CHAPTER 1

The Problem of Marriage

This chapter sets out some recent changes in relationship trends in the three countries which explain the intense debates concerning the marriage problem. It explains why the marriage debate is so contentious and sets out a constructive framework for considering the challenges that governments face in developing marriage education policies. On the one hand, from the 'marital decline' perspective, marriage is perceived as disintegrating and in need of rescuing, while on the other hand, from the 'marital resilience' perspective, marriage is perceived as just one relationship option among many that people can choose. This frame sets out the clear distinctions in the debate, but it is necessary to keep in mind that marriage itself is constantly changing. Therefore, as the remaining chapters will illustrate, the key issue is how or whether it can be revitalized or recreated as an important social institution in the three countries. The chapter also offers a brief overview of marriage and relationship education which has been receiving public support for strengthening marriage.

Recent Relationship Trends in the UK, Australia and the US

Marriage education policy has developed as a political response to the perceived social problem of a crisis in marriage, where many couples have moved away from the altar or exchanging marriage vows as the ultimate goal. Trends in family arrangements are not dissimilar in the UK, Australia and the US, where there has been a general decline in marriage rates and age at first marriage, while rates of divorce, cohabitation and out-of-wedlock births have increased. As more people retreat from marriage, the political and policy debates about the purported marriage crisis are particularly lively in the US, where the policy

focus is on whether marriage offers unique benefits for couples and their children. In the UK, marriage tends to be a rather taboo subject in public debate and dialogue concentrates more on how to support all children and families, regardless of the marital status or sexual orientation of the parents. In Australia, there has recently been little public discussion about marriage *per se*, but there has been an increasing interest in protecting the family unit, especially at the point of divorce.

The following figures illustrate the changes in relationship trends.

Table 1.1   Marriage Rates: Australia, UK and US (Marriages per 1000 people)

	Australia	UK	US
1993	6.4		
1994	6.2	11.00	
1995	6.1	11.32	
1996	5.8	11.18	8.8
1997	5.8	10.99	8.9
1998	5.9	10.93	8.4
1999	6.0	10.98	8.6
2000	5.9	10.53	8.5
2001	5.3	10.32	8.2
2002	5.4	10.29	7.8
2003	5.4	10.33	7.7
2004	5.5	09.80	7.8
2005	5.4	09.74	7.5

SOURCES - Australia: ABS (2006a), UK: Eurostat, US: National Center for Health Statistics, *National Vital Statistics Reports* (2005, 2006).

Table 1.2   Divorce Rates: Australia, UK and US (Divorces per 1000 people)

	Australia	UK	US
1993	2.7		
1994	2.7		
1995	2.8	2.8	
1996	2.9	3.0	4.3
1997	2.8	3.0	4.3
1998	2.7	2.8	4.2
1999	2.8	2.8	4.1
2000	2.6	2.7	
2001	2.9	2.7	4.0
2002	2.7	2.7	4.0
2003	2.7	2.8	3.8
2004	2.6	2.8	3.7
2005	2.6	2.6	3.6

SOURCES - Australia: ABS (2006a), UK: Eurostat, US: National Center for Health Statistics, *National Vital Statistics Reports* (2005, 2006).

Table 1.3   Births Out-of-wedlock (as a percentage of total live births)

	Australia	UK	US
1993		32.2	31.0
1994	25.6	32.4	32.6
1995	26.6	33.9	32.2
1996	27.4	35.8	32.4
1997	28.1	37.0	32.4
1998	28.7	37.8	32.8
1999	29.2	38.9	33.0
2000	29.2	39.5	33.2
2001	30.7	40.0	33.5
2002	31.3	40.6	34.0
2003	31.6	41.4	34.6
2004	32.2	42.2	35.8
2005	32.2	42.8	

SOURCES - Australia: ABS (2005a), UK: National Statistics (2006), US: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2006).

Couples living together as 'husband and wife' in informal marriages have been difficult to identify and quantify in the past. However as cohabitation – or *de facto* relationships – became more socially acceptable, more data has become available, although it is presented in different measures. In the UK, the percentage of non-married men and women under the age of 60 cohabitating increased between 1986 and 2005 from 11 per cent to 24 per cent for men and 13 per cent to 24 per cent for women (National Statistics, 2007). The Australian 2006 census showed that just over 85 per cent of couples were in registered marriages, while 15 per cent of couples were in *de facto* relationships. Couples with children are slightly more likely to be married (89 per cent), than couples without children (81 per cent).[1] The US Census figures in 2000 showed that 5.5 million couples were living together but not married. This was up from 3.2 million in 1990 (Census, 2003). Put in percentage figures, nearly 60 per cent of US adults are married, 10.4 per cent are separated or divorced, 6.6 per cent are widowed, 19 per cent are never married, and 5.7 per cent are living with a partner (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2004).

The Marriage Debate: Disintegration or Progress?

The challenge for government is to manage marriage at a time when there are differing views about its function and role in the 21st century. If we ask the question 'what is marriage for?', the perceptions that marriage is a productive public institution or a fulfilling private one can both provide convincing, if distinct, explanations. There is an enormous literature on the value of modern marriage, especially from the US.[2] This literature on the marriage debate is divided into two main camps. Marriage is perceived as a form of public commitment and the most appropriate institution for raising children, or as a private emotional relationship which does not concern

governments. Therefore, as the institution of marriage undergoes rapid changes, some social scientists and legal scholars argue for restoring it, while others disagree. This debate forms the framework of the book's analysis. While it should be acknowledged that much of the discussion draws on American research, due to similar trends in the UK and Australia, it is possible to draw out some relevant insights.

Amato (2004) and Amato et al (2007) offer a very useful framework which contributes to a better understanding of the conflicting views in the marriage debate. Contemporary marriage possesses multiple meanings and wide ranging objectives. Both the 'marital decline' perspective (situated in an institutional framework) and the 'marital resilience' perspective (situated in an individual framework) are valuable for charting and appreciating the difficulties in developing public policies. These perspectives assess the changes in marriage in different ways and many of the factors that we will be examining can be regarded as markers of institutional or individualistic marriage. For example, in keeping with the argument that marriage is an important institution, it represents the favoured entity for raising children, a lawful contract, a religious directive, an economic bond, a measure to avoid poverty and welfare dependency. It may embody a calculated agreement based on negotiating a mutually beneficial arrangement. From the standpoint that marriage is more about fulfilling individual needs, it signifies commitment, an exclusive sexual attachment, self-gratification, proof of one's sexual appeal, the fulfilment of romantic hopes and dreams or relations of power. Not surprisingly, marriage for many couples probably features various parts of these elements.

The 'Marital Decline' Perspective

Those who are concerned about the retreat from marriage adopt the 'marital decline' perspective which emphasizes an institutional world view; that is, marriage is more

than the individuals within it and therefore should be protected by institutions such as

the law and the churches. This perspective considers how marriage has played a role

in meeting the needs of society and sustaining the family structure over time. Due to

the shift towards individualism and the pursuit of personal happiness, people no

longer remain married 'for better or for worse' and this leads to the major question:

'how can we save marriage'? The answer, from this perspective, is to develop a

marriage culture and government policies that strengthen the institution of marriage

through measures such as premarital and relationship education programs. Divorce

should be made more difficult so that people take marriage vows more seriously and

make a commitment to stay together even when their relationships are under duress.

The solution is to dismantle and repeal the culture of divorce and to encourage unwed

parents to marry.

As the forms, values and arrangements of marriage are changing around the

world, some social scientists and legal scholars – along with politicians and policy

makers – are concerned that marriage is a fragile institution which should be restored.

For example, *Rebuilding the Nest* edited by David Blankenhorn, Jean Bethke Elshtain

and Steven Bayme (1990) argued for recreating the privileged status of lasting

heterosexual marriage. Voices from various political persuasions celebrated the term

'family values' and helped launch a conservative ascendancy about the importance of

marriage. In 1992, US Vice-President Dan Quayle attacked the television character of

Murphy Brown for becoming a single mother. The following year, Barbara Dafoe

Whitehead wrote an op-ed piece on Murphy Brown declaring that 'Dan Quayle Was

Right'. Her volume on *The Divorce Culture* (1997) discusses the dangers of single

parenthood and divorce. Works such as Maggie Gallagher's *The Abolition of*

Marriage and David Popenoe's *Life Without Father* both published in 1996 added to

the growing debates about marriage. These authors place the well being of children at the centre of the marriage debate. 'Marriage is an institution in crisis. Close to half of new marriages end in divorce. A third of our children are born out-of-wedlock. The majority of children, at current estimates, will experience a fatherless or motherless household' (Gallagher, 2003, p. 21). Popenoe (1996, p. 24) bemoans the fact that:

> Marriage has been losing its social purpose. In place of commitment
> and obligation to others, especially children, marriage has become
> mainly a vehicle for the emotional fulfilment of the adult partners.
> "Till death do us part" has been replaced by "so long as I am happy".
> Marriage is now less an institution that one belongs to and more a
> vehicle to be used to one's own advantage.

These authors extol the virtues of marriage and two-parent families – a husband and wife. They oppose same-sex marriage, arguing that only heterosexuals should be permitted to marry (see George and Elshtain, 2006).

The work of scholars such as Waite and Gallagher (2000), Whitehead and Popenoe (2003, 2004, 2005, 2006) and Wilson (2002) is used to support policy developments to strengthen marriage. Waite and Gallagher's book *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*, attempts to counter what they regard as a 'sustained and surprisingly successful attack' (2000, p. 1) on the institution of marriage. They argue that married people tend to lead longer, healthier, happier lives than divorced or single people. Additionally, they suggest that children in intact, two-parent families tend to earn more and learn more. Because of this, these children generally require fewer government-paid social services, such as remedial learning, criminal justice, drug and alcohol rehabilitation,

depression counselling, and medical, income and housing-aid programs. There are also economic benefits for married couples, according to Waite and Gallagher, who draw on data which indicates that married men earn at least 10 per cent more than single men, and that married families have the highest amount of assets. They argue that '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' (2000, p. 67). Therefore, they conclude, 'when it comes to building wealth or avoiding poverty, a stable marriage may be your most important asset' (2000, p. 123). Marriage provides many benefits, and protects the interests of children and families by upholding the foundational institution of social order.

The 'Marital Resilience' Perspective

Others disagree: for them, marriage is changing, but it is a robust institution which is not necessarily in decline. Those who adopt the 'marital resilience' perspective do not mourn the shift to individualism and the focus on self-interest (Amato, 2004, p. 960) intimating that marital instability is not necessarily a problem. Personal development and self-fulfilment are important factors in shaping people's decisions about marriage, cohabitation, divorce and having children out-of-wedlock. At present, love is the central reason for marriage. This has created a paradox according to Coontz (2005), because 'no sooner did the ideal of marrying for love triumph than its most enthusiastic supporters started demanding the right to divorce if love died' (2005, p. 307). Before divorce became easy to obtain, troubled couples would have had 'stable' marriages at least to the outside world, even though they may have been sleeping in separate bedrooms or have been dissatisfied with their relationship. The advent of no-fault divorce, from the marital resilient perspective, is a positive development as it has offered unhappy couples more options about how to live their lives. People do not divorce because they are more 'promiscuous or irresponsible than their forebears were; they divorce

because the social role of marriage has changed' (Shumway, 2003, p. 226). While in the past, many individuals remained in unhappy marriages because divorce was difficult, expensive and stigmatized, this is no longer the case. In fact, divorce offers people another chance for happiness and an escape from dysfunctional homes for children.

The argument that marriage is in decline has also sparked a range of rejoinders that underscore and sometimes cheer the changing nature of marriage for endorsing flexibility and championing individual rights and needs. At the time when the works mentioned above denounced the decline in marriage, Judith Stacey (1996) a US family studies academic, responded that these authors were part of a strong network of 'scholarly and policy institutes, think tanks and commissions' which effectively mobilized 'to forge a national consensus on family values that rapidly shaped the family ideology and politics of the Clinton administration' (1996, p. 54). She continues:

> through the sheer force of categorical assertion, repetition, and cross-citation of each other's publications, these social scientists seem to have convinced most of the media, the literate public, and Clinton himself that a fault-free bedrock of social science research validates the particular family values that they and most Americans claim to favour, but fail to practice (1996, p. 58).

Deliberations about the resilience of marriage developed in reaction to these developments. The central question is 'how can we make relationships personally and socially fulfilling'? This recognizes the pressures and anxieties experienced by families in all living arrangements and across class, racial and ethnic lines. An important point for those who adopt this perspective is that relationship decisions are private choices and governments have

no business in endorsing or privileging the nuclear family at the expense of other types of family. Promoting marriage, therefore, offers few solutions. Governments should address problems such as poverty and poor access to education, health and child care, which threaten the well being of children, more than the growth of individualism and the corresponding decline in the two-parent family. Problems in social relationships indicate that wider measures such as family-friendly work policies, parental leave, flexible work arrangements, and access to good quality child care should be available not just for married couples but for all families. Improved public policies providing effective support systems would make life easier and put less of a burden on all relationships, not just married ones. Developing policies to restrict no-fault divorce are unhelpful and harmful for those trapped in abusive relationships. Divorce should not be made more difficult, as this may discourage many people from entering marriage in the first place. The high rates of divorce heighten the impression that marriage is a risky investment (Kiernan 2004).

Those coming from a 'marital resilience' standpoint criticize some of the authors who view marriage as the avenue to better life chances. Coltrane cites one reviewer who claims that Gallagher and Waite's *The Case for Marriage* 'reads like and infomercial for marriage. … Marriage, in their treatise, becomes a kind of universal wonder product, Prozac without the side effects' (cited in Coltrane, 2001, p. 395). Coltrane (2001) suggests that the simple comparisons offered in Gallagher and Waite's work 'overstate the potential benefits of marriage and lapse into treating correlation as causation' (2001, p. 395). Making a similar point to Stacey above, Coltrane argues that the pro-marriage movement is

> guilty of oversimplifying and often misrepresenting research on
> marriage, divorce, and parenting. Through sheer frequency of
> repetition, their public proclamations and media rhetoric about the

dangers of fatherlessness and the evils of divorce come to be seen as

'facts'. In truth, the social science evidence on these topics is much

more mixed (2001, p. 405).

Marriage's perceived benefits need to be evaluated carefully. Huston and Melz (2004) call

for caution when interpreting findings that support marriage, claiming that it is necessary to

pay greater attention to details. Making generalizations as Waite and Gallagher (2000) do tell

us very little about the benefits of marriage. Using broad-scale statistics that treat all groups

the same, Huston and Melz (2004) claim 'obscures substantive differences in family-building

behaviour for different racial and income groups' (2004, p. 946). To prove convincingly that

marriage provides health, economic and other benefits it is necessary, they say, to compare

married, single and divorced people on a range of indicators. Marriage's advantages, Huston

and Melz (2004) assert, cannot be limited to those who establish good marriages – those in

conflict-ridden marriages should also experience benefits. Good marriage should be better for

people than good forms of other lifestyles such as *de facto* or gay relationships. The benefits

of marriage should exist for all couples, and demographic differences such as being rich or

poor, gay or straight should not matter.

Several scholars have challenged the 'marital decline' argument that because

married people, are, on average, better off than divorced or single people, lifelong

marriage should be promoted for all and sundry, while divorce and cohabitation

should be opposed. Coontz (2005, p. 310) disagrees with using averages to bestow

personal advice to individuals or to develop social policy for everyone. Typically, she

argues, marriage has substantial benefits for both husbands and wives. That is

because, she acknowledges, most marriages are reasonably content. But, she insists,

'individuals in unhappy marriages are more psychologically distressed than people

who remain single, and many of marriage's health benefits fade if the marriage is

troubled' (2005, p. 310). In any case, according to Judith Stacey (1996), changes in family life are here to stay. It is more important to provide good public services and support all types of families, not just those which consist of heterosexual, married parents with children. She argues that there are two choices:

> Either we can come to grips with the postmodern family condition by accepting the end of a singular ideal family and begin to promote better living and spiritual conditions for the diverse array of real families we actually inhabit and desire. Or we can continue to engage in denial, resistance, displacement, and bad faith, by cleaving to a moralistic ideology of *the family* at the same time that we fail to provide social and economic conditions that make life for the modern family or any other kind of family viable, let alone dignified and secure (1996, p. 11).

From this point of view, the objective of reviving marriage in its traditional form of the nuclear family is misguided. Any movement that sets a goal of re-establishing heterosexual marriage as the main site of child raising, dependent care or interpersonal commitments misunderstands how irrevocably marriage and family life have changed (Coontz 2005). The claim for equality in marriage has centred on the reliance of love as the crucial element for legitimacy. This has implications for gays and lesbians. If love is the true foundation of marriage, and queer love is no different in passion or sincerity from straight love, then the institution of marriage cannot exclude gays and lesbians, except on the improper grounds of discrimination based on sexual orientation (Graff 1999). Moreover, if gays and lesbians raise children, then

their children should not be prevented from enjoying the rights and protection

provided by marriage for heterosexual families.

Research indicates that successful marriage can be partially explained by self-

selection, that is, people who choose to marry in the first place are more likely than

unmarried couples to have steady employment, higher education and higher wages.

From this perspective, governments can do little, because they cannot be involved in

this selection process. Clearly though, marriage does not actually cause these

differences, but people with good prospects are more likely to marry (Smock and

Manning, 2004). Studies have shown that economically disadvantaged groups are just

as likely to marry as non-disadvantaged groups. However, being economically

disadvantaged does not result in successful marriage: couples with low income or

income instability are more likely to divorce (Raley and Bumpass, 2003).

As Amato (2004) argues, the conflicting perspectives on marriage depend on

whether marriage is perceived from an institutional point of view or from an

individual point of view (2004, p. 962). Indeed, he reveals that the clash between

these two perspectives 'reflects a fundamental contradiction within marriage itself'.

On the one hand, marriage is designed to promote social stability and tradition, but on

the other hand, it should nurture personal freedom and happiness (Amato 2004, p.

962). Ultimately, Amato supports marriage policies, citing studies that demonstrate

that children have the best life chances if they are raised by two happily married

parents. In a later study, Amato et al (2007) investigate major changes in marriage in

the US by comparing data from 1980 and 2000. They examine different dimensions

including couples' social connections with friends, family and community

organizations, and their expectations and attitudes about marriage and divorce. They

document complex patterns of marriage, which 'have become stronger and more

satisfying in some respects and weaker and less satisfying in other respects' (2007, p. 238). They noticed no consistent support for either the 'marital decline' or the 'marital resilience' perspective. For example, their findings indicate that attitudes towards life-long marriage have become more traditional and strongly value marital commitment, while the majority of people believe that personal happiness is more important than remaining in a bad marriage (2007, p. 201). Thus it is possible to support different perspectives on the state of marriage, depending on the selected evidence.

As a consequence of changing expectations which structure marriage, all the previous precedents have been challenged. As Coontz expresses it, society is now entering 'uncharted territory', and there is no clear guide to the new marital landscape. Most of what was taken for granted about who marries and why, or how to make a marriage work, is 'in flux' (2005, p. 11-12). A return to traditional values of commitment, responsibility and sacrifice in marriage require what Cherlin calls a 'reinstitutionalization of marriage' and a 'reversal of the individualistic orientation toward family and personal life' (2004, p. 857). This would be difficult because today, as never before, decisions about marriage and family life rest with the individuals involved, not with society as a whole.[3]

Certainly there have been claims that western society is accepting a wide variety of relationships. Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) have identified a loosening shift in family meanings and structures, suggesting that emotional and egalitarian attachments are replacing traditional bonds. They theorize about the greater acceptance that relationships are an essentially private subjective agreement. Giddens (1992) provides an interesting argument about the transformation of intimacy from a sociological perspective. He describes the shift in the late 18th century as 'the intrinsically subversive character of the romantic love complex' (1992,

p. 46). Intimate relations are more fluid and no longer fixed by laws and customs or morals. People have the autonomy to deliberate, judge, choose and act on different possible courses of action (1992, p. 185). 'Love used to be tied to sexuality, for most of the sexually "normal" population, through marriage; but now the two are connected more and more via the pure relationship' (1992, p. 8). This relationship, Giddens argues, is entered into for its own sake, based on sexual and emotional equality, offering participants the likelihood of mutual respect and personally satisfying love. Accordingly, marriage is 'just one life-style among others' (1992, p. 154). Giddens reasons that this approach to relationships is reconfiguring popular as well as academic culture.

What is significant about Giddens' approach is that he sees the development of new types of intimacy holding the prospect of radically democratizing the personal sphere. However, he seems to be exaggerating his case. He does not consider sufficiently the inequality of gender, class and race. And as Cherlin (2004, p. 858) points out, Giddens does not take into account the effect of children on the pure relationship. It may be the case that couples who are well educated, earn good wages and have no children have a casual view about responsibility and can enjoy fluid relationships. However, people who are, or who intend to have children, or are not well-off, also want steadfastness and financial support from their partners. Ultimately, Cherlin (2004) concludes, it is marriage which can offer commitment and stability. This final comment points to the continued value of marriage for children and of relevance to governments who share public responsibility for their welfare. Those who argue for bringing back traditional marriage as well as those who defend diverse range of relationships would agree that children need a stable and happy environment if they are to flourish.

Marriage Education Programs and Relationship Support

Couples may no longer be content with having a 'stable' marriage if they are unhappy. Although governments may be limited in what they can do to address this discontentment, they can support a range of marital and relationship education programs as a way of strengthening relationships. As I will discuss in the empirical chapters, marriage and relationship education programs are similar in the UK, the US and Australia, ranging from early intervention and preventative strategies to strengthening approaches for those already married to rejuvenate their relationships, or assist those considering separation. In all three countries, a distinction is made between marriage and relationship education and marriage counselling. Marriage education programs suggest that people need to nurture their relationships and can benefit from accessing information, learning new skills or changing their behaviour (Gottman, 1994). This is different from counselling which is offered to already distressed couples experiencing specific problems.

Marriage education embraces pre-marital preparation when couples are happy with each other and willing to invest effort into their relationship. Entry to marriage is a good time for educational measures to prepare couples for the challenges they may encounter in the future. While newly weds report high levels of relationship satisfaction initially, after the first year or two couples find the attraction moderates and are confronted with the need to develop new roles and routines in their relationship and also with the need to find ways to negotiate conflict (Halford, 2004, p. 561). Other forms of marriage education include mentoring programs, relationships skills training, campaigns and information about the value of marriage. The aim of the marriage and relationship education more broadly is to assist committed couples (whether cohabiting, engaged or already married) to move through the various phases of their relationship.

There are numerous approaches to marriage education, some focus on role playing, or showing empathy, some are content driven, others focus on updating and revising skills. While marriage education programs provide a variety of learning options, the common objective is to teach people the behaviours that predict marital success and those that predict failure, to teach them about the advantages of marriage for families and what to expect along the path of matrimony. The assumption is that the earlier couples learn relationship skills, the fewer problems they will experience once married. Various studies have shown that these programs produce large improvements in relationship skills immediately after completion and that these improvements persist over time (Halford and Simons, 2005, Stanley et al, 2001). Benefits of pre-marriage education include slowing couples down to allow time to deliberate over their relationship and reduce impulsive decision making; sending a message about the importance of marriage and the commitment it entails; raising awareness of support and resources if couples require it and reducing the risk of subsequent distress (Stanley, 2001).

Marriage education provides information designed to help people achieve 'long-lasting, happy, and successful marriages. It aims to impart knowledge and attitudes and teach the skills and behaviours needed to have successful intimate relationships' (Ooms, 2005, 1). Ooms refers broadly to the field of marriage and relationships education which includes information for people in different life-cycles from single to divorced. Marriage and relationships education is available through classes and also via media campaigns, fact sheets and brochures, self-help books, DVDs and self-guided web courses and other information available via the Internet. Most commonly, however, this form of learning refers to 'structured programs, classes, and work-shops for couples and individuals offered on a voluntary basis in

the community, churches, campuses and schools' (Ooms, 2005, p. 1-2). It uses an educational approach, providing information and understanding about relationship choices, behaviours and challenges. The idea is to equip individuals and couples with the skills and knowledge they need to deal with any relationship issues. The programs employ various teaching methods, lecture material and experiential exercises. They are often supplemented with videos and movie clips, role-playing, workbook exercises and practice assignments between sessions. Most courses run from eight to 20 hours and are delivered over a weekend or one night per week for six to ten week periods.

While differences exist between the three countries, there are two main approaches: skills training and inventories. One of the main approaches to marriage education programs (particularly in the US), uses skills based programs focusing on active training of skills, although these approaches usually include other components such as building awareness and cognitive change (Halford and Simons, 2005, p. 150). Examples include Practical Application of Relationship Skills (PAIRS), Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), Relationship Enhancement and Couples Communication. The programs offer married or unmarried couples skills for maintaining a lasting relationship. They are designed in different formats and can be delivered in a range of settings by clergy, trained para-professionals, religious and lay leaders and teachers. Courses and activities cover issues such as positive communication, managing conflict, balancing work, home and relationships, sharing responsibility, intimacy and sexuality. The goal of providing information and self-awareness is important. Many programs involve sharing information, for example about issues such as financial budgets and awareness raising, particularly about expectations and attitudes, communication and conflict. There is evidence on the

short-term effectiveness of skills training, in particular immediately after programs

(Hahlweg and Markman, 1988) and that improvements continue over time (Halford et

al, 2003) Studies have illustrated that even short programs of a few hours duration can

strengthen relationships over a period of one to five years (Carroll and Doherty,

2003). A study of 3,000 families in the US discovered that divorce rates were 30 per

cent lower over the first five years of marriage for those who had completed a

marriage preparation course (Stanley et al, 2006a).

      A widely used approach is based on pre-marital assessment by utilizing couple

inventories. Examples of inventories include Premarital Personal and Relationship

Evaluation (PREPARE) and Facilitating Open Couple Communication Understanding

and Study (FOCCUS). These programs involve completing a self-diagnostic

inventory assessing a range of relationship issues or completing a questionnaire which

seeks to help couples identify their strengths and areas for growth. Used as an

introduction to the marriage preparation process, the programs open up issues for

discussion and couples consider the results of their surveys with a trained facilitator,

educator or clergy person. According to Halford and Simons (2005, p. 149-150), the

benefit of these programs is the focus on adult learning processes which allows self-

directed learning and negotiating curricula between participants and educators. For

example, FOCCUS surveys a respondent's perceptions of his or her partner as couples

complete a premarital inventory that assesses relationship issues. A facilitator

considers the results of these questionnaires with the couple, addressing their

strengths and weaknesses. Couples can then reflect on issues where they disagree and

consider ways of improving their relationship. A positive aspect of the inventory-

based approach is that programs such as PREPARE and FOCCUS can predict the

trajectory of relationship satisfaction in the initial years of marriage (Larson and

Olsen, 1989, Williams and Jurich, 1995). They provide the opportunity for couples to evaluate their personal risk and resilience. In some instances, couples realize they have problems that they need to resolve and may delay or even cancel their wedding. And the structured approach to using the inventories and the available training might help to explain their widespread application (Halford and Simons, 2005, p. 150). However, outcomes studies on the use and effects of assessment instruments such as PREPARE have not been carried out (Stanley, 2001, p. 276).

Some settings offer couples skills programs after they have completed the inventories. It has been argued that inventories are a supplemental tool and should not be called marriage education because they do not teach skills (Sollee, email 2007). At any rate, inventories continue to be widely used, particularly by religious organizations; many of these receive public funding in the UK and Australia.

While the divorce rate is high in the three countries under study, it is important to acknowledge that over 50 per cent of marrying couples remain married for the rest of their lives. This suggests that many couples sustain marriages without participating in relationship education (although this tells us little about the quality of their relationship and it does not necessarily follow that these couples are happy). However, of more concern is the need to target 'high risk' couples. Predictors of high risk for future relationship problems include 'negative family-of-origin experiences, certain personality characteristics, patterns of couple communication, and low religiosity' (Halford and Simons, 2005, p. 153). Particular groups have been identified as being 'at risk' or 'high risk' and susceptible to developing unsuccessful marriages. Halford (2004) argues that relationship education is of particular benefit to these high risk couples. Assessing risk indicators such as parental divorce, previous marriage, amount of time that the partners have known each other, whether they have

cohabitated or will be forming stepfamilies are relatively easy to measure. While

some of the programs such as PREP focus on negative behaviour which is particularly

relevant for high risk couples such as withdrawal, escalation, negativity and

invalidation, the problem is that high risk partners are less likely to go to education

classes than are low risk partners (Halford, 2004, p. 562-563). A recent study by

Fincham et al (2007) argues that forgiveness, sacrifice, commitment and sanctification

in maintaining and regulating marital quality are important. This finding is connected

to the transformation of marriage itself – these factors may not be present in

relationships given the current trend toward individual fulfilment. However, the

analysis concludes that those who do place the stability of the marriage above their

own personal needs are more likely to enjoy happy and successful marriages.

Various studies indicate that not all couples require the same intervention, so a

'one size fits all' approach may not be particularly useful. While some couples may

need communication skills training, others may benefit from learning stress

management techniques or how to deal with conflicts with in-laws. Others may be

experiencing emotional problems or physical illness (Larson, 2004, Halford et al,

2004). Ooms (2005) argues that in the US, some attention has been paid to 'best

practice' curricula thereby avoiding a model based on traditional family roles and

tasks within marriage. She claims that 'the processes and skills taught in these

programs are clearly egalitarian and carefully structured to create and model a level

playing field' (2005, p. 5). She goes on to acknowledge, however, that marriage

education does not 'explicitly discuss the dark side of couple relationships and

marriage, nor what constitutes violent and abusive intimate behaviour' (2005, p. 5).

Government subsidies for many of these programs allow the service providers

to charge inexpensive fees. Moreover, governments are gradually funding programs

that have been designed for the specific needs of diverse populations in different situations. For example, programs that were initially designed for fairly small numbers of white, middle class, committed couples are being adapted for stepfamilies, military families, prisoners and their partners and couples dealing with substance abuse or chronic illness. Particular racial and ethnic groups, refugees and migrants are also being targeted. In the US, marriage educators are now working with domestic violence groups. Self-directed learning kits are available for people living in regional and remote areas in Australia. Evidently, marriage and relationship education takes place in assorted arrangements and settings. Service providers often develop their programs in response to local needs or to address the requirements of particular cohorts.

Recent studies show the different participation levels in marriage and relationship education. In the US, 44 per cent of couples who married in the 1990s attended some form of program (Stanley et al, 2006a). In Australia approximately one third of marrying couples attend some form of premarriage education (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, 1998), while in the Britain, it has been estimated that less than one in 100 couples per year seek relationship support of any kind (Callan, 2007). These low figures suggest that governments and service providers face many challenges if they wish to increase this amount.

Conclusion

This book considers how differing perceptions about marriage play out in interactions between the various actors in the public realm. Those who view marriage as a traditional institution wish to see it revived through government support and individual effort, arguing that a strong marriage is far superior to a strong relationship. In contrast, those who perceive

marriage as a private institution are not automatically opposed to governments enhancing marriage education, but recommend that the focus of the debate should be on developing policies that support *all* family relationships, regardless of their form. While there is therefore some overlap between the two perspectives, there are nonetheless fundamental disagreements. The following chapters will demonstrate the ways in which the issues surrounding the marriage debate remain contested.

Marriage educators agree that the attitudes, skills, and behaviours needed for a successful marriage can be learned; that marriage education is more easily accepted, reaches more people and is more cost-effective than individual couples therapy. Moreover, happy couples can profit from education – it is not necessarily for those whose relationships are already under stress. In short, marriages naturally decay unless energy is put into them (Ooms, 2005, p. 4). These programs focus on practical, technique-based measures to sustain successful relationships. Their underlying theme is for couples to reduce any unrealistic expectations that they will 'live happily ever after' and to adopt responsible attitudes by working on their relationships. This may occur via feedback through completing an inventory; accessing resources materials; or learning skills which provide people with the ability to strengthen their relationship through programs such as PREP.

The next chapter examines the changes and different understandings about marriage because they impact on the role of governments. As the above account illustrates, there have been many explanations and discussions about shifts in people's relationships and changes in marriage's functions. Governments not only have to deal with these numerous, wide reaching developments, but also with a range of particular variables which in turn influence marriage education and public policy.