidence that poverty is increasing in Australia, with 4 out of 10 children now living in poverty. It can be argued that poverty is increasingly a female phenomenon, with 43% of children in poverty living in single parent families, headed by their mother (Boss, Edwards & Pitman, 1995).

These trends represent a fundamental departure from the nostalgic, normative ideal of the nuclear family, with father as breadwinner and mother as homemaker and predominant carer. The generation of students leaving school have experienced many of the changes in the relationship of work and family life, first hand. The next section of the paper presents some data from a survey of student beliefs about maternal care roles and the contemporary salience of careers.

A survey of student attitudes to maternal care and career roles

The second focus of this paper is on the attitudes of those training to work in the early childhood sector. There is likely to be a range of attitudes represented among those who are planning careers in children's services. Some of these attitudes will reflect enduring normative expectations about the nuclear family, while others will more closely reflect the current state of family diversity of form and function. This raises an issue of the degree of congruence between the attitudes and values of those embarking on a career in children's services and the realities of family life in contemporary Australia. As such, the study addresses the extent to which normative expectations characterise the beliefs of students in early childhood towards maternal care and career roles.

This issue has been explored in a parallel survey, completed by Field and Varga (1997), with a sample of Canadian students in the first and fourth years of a degree program for those preparing to work in a range of children's services. They found that first year students were significantly more likely than fourth year students to express traditional stereotypes of the expected roles of mothers as carers rather than as career seekers.

Design

The study was designed to examine the attitudes of undergraduate students to issues related to maternal care and employment roles as a function of their life experience. Life experience was operationalised in the form of university year level, age, birth order, family size, qualifications, experience in early childhood, marital status, parenting experience, and current occupational status.

Participants

The participants were female undergraduate students involved in training to become early childhood professionals ($\underline{N}$=284), at a university in northern metropolitan Sydney. Students from each

of the first (n=75), second (n=124) and third years (n=85) of the degree were included in the project.

Materials

A questionnaire asking about demographic details was developed. Established scales were used to measure beliefs about the roles of women (Home-as-Haven Scale) (Rapp & Lloyd, 1989), career salience (Career Salience Scale) (Greenhaus, 1971) and social conformity (Marlowe Crowne Social Desirability Scale—short form) (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960).

Demographic Questionnaire. Students were asked their age, birth order, years since completing secondary education, degree in which enrolled, courses of study since high school, experience in child care, marital status, parenting experience, family size and present occupation. Ninety per cent of the students were under 25 and had little work experience (relevant data on the demographic profile is available on request through AECA).

Home-as-Haven Scale. This scale measures beliefs and ideas about maternal home responsibilities, employment, and the impact of non-parental care on the attachment of children to their parents. It taps what Rapp & Lloyd (1989) have labelled 'Home-as-Haven ideology' or the belief that it is the sole responsibility of parents to give their children a refuge and can do this more effectively than other caregivers. Those holding traditional values are more likely to score higher on the scale. Responses in the Home-as-Haven Scale were measured on 4-point Likert-type scales from 1 (disagree strongly) through 4 (agree strongly). This 15-item scale had good internal consistency as measured by Cronbach's alpha (a=.81).

Career Salience Scale. This scale assesses perceptions of the importance of employment and career roles. It probes attitudes to work, the degree of thought given to planning a career, and the relative salience of employment in individual's life priorities. The Career Salience Scale measures responses on 5-point Likert-type scales from 1 (strongly disagree) through 5 (strongly agree), with a labelled midpoint category 3 (uncertain). There are 27 items in this scale, again having an acceptable level of reliability (a=.78).

Marlowe Crowne Social Desirability Scale. The short form of the Marlowe Crowne Social Desirability Scale was used consisting of 10 items. Responses are in terms of whether students consider each statement to be either true or false in relation to themselves.

Procedure

Students were invited to participate in the project by letter, detailing the study's purpose and outlining tasks participants were to complete. The response rate was 100%. Questionnaires were distributed to each participant and completed during a university lecture at the end of second semester in 1996. There were no missing data either for subjects or items.

Analyses

Relations between life experience variables (university year level, age, birth order, family size, qualifications, experience in early childhood) and beliefs about women's roles and career salience were examined through correlational analyses in each case, with the exception of parenting experience, marital status, and occupational variables. For these, analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were used.

Results are reported in two main sections focusing first on relations of life experience variables to attitudes about women's roles, and second on relations between life experience and career salience.

Attitudes about Women's Roles

Non-Significant Relations. There were no significant relations (p>.05 in each case) between Home-as-Haven orientation and year of enrolment, birth order, having a past qualification, completion of a child care course, years of child care experience, family size, or type of occupation (whether full-time, part-time, casual or none).

Age. There was a significant but weak association between 'Home-as-Haven' orientation and age (r=-.16, p=.005). To get a better idea of the dependency of Home-as-Haven orientation on age, age was grouped into quartiles and an ANOVA conducted. The four age groups differed vary significantly in terms of Home-as-Haven orientation (F(1,267)=2.64, p=.001), although the effect sizes were small, with younger students having the strongest Home-as-Haven orientation, and older students the least. Figure 1 depicts the effect sizes for differences between age groups.

Figure 1. Home-as-Haven orienatation according to age group.
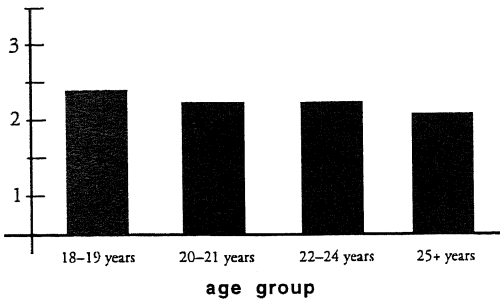
Parenting Experience. Students with parenting experience were less inclined to a traditional Home-as-Haven orientation than students with no parenting experience $(F(1,282)=5.10, p=.03)$, however this finding is an artefact of age, since older students tended to be those with parenting experience $(r=.79)$.

Marital Status. Whether students were single, married or of some other marital status had an impact on their Home-as-Haven orientations $(F(2,280)=4.14, p=.02)$. Single students had the strongest Home-as-Haven orientation, followed by married students, with those in some other marital arrangement having the least strong orientation (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Home-as-Haven orientation according to marital status
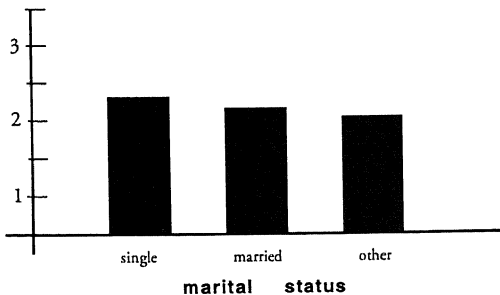
Career Salience. There were no relations between any of the independent variables and career salience, indicating that irrespective of life experience, career salience was equally rated by students.

It is clear from the findings of this study that students with less life experience, in terms of age and experience with marriage and parenting, have stronger orientation towards the belief that women's roles should relate to home and child care. Conversely, students with more life experience in terms of age and marital and parenting experience, are less oriented towards these beliefs.

Discussion and future directions

The present study: Implications and caveats

In considering the results of the present survey, several points need to be highlighted. While the results are significant, the differences are small, suggesting that the traditional beliefs held by those students with less life experience may be relatively easily modified once they enter the field. This suggest the value of a further study to follow these students as they enter the workforce and gain experience of the complex realities of work and family life for those with whom they work.

Unlike the earlier work of Field and Varga (1997), the present study did not find a relationship between year of enrolment and attitudes to maternal roles, perhaps reflecting particular differences in the Canadian and Australian samples, possibly related to the extent of practicum experience of the two samples of students in early childhood settings, such as day care and preschools. Throughout their course the Australian students have extensive experience working in these types of settings.

The lack of relationship between attitudes to maternal care roles and career salience suggests that, in the present sample, career salience is a separate attitudinal dimension to home-as-haven ideology, although care needs to be exercised in the light of the age of the Career Salience Scale and the fact that it has not been revised since its publication at the end of the 1970s. This finding has implications for those involved in education and training as it shows the relative resistance of normative attitudes and expectations to modification by cognitive input, alone.

The future

The family changes and demographic trends discussed in the first section of this paper have far-reaching implications for policy and practice. But what of the future? The recent explosion of new information-based technologies, like the changes of the Industrial Revolution that led to the movement of families from farm to urban life, will no doubt have similarly profound impacts on both work and

family life. In the world of work, it seems clear that future generations will be less likely to think in terms of a single career and more in terms of a patchwork of positions. Telecommuting is likely to increase and fundamentally change the experience of a small but growing set of Australian families, although at present, it is restricted to those engaged in clerical work or professionals involved in the information-rich areas of employment (Riley, 1996). While typically involving only 1 to 2 days of work at home, it offers greater flexibility to achieve a more effective balance of work and family responsibilities. As this trend is extended, places of residence will no longer need to be as strongly tied to places of work. Should this occur, then the nature of the supports families need for child care is also likely to change. Telecommuting, at least in the short to medium term, is likely to have its greatest impact on those who already enjoy considerable material advantage in our society.

A legacy of the parsimony that has attended the present era of economic rationalism is the increase in the gap between rich and poor in contemporary Australia (Boss et al., 1995). The current dismantling of social supports that, at least in part, have ameliorated some of the effects of poverty and disadvantage, may be precisely the approach that is likely to increase the problems it seeks to solve! Again, these are realities that are not appropriately addressed by anachronistic normative expectations about the relationship of work and family life, and the naive belief in the ability of market forces to solve social problems. As Bittman and Pixley (1997, p.269) concluded 'family life cannot be built on the rationality of the market or there will be no market in a generation'.

Anchoring our expectations in the irresistible realities of current changes in the worlds of work and family life is essential. Early childhood professionals have much to contribute to the current social discourse and to ensuring a sustainable future for Australia's children, families and communities.

The perpetuation of normative expectations that obscure the current realities for Australian children, families and communities hardly provides an appropriate base for development of effective policies and practices. That such expectations still prevail among those training to work in children's services is of concern.

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Conference CALENDER

October 29 – 30, 1998
Centre for Community Child Health & Ambulatory Paediatrics — National Conference

Health Childcare in Australia Melbourne.

Contact: Judith Gray, Health Educator, Education & Quality Unit, Royal Children's Hospital, Flemington Road, Parkville, Vic. 3052.

Tel: (03) 9345 6150.

Fax: (03) 9345 5900.

October 21 – 24, 1998
Second international Conference on Play Krakov, Poland.

Contact: Conference Secretary, Mr Zbigniew Baran, Cracow Pedagogical University, Wyzsza Szkola Pedagogiczna w Krakowie/ Katedra Pedagogiki Przedszkolneg, i Wezesnoszkolnej.

October 31, 1998
University of Wollongong, 1998 Early Childhood Conference

Emerging Voices: "explorations of language and literacy in early childhood settings". University of Wollongong.

Contact: Kim Roser, Pauline Harris, University of Wollongong.
Tel: (02) 4221 4678.
Fax: (02) 4221 4657.

Email: kimroser@uow.edu.au

November 4 – 5, 1998
6th National Public Health Association Immunisation Conference

Immunisation Beyond 2000. Hilton on the Park, Melbourne.

Contact: Rosemary Lester and Heath Kelly, Conference Secretariat, The Public Health Association of Australia Inc.
Tel: (02) 6285 2373.
Fax: (02) 6260 4174.

Email: media@pha.org.au

November 5 – 7, 1998
National Conference promoting the health, development and wellbeing of children in long day care and family day care settings

Healthy Childcare in Australia. Aikenhead Conference Centre, Melbourne.

Contact: Healthy Child Care in Australia Conference, C/o ICMS Pty Ltd. 84 Queensbridge Street, Southbank, Vic. 3006.
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Fax: (03) 9682 0288.
Email: childcare@icms.com.au

July 14 – 17, 1999
AECA Conference 1999

Children at the Top. Darwin High School, Bullocky Point, Darwin.

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