FORMING RELATIONSHIPS IN AUSTRALIA: QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS INTO A PROCESS IMPORTANT TO HUMAN WELLBEING

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Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted during 2002–03 for the Australian Family Formation Decisions (AFFD) Project, this paper probes the relationship formation experiences of 115 women, men and couples of family-forming age living in eastern Australia. Contemporary relationship formation is characterized by a mixture of ambivalence and resignation to having limited control over the process on the one hand ('if it happens it happens'), and urgency on the other, especially among women seeking to fulfil maternal ambitions in their thirties after prioritizing other things earlier in their adult lives. For most the process of partnering involves trial and error, with timing – finding someone whose expectations of a relationship match one's own – posing a major challenge. It gives rise to a common phenomenon, the 'too soon syndrome', where relationships with many positive attributes are abandoned because one party perceives the other as too keen to 'settle down', and/or himself or herself as not ready to do so. The paper also examines impediments to partnering, including traditional ones like shyness; negative trial-and-error experiences; the demands of study and career establishment; pursuit of agendas emphasizing travel and enjoyment; sole parenthood; and parental marriage breakdown. A framework is provided by Beck's (1992) concept of reflexive modernization, and his associated proposition that life has become highly individualized with an emphasis on creating 'do-it-yourself' biographies.

Keywords: family formation, partnering, relationship experiences, 'too soon' syndrome, impediments to partnering, lifestyles, reflexive modernization

Largely involuntarily and driven by social changes, individuals are entering a searching and exploratory phase. They want to try out and 'experience' new ways of living to counteract the dominance of roles which are becoming increasingly irrelevant. ... They allow themselves to enjoy life here and now and not just in the distant future, and to cultivate a conscious delight in the good things in life. ... They are developing a feeling for freedom ... a new ethic based on 'one's duty to oneself' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995: 43).

Family formation is a fundamental process in human societies. It entails forming relationships and then having, or not having, children in those relationships, and is

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complicated by the breakdown of old relationships and the formation of new ones, especially where there are children involved. At one extreme, relationships formed can be tenuous and the transition to parenthood decidedly unplanned, as, for example, when a brief sexual encounter results in unintended pregnancy and a live first birth. For the most part in contemporary Western countries, however, with contraceptive technology, access to safe abortion and societal tolerance of consensual unions providing unprecedented choice over whether and when to have children, family formation is a more considered process. People seek compatible partners, and while satisfying themselves of that compatibility or subsequently, negotiate the 'whether', 'how many' and 'when' of having children.

This paper draws on in-depth interviews with 115 women, men and couples in eastern Australia undertaken for the Australian Family Formation Decisions (AFFD) Project to focus on the first stage of family formation: relationship formation. It has been recommended that family formation research must use methods other than event history analysis if *explanation* of modern trends and patterns is its goal (Coleman 2002; Hobcraft 2002). In this spirit, the aim of the AFFD Project was to step back from aggregate data and allow people for whom family formation was a recent past, current or imminent future issue to relate their lived experience of, and/or future desires for, the process. By taking a qualitative approach it sought to obtain fresh insight into the texture of an area of behaviour central to human and societal wellbeing, and one that in recent decades has undergone considerable change.

Informants (partners in couple interviews excepted) had previously, in 1996–97 and 2000, participated in the Negotiating the Life Course Survey (NLC), a national longitudinal telephone survey of over 2,200 people initially aged 18–54 years. To contain costs only residents of the eastern states between Southeast Queensland and Tasmania were eligible for interview, but both metropolitan and regional–rural areas were covered. Given a broader project interest in fertility decisions, partnered persons were oversampled, interviews being conducted with 51 females (13 unpartnered), 35 males (9 unpartnered) and 29 couples (a total of 80 female and 64 male informants). Most female and unpartnered male informants were aged 23–39, while partnered male informants had partners that age. Mindful of recent trends to later childbearing (Carmichael and McDonald 2003) and increased childlessness (Merlo and Rowland 2000), however, a few informants aged, or with female partners aged, 40–44 were also interviewed, on the basis that they were childless or had first had children at maternal ages beyond 33. Potential interviewees were contacted by letter then follow-up phone call. Those agreeing to participate undertook face-to-face tape-recorded interviews, mostly in their homes. These were guided by open questions that probed various themes, relationship formation being a major one. Others included decisions on whether and when to have children, and how many to have, parenting experiences and future plans. Interviews took from one to one-and-a-half hours and were fully transcribed, then thematically coded using The Ethnograph 6.0 into almost 130 discrete codes developed during the coding process. Discourse concerning relationship formation was then isolated through selection of relevant codes, and secondary coding organized this material according to themes reported on below. All names to which quotations are attributed are pseudonyms.

Recent partnering trends in Australia have been explored by McDonald (2003) using NLC data; de Vaus, Qu and Weston (2003) using a variety of sources; and Birrell, Rapson and Hourigan (2004) using mostly census data. Qu and Soriano (2004)

have probed constraints to relationship formation among young adults. McDonald shows that since 1970 'massive' falls in proportions married among those in their twenties have been offset, cross-sectionally, by greatly increased proportions both not in relationships and living together unmarried. Proportions, by sex, of 20–29-year-olds who have *ever* lived together are, however, much higher than proportions currently living together. This highlights the usually limited durations of such relationships before either dissolution or conversion to marriages. They are not, by and large, alternatives to marriage, but rather, except among Mediterranean and Asian-birthplace groups and the strongly religious, 'an integral part of the process of getting married' (McDonald 2003: 84). That said, over the period when living together has proliferated, first relationships of this type have become more likely to dissolve than to end in marriage, their usual destiny in the 1970s. Given that it is the norm now for first marriages to follow cohabitation with the spouse (74 per cent did so in 2005, up from 30 per cent in the early 1980s (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003, 2006) and a much lower proportion in 1970 – probably below 10 per cent), this implies that in recent times it has become common to experience more than one living-together relationship.

De Vaus *et al.* (2003) also chart the retreat from marriage at ages below 30, and particularly below 25, and the rise of cohabitation to become a normative phase before marrying. They demonstrate, using data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, that periods spent cohabiting before marriage have increased substantially. Whereas 40 per cent of those cohabiting before marriage cohabited for six months or less and just 5 per cent for three years or more in the 1960s and 1970s, 12 per cent and more than 30 per cent, respectively, did so in the late 1990s. First live-in relationships are nowadays, on average, entered later than those of birth cohorts that reached age 20 at the height of the postwar marriage boom, but at similar ages to cohorts born earlier in the twentieth century.

Birrell *et al.*'s (2004) study appeared while the present one was in progress, and raises issues the present study is ill-equipped to address. It documents sharp 1986–2001 declines in proportions of young men and women living in couple relationships, and even sharper falls in proportions married, these having been concentrated among women without degrees and men without post-school qualifications. Conventional wisdom, that those resisting partnering of late have been well educated women seeking returns on educational investment in the labour force, is thus challenged. What has happened among this group allegedly accords better with Oppenheimer's (1997) claim that a more egalitarian 'collaborative' model of partnering is emerging. Professional couples have embraced that model's joint acquisition, maintenance and operation of a home, and subscribe far more widely than the less educated to its egalitarian values. It reflects, however, forces, not least rapidly rising housing costs, which simultaneously have undermined the breadwinner–homemaker model. Less well educated men are no longer as able to live up to that model's financial expectations, and also have limited ability, both financially and through reluctance to embrace egalitarian domestic ideals, to partner collaboratively.

The weak attachment to partnering of men without post-school qualifications deserves qualitative investigation, but that is not possible here. Birrell *et al.*'s (2004) findings are a timely reminder that different partnering markets exist in Australia, but AFFD data provide more insight into experiences of the better educated and partnered than into those of the less educated and unpartnered. Most informants were

partnered by design. In addition, non-contact was highest among potential informants who were unpartnered, and impressionistic evidence, consistent with Mansfield and Collard's (1988: 43) qualitative experience, is that refusals after telephone contact were disproportionately by less articulate persons of blue-collar background. Each of these considerations militated against significant representation in the sample of poorly educated unpartnered males, and of similarly educated female sole parents who, Birrell *et al.* (2004) claim, as potential partners of less educated men, hesitate to trade welfare income that they control for unreliable wage income that they do not.

Qu and Soriano (2004) build their study on the twin observations that levels of live-in partnering among those in their twenties have fallen dramatically, despite evidence from two recent Australian studies that aspirations are high among 17–19-year-olds for long-term relationships and marriage: by their early and late twenties, respectively. Why, they ask, are these aspirations often not realized? They then draw on a 1998 survey of 580 20–29-year-olds, first to confirm lower levels of relationship formation and marriage than aspirations would predict, and second to examine reported constraints to relationship formation among the unpartnered who claimed that finding a suitable partner was 'difficult': about 30 per cent of the total sample. As constraints in most instances matched themes that emerged from AFFD interviews, they will be reviewed as those themes are discussed.

A framework

The ethic of individual self-fulfilment and achievement is the most powerful current in modern society. The choosing, deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his or her own life, the creator of an individual identity, is the central character of our time (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 22–23).

The studies reviewed above are Australian. Many other studies have in recent years focused on similar trends in other developed countries (e.g., Lewis 2001; Kiernan 2004), but this is not the place for a comprehensive review. The objective of this paper is to probe the relationship-establishment processes behind recent partnering trends in Australia. A useful framework for the analysis is provided by the work of German sociologists Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (Beck 1992, 1994; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2002; Beck-Gernsheim 2002). This centres on their argument that through the later decades of the twentieth century the modernization that produced industrial society began to be superseded by reflexive modernization – a 'modernization of modernization' (Beck 1994: 4), or 'self-confrontation' of industrial society with effects of its own development. Reflexive modernization rests on two concepts: the emergence of 'risk society' and a profound individualization of people's lifestyles. The transition to risk society occurs quietly, unseen, through 'the back stairs of side effects' (Beck 1992: 11). These do not initially become matters of public, political and private debate and conflict, but do so over time, giving rise to new social movements and to criticism of science, technology and progress. Gains from techno-economic 'progress' increasingly are overshadowed by associated risks, and the 'logic' of risk production which emphasizes 'avoidance imperatives' (Beck 1994: 9) begins to displace that of wealth production which drove industrial modernization. A precondition for this displacement is widespread elimination of genuine material need. It is also driven by new types of risks: irreversible, intangible threats (e.g., the nuclear threat, toxins in foodstuffs) – 'supra-national and non-class-specific global

hazards with a new type of social and political dynamism' (Beck 1992: 13). Not even the rich and powerful are safe from these hazards – 'poverty is hierarchic, smog is democratic' (Beck 1992: 36) – and by transcending class and national boundaries they undermine the class basis of industrial society and necessitate international action to address them.

'Risk societies are not class societies. ... They contain within themselves a grass-roots developmental dynamics that destroys [class and other] boundaries' (Beck 1992: 47). The new global risks

... overlap with social, biographical and cultural risks and insecurities [which] have embodied and reshaped the inner social structure of industrial society and its grounded and basic certainties of life conduct – social classes, familial forms, gender status, marriage, parenthood and occupations (Beck 1992: 87).

These traditional parameters of industrial society are dissolved 'in a social surge of individualization' (Beck 1992: 87). This, against the backdrop of comparatively high material standards of living and advanced social security systems, compels people, on pain of permanent disadvantage, to act in their own interests, lead lives of their own, and cobble together reflexive 'do-it-yourself' biographies that embody the principle: 'until further notice' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). The driving force behind this process is the modern labour market, which demands education (a major destroyer of boundaries, promoter of individual aspiration, and avenue to formation of new social networks), insists on individual flexibility and mobility, and prescribes competition (hence the promotion of personal uniqueness and accomplishment). Whereas formerly life had a 'self-evident quality' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 7) and followed a largely predetermined path to a 'destiny', people nowadays are forced to conduct their lives reflexively (self-confrontationally) in an environment of possibilities. To the extent that tradition persists, it is chosen: discussed, justified and agreed. Generally speaking, people must think, plan, adapt, make decisions, improvise, experiment, juggle, reinvent, set goals and weigh consequences of alternatives. They must do this in environments that are governed by networks of individually, not group-oriented regulations, conditions, obligations and provisos, so that failure or inadequacy is now personalized: you make your own bed and lie in it. The result has been a 'tidal wave of new life designs' developed through a 'personal trial-and-error process' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 15).

In the course of this individualization, traditional sex roles have been extensively undermined, through increased life expectancy rendering motherhood a passing life phase; deskilling of housework; advances in contraceptive technology; growing fragility of relationships, making marital support unreliable; and equalization of educational opportunity. This has led to the rise of the 'negotiated family' as the sexes 'enter into a more or less regulated exchange of emotional comfort, which is always cancellable' (Beck 1992: 89). In its gender relations industrial society, in denying women freedom and equality, was always half still feudal, and this contradiction is fully exposed and targeted for elimination under reflexive modernization. While men have so far failed to match gender equity rhetoric with deeds, reflexive modernization and individualization have released both sexes from traditional family forms and ascribed family roles to seek lives of their own. Yet paradoxically, in a climate of diluted traditions and social relationships where 'uncertainty ... proliferates everywhere' (Beck 1994: 12), a longing for intimacy, closeness and happiness in partnership remains: 'Everything that one has lost is sought in the other' (Beck and

Beck-Gernsheim 1995: 32). How to live together, however, also becomes uncertain, as personal and relationship–family interests inevitably collide. Struggle, negotiation and experimentation ensue. Rules for achieving intimacy constantly disappoint and prove provisional. ‘Mistakes’ followed by renewed ‘attempts’ generate increasingly pluralistic longitudinal biographies. Where formerly there were established rules and rituals to fall back on, individualized relationships and family life rely on ‘an acrobatics of discussion and finely balanced agreement’ (Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 9). But a craving remains for independence without loneliness; for ‘a biography, roots and identity of one’s own ... within a life *à deux*’ (Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 6). It gives rise to very delicate balancing acts as people seek to form and live in relationships, but keep the door open.

The analysis which follows can usefully be seen in the context, first, of contemporary pressures to construct ‘do-it-yourself’ biographies and in doing so to make ‘right’ decisions and appropriately prioritize different goals at different stages of life, and second, of the reality that with any member of the opposite sex engaged in a broadly similar exercise the prospects are restricted for two people’s goals and priorities coalescing at a given point in time. ‘Now for the first time two people falling in love find themselves both subject to the opportunities and hindrances of a biography designed by themselves’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995: 62). The intimate interactions involved in relationship formation, and in marriage, parenthood, friendship and the family, take place in what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002: xxii–xxiii) describe as ‘a normative horizon of expectations of reciprocal individuation ... [under which] issues of fairness and recognition of the other’s identity ... become highly charged.’ This makes the process of establishing enduring relationships unprecedentedly challenging.

The search for a partner

If it happens it happens

How important [has finding a partner been]? I must admit I haven’t placed a lot of importance on it really. ... for me it’s just something that if it happens it happens. If it doesn’t it doesn’t. ... I’m sort of quite content by myself and that sort of thing. ... There doesn’t seem to be any sort of urgency to it (*Joel*, 42, computer programmer, never married, short relationships but nothing serious for some years).

The attitude ‘if it happens, it happens’ with respect to prospects for finding a long-term partner was common among unpartnered AFFD informants, as was the claim among those who had found one that they had not really been looking: it had ‘just happened’. For example, Jeffrey: ‘No, no, no, I wasn’t looking for a lifelong partner. Well it just develops, yeah. Life’s a great lottery isn’t it?’. Michelle: ‘Wasn’t sort of looking but sort of, if I found someone, yes, yes I was. But I wasn’t sort of looking looking’. Many contemporary young Australians seem to live their lives either quite ambivalently – open to a serious relationship, but not outwardly perturbed, at least for the meantime, if it doesn’t eventuate – or resigned to having little control in such matters. This mindset probably was less common thirty or forty years ago when marriage was more universal, less optional and earlier (McDonald 1975; Carmichael 1988), and perhaps has been fostered in part by the economic barriers to partnering identified by Birrell *et al.* (2004). But ambivalence and resignation to needing to let life take its course doubtless also arise from recognition that in early adulthood other

aspects of biography creation can be of higher immediate priority, for both oneself and potential partners. Bill, who had married young himself but had male friends who had struggled to find partners observed: 'I don't know that it's a choice thing. I think you've gotta just meet the right person. And when the timing's right, the timing's right'. Many others shared this sentiment that a long-term relationship would eventuate if and when the right person came along.

I'll be 26 in April. I'm getting on. So I'd like to settle down one day, but I'm a believer in if it's meant to happen it will happen, and one day it will. ... it's nice having a girlfriend, but if I haven't I don't go out looking (*Jack*, mechanic).

Yeah, if it happens it happens. Because I'm one of those people that think if you look for something you'll never find it. Things usually come when you're not looking (*Deyna*, aged 39, one previous cohabiting relationship).

Plenty of time. ... I don't feel any pressure to find that person. I'm not actively searching for it – probably because I don't have the time at the moment. ... It will [happen] or it won't. ... I'm not unhappy without a relationship (*Teresa*, aged 27).

When I was in high school ... I thought by the age of 24 I'd be married with kids. I've realized that that is quite unrealistic, and there's no point putting a timeframe on something like that, because if it happens it happens, if it doesn't it doesn't (*Rebecca*, aged 26).

Urgency

There are others, however, for whom the search for a partner is more urgent. For some young women, motherhood retains a strong attraction. Jacinta, engaged briefly at 19 but not married until her late twenties after a succession of other unsatisfying relationships, recounted 'just always wanting to have children and always thinking about wedding stuff'.

... because I wasn't having any luck ... or success in relationships ... I thought that I would maybe ... be a single parent and choose to have a child on my own. ... if I got into my thirties and I wasn't in a stable relationship, that would be a consideration.

Megan likewise, at 27, was contemplating sole parenthood should her inability to attract 'a decent guy' continue. Of Greek heritage (Greek men 'want a mother not a wife'), with the 'disadvantage' of a rural upbringing, also identified as a constraint on relationship formation by Qu and Soriano (2004), and 'one of those nerdy-looking girls at high school who boys don't look at', she 'didn't really care' about a career ('my friends think I'm weird'), and yearned for a steady boyfriend. She had moved to the city partly to enhance her prospects of meeting one, but it was 'not looking likely'.

Desperation stage gets to about 35, 'cause I'd really like to have children. So it's going to be asking my male friends if they wanna donate some sperm or something like that. ... I really wanna have children. That's something I've always known.

Sharon, 'pretty choosy', had felt 'a bit more frantic to meet someone' after returning from three years abroad in her mid-twenties. While away 'life was a little bit on hold', but on her return establishing a relationship 'was really important ... like coming back into the river of life again.' Krystal, 26, had not been desperate for a partner, but after five years boyfriend-free at university and starting her career she had felt 'ready to have a serious relationship ... I just felt that was something I wanted for me'. For Miriam, serial hastily-entered relationships when younger (because 'I needed someone to call mine') had been followed by eight despairing years during

which her mother would joke 'Don't worry. If you don't find a man soon I'll knit you one'.

A particular source of urgency to find a partner, again typically for females, can be a desire to escape an unhappy home life. Cecilia, 25, had rarely been without a boyfriend since she was 16. Anything beat nothing: 'Oh this guy likes me. OK. He'll do'. Her mother had died when she was aged 10, and she had been abused by her father and was not close to her brother, so 'if I didn't have [a boyfriend] then I didn't have anybody'. At 20, Simone had married an itinerant musician who was 'after sex more than anything else'; she had married 'to try and get out of home', where the screaming, shouting and arguing were 'incessant'. Lucy, after her parents' marriage broke down, had found herself at 14 separated from friends and sharing sleeping quarters in a farm loft with five brothers and stepbrothers. 'I waited and waited and waited 'til I turned 16, and said, "Right, I'm outta here"'. Her 19-year-old husband-to-be was 'this knight in shining armour [who] wanted to get me out of that situation. ... He was there, he was available, he promised to save me, off we went'.

For other women, concern to form stable relationships builds as the biological window of opportunity for parenthood closes and 'childlessness by circumstance' as 'thwarted mothers' looms (Cannold 2004, 2005). In AFFD interviews, few of which were with unpartnered women older than 30, this situation was recounted second-hand more often than personally, although Linda, 35, described the difficulty she and fellow nurses were having finding long-term partners: 'Yeah. My friends around the same age, and they're all nurses, and all in the same situation'.

And there is one friend in particular that is now considering [having] her own child without a father. She's in her late thirties. ... a true career woman who has done exceptionally well throughout her career. Very dominating woman, because she needed to be in the industry she was working in. But the downside of that is that she scares guys off, and hasn't been able to find a partner. But then all of a sudden the biological clock's ticking and she's saying, well, I can't wait to have a courtship, get married and then have children. She[s] ... got, in her eyes, a couple of years ... [so] she's seriously considering doing it on her own (*Norman*).

I know three or four girls in their late thirties ... who ... didn't find the right guy ... and are not happy about it. ... [They] see a couple where the husband has got his act together ... and they kind of aspire to a guy like that but they find themselves in a rut. The clock is ticking. They want kids. They don't necessarily want to have kids out of wedlock. There's not a lot of choice. They've been pushed up hard against a wall with nowhere to go. ... They are great girls ... good looking, very attractive, mature and successful girls. ... They keep saying to me, 'Introduce us to your friends - someone with a boat, a big house, good looking, half a brain, not a drunk'. I don't know any! I do have a few mates who are out on the tiles. They've been through a marriage, the marriage has failed, and they don't want a bar of a relationship (*Gordon*).

... they've been career women, and it hasn't worked out for one reason or another. ... there's a lot of my female friends who are in their thirties and are just miserable that they haven't found the right one (*Justine*, aged 39, TV producer).

I know quite a few [women] in their thirties who just haven't met the right person. ... a few of them are at the clucky stage. ... two women, good friends, [career orientated, university educated] ... confessed that it would be nice to meet someone, have someone in their life, think about a family, but it just hasn't happened for them. ... I know they are hearing the tick-tock. ... There don't seem to be any men out there. ... men their age or a little bit older who are thinking about settling down are going for younger women ... maybe it's because they've got a few more years before that woman will think about having children (*Becky*, mother of four).

There is little doubt that the sex difference in reproductive biology, which Cannold (2005: 33) describes as 'totally infuriating', affects the partnering process beyond age 30. Women's awareness of impending decline in reproductive capacity contrasts starkly with men's ability to defer parenthood, and may at times generate a counterproductive desperation. Becky again: 'The desperation factor comes in, and men don't want to deal with that'. Their preference 'to have a few years between meeting and marrying and having children' was not necessarily compatible with a 30-something woman's concern that her fecundity might be waning. Marketer Roberta doubted that men in their thirties consciously sought much younger partners, but conceded that 'if you meet someone [for whom] children are a priority, and that's not a priority for you, I suppose that will influence where the relationship goes'. Having herself done, in her peers' eyes, 'a strange thing' by marrying a year ago at 28, she also saw that life for her cohort might soon change from 'cruise' to 'panic':

I think we're on the cusp of that decade where panic sort of sets in. At the moment everyone's still cruising because they think, 'No, I'm 28, 29. I'll be right. Thirties, that's when that happens'. But I think in the next 10 years we're really going to see that start to kick in with people. And not just our female friends. I think there'll even be men who feel that, in the next decade, that's the time where you meet that person. And if that doesn't happen it's going to be a bit of a rude shock.

Single women in their thirties also face the dilemma that, many of them being tertiary-educated professionals, they are apt to be particular about their aspirations in a partner: 'too choosy' in the estimation of Ethan, who had observed kindergarten-teacher colleagues of his wife Emma who 'would love to be in a relationship and have children, [and] really feel they've missed out ... big time'. Alice similarly reported the 'far too high' expectations of five single career-women friends in their late thirties, although Cannold (2005) notes that some women do lower their standards as they age or, as Norman's friend was considering doing, turn to sperm banks. Janice (39, two children) also observed the 'too choosy' phenomenon, as well as a challenge in adjusting from living alone and the intimidation factor noted by Norman, among girlfriends who had prioritized career and enjoyment earlier in their adult lives.

I think a lot of [women] put [partnering] off because they want to get into their careers and ... go through their twenties and have a good time. And then I think they get to their thirties and can't find the right partner, and it's almost like you're too choosy. ... you've probably been living by yourself for a long time, and it's harder to let people into that. ... I've got a lot of girlfriends who because ... the industry I'm in [involves considerable travel] haven't had children. They would love to meet someone and have a child, but there's just not the men. And maybe it's because they're very confident. They're fantastic, interesting, funny, gorgeous girls. And I think maybe ... they're too confident ... I don't know.

'Being choosy' was also identified by Qu and Soriano (2004) as a major constraint to relationship formation. Many of their unpartnered respondents, of both sexes, spoke of being 'fussy' or having 'high standards' that made it hard to find someone with the right mix of interests, values, personality and physical attraction. But the realities for single women in their thirties are that the pool of suitably-aged men has to some extent been picked over; many still in it are there because marriage and children lack appeal, or lack appeal at that time in their lives; and as indicated above by Gordon, re-entrants to it after failed first marriages are also likely to be wary of being lured, afresh, into family formation. Jed, early 40s, divorced with a subsequent relationship undermined by unwillingness to add to his two children, was an exemplar:

'[I've] sort of had enough. ... I really don't want a relationship. ... That's all too much for me, having little kids run around the house [again]'

It will not have escaped notice that this discussion of persons for whom partnering took on some urgency has thus far cited exclusively female examples. Roberta, quoted above, suggested that men were not necessarily immune from anxiety in the search for a partner, and the AFFD data did yield examples, but they were few. Bill told of his mate Brent, who 'had a lot of girlfriends, ... did a lot of partying, and ... spent a lot of money just hitting his head against the wall, but ... didn't find the right girl'.

I remember Brent used to ring and say 'Hey, look, I'm just stagnant. I haven't met anyone. I don't know what to do.' ... It was just 'What comes next?' But what comes next wasn't happening for him. ... he just got to the point where he thought he was never going to find the right person.

Gavin, too, had felt 'a sense of urgency' about finding a new partner when his first marriage had foundered in his mid-twenties. Not having a partner at that time of his life had been socially isolating: 'it's sort of difficult when all your friends have got girlfriends and [are] in steady relationships, and suddenly you're not. You sort of feel a bit out of it'. But men anxious to form relationships to escape unhappy home lives or because they craved parenthood, whether from early adulthood or in their thirties, were not encountered.

Trial, error and timing

While marriages to childhood sweethearts and first dates still occur, partnering today, in keeping with reflexive modernization, typically entails considerable trial and error. Richard, twice married, put it thus:

I suppose it's simply a reality of life that it's difficult to nail someone down you really want to spend the rest of your life with. You have to probably go through a string of relationships, instead of feel comfortable that you've got the right person; that that person wants the same things you want.

Grant agreed:

I think it's hard to find someone that's [got] all the characteristics that are probably important to yourself. It's hard to find someone like that that's also available, and also interested in you with your characteristics. And sort of trying to get that mix I think is hard. ... So you sort of go down ... paths [that lead nowhere] a fair bit.

The trend to more trial-and-error partnering is reflected in work by Qu and Weston (2001). Data they present imply that during 1977–81 only 2–3 per cent of Australian women reaching age 25 had entered cohabiting first unions that were followed by separation without having married within four years. However, during 1992–96, 16–17 per cent of those reaching age 25 had done so. The later cohort was both more than twice as likely to have had a cohabiting first union, and over three times as likely to have had it dissolve without marrying within four years. These data, of course, relate only to partnering resulting in co-residence, but are almost certainly symptomatic of a more general tendency towards multiple relationships, including those that do not progress to co-residence.

AFFD informants often reported successions of short-term, and sometimes longer-term relationships when younger that usually were focused more on enjoyment ('play' relationships as 25-year-old Jack dubbed them) than on seeking a life-

long mate. Many cited first relationships, 'growing up' relationships Joe called them, that began in their late teens and 'just rolled along' (Ann) for several years until they and their partners realized that they were headed 'in different directions' (Ryan) or had 'changed [and] wanted different things from a relationship' (Jess, Teresa). Joe, now 39, recalled his first of three cohabiting relationships thus:

We were kids. I must've been 19 when we moved in together. ... And it was, I think, that maturing and growing apart ... no real upset. Just a, 'Do you really wanna do this?' 'No.' And you go, 'OK, we'd better stop doing this. It's silly'.

Gavin even admitted that his youthful first relationship had been motivated by 'just a little bit of sort of sexual freedom I suppose, you know, to be honest'. But at some point, the urge for a more meaningful relationship would strike.

It slowly occurred to me that these short-term relationships were going nowhere ... they weren't sort of offering any sort of personal growth or anything. ... it wasn't the priority, [but] I did start at that age [23] to realize that maybe I do need a partner (*Maurice*).

We were both mid-thirties and we'd both travelled, had previous partners, been involved in a range of things. And I think we were both probably looking ... along the same lines of marriage and children ... peer group are getting married ... so you look towards those things and what you're doing with your life (*Fred*).

So maybe I was ... looking more in those later years, in my thirties. Before that I was quite happy just to cruise around. Everything was a good time. ... I'm trying to think back ... why relationships in the past didn't go on to anything. Just timing. ... I just wasn't interested in settling down before I turned 30. ... I wasn't ready (*Grant*, worked overseas into his early thirties; five relationships before marrying).

I hadn't been married before, but been out with a few jerks I must say. ... they were just after one thing I suppose, and me a naïve country girl (*Liz*, married at 27).

I've had a lot of relationships, some of them long-term, some of them very short-term. And in a sense I've tried on different life partners (*Frances*, academic, married mid-thirties).

... after you end up with someone better you think, 'Oh, I'm glad I didn't [marry the other guy] now.' ... we didn't meet 'til we were 25, a bit older and a bit more ready for it. We'd had our parties and done all that sort of stuff (*Joni*, two long-term relationships before meeting husband).

I was a bit of a good time party girl ... my parents were very strict ... [no drinking] was allowed until we were of legal age. ... So I hit 18 and went crazy for a while. ... But then I did get to a point where I knew that I wanted to be in a relationship that would last more than three or four months Already by 22, 23 I wanted to have that long-term [relationship], or start having a go at that anyway (*Justine*).

Seven quotations evidencing trial-and-error behaviour may seem excessive, but a prominent feature of them is the wide range of ages at which the urge to seek a more fulfilling relationship was felt. This raises a major issue in modern partnering: timing. One dimension of timing is the age-old need for compatible individuals to be co-located in order to meet. Thus Greg, married to Laurel at 39 after a divorce and two other relationships, commented:

... it's one of those things now, we look back and say we wish we'd met when we were 20, and by now we'd be looking forward to grandchildren. But we were in different places. She was married to someone else.

The dimension of timing that has acquired special contemporary relevance, however, involves couples needing to be on a common wavelength as to what they are

seeking from a relationship: fun or a life together. This is what Grant referred to above as being 'available', and what farmer Will meant when observing 'things have to be mutual'. Thus Bill spoke of friends who were 'doing all right on the woman front', but 'weren't finding serious women'. Fred described the ending of a relationship with a much younger partner thus: 'I was looking to do certain things, she was looking to do certain things, and we just ended up going in different directions'. Jack observed that 'because everyone has their own independence and destinies, to be as a partnership is a bit harder'. And Norman distinguished 'girlfriends' from 'female friends', women who were pleasant company but not candidates for romance. He highlighted the timing dilemma, in an era when young people typically pursue individual life agendas (Inglehart 1977, 1990; Lesthaeghe 1983, 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002), with the following comment:

There's a lot of guys out there that are great guys, but they just can't find Miss Right. Why? Because Miss Right is either studying, or Miss Right doesn't have the time to do it because she's doing all the things she wants to do. [And] at the same time, the guys are doing all the things they want to do as well. ... And finding time [for relationships is difficult]. ... I think that's a big factor.

At one extreme on the fun-life together continuum are the 'jerks' pursuing one-night stands encountered by Liz; at the other are people desperate to find spouses and co-parents. Provided both parties' perspectives on a relationship are similar there is a prospect of harmony. But if perspectives differ, sooner or later friction is likely. And in the early twenty-first century the wide range of ages over which partnering occurs, the choices available to young people, public acceptance of opting out of marriage or parenthood, the popularity and ambiguous status of living together relationships, and the frequency with which baggage from previous relationships intrudes, make it more likely than in the past that perspectives will differ. And differences are not necessarily constant over time; they can develop as one party moves more rapidly from a focus on fun to a desire for commitment. Thus Linda, having gone out for 'a considerable amount of time' in her early thirties with a doctor from work, 'thought the relationship could go somewhere', to be devastated when told 'It was just for fun'. Similarly truck-driver Ben, through three longer-term relationships preceding his current one, had routinely opted out once pressure for commitment was applied: 'you see the wolves coming'. His easy-going nature was attractive to women, but friction was inevitable once marriage or children were raised: he wanted neither.

The 'too soon syndrome'

A phenomenon reflective of the difficulty of aligning perspectives is the 'too soon syndrome', where relationships are scuttled because one party perceives the other as in too much of a hurry to 'settle down', and/or himself or herself as not ready to do so. It differs from the situation encountered by Bruce, where the relationship ended because of perceived incompatibility: 'She just wasn't the one for me ... I think she had different thoughts, but certainly for me ... it wasn't going to be a lifelong partnership'. The 'too soon syndrome' undermines otherwise harmonious relationships, and while not unknown in the past has become more common as life-course options in early adulthood and the priorities accorded them have changed in the individualized era produced by reflexive modernization: options in tertiary education, careers,

travel overseas, variety of experience in relationships, and pursuit of lifestyle and pleasure.

Gordon, after leaving the navy, had had a five-year cohabiting relationship through his early twenties.

She's a fantastic girl, absolutely fantastic, and we were very suited. But I was too young to get married at that stage in my mind. I was just starting my new business at 24. Things were going well. I had my mates here; I was out of the shackles of the navy; and I had a lot of time to enjoy myself. I really wanted to be single. It really was that I made the decision not to marry her before I broke it off. I couldn't keep going for another five years as boyfriend/girlfriend. ... I went to see her off. One of her girlfriends came up and grabbed me by the shoulder, looked me in the eye, a foot away, and said, 'Are you sure you know what you're doing? Are you sure you want to let her go?' I said, 'I'm fine'. I don't have any regrets. She was a great person ... but I was too young ... to get married. ... I either had to marry her ... or I moved on. I let her go.

Likewise Grant reflected on his first serious relationship, which had lasted three years through his early twenties:

I was just young, and just wanting to, you know, still look. Whilst, you know, she was a nice girl and probably in hindsight would've been a good person to sort of, you know, have a long-term relationship with, it was just, you know, ... when you're young you've got lots of things you wanna do first. ... I wasn't interested in settling down before I turned 30. ... You know, I wasn't ready.

Jason, after an 'obsessive' first relationship at university had foundered, had begun a second one at 22 working in England. It lasted six years, its continuity broken three times by expiry of his UK or her Australian visa (which created its own, unwelcome, pressure to marry). After procrastinating interminably and having had other 'flings' during the breaks in continuity,

I realized that I just wasn't going to ask her to marry me. And ... I really thought that I'd wasted a lot of her time, as her family and her friends had told her. ... I did love her, but didn't love the idea of getting married then. I still had ... a desire to travel and work elsewhere in the world. So that independence was something that I had not fully resolved. And I guess I saw that if I got married ... I would be giving up the opportunity to do that properly.

The relationship was ended by a long-distance phone call, and Jason married another three years later without having worked further overseas.

The 'too soon syndrome' also affects women. Rebecca had gone out for three years in her early twenties with a boyfriend of Southern European parentage.

... he was working nights, I was working days, I was stressed [because my father was ill], we couldn't ever see each other. ... I kept on delaying ... talk [of settling down]. ... [I was] just starting a new job and career after being at university. I wanted to stick with that. ... His family was pushing for us to get together and stay together. He was quite 'old' for them, whereas I felt I was far too young. So in the end we just decided that would be it.

Paula, 29 and just engaged, had had several shorter-term relationships when younger in which she had resisted overtures to 'make more of it'.

I felt quite claustrophobic at times. I just didn't enjoy their company or get along well enough with any of them. I didn't have the same ideas about life and, yeah, when there was a bit more pressure applied I felt claustrophobic and fenced in. ... I wanted to travel overseas and work overseas for a few years ... different goals [to what] they wanted to achieve in life. ... I've always wanted to finish my university degree and then work in that field and see how I went.

Cecilia told how her husband, Quentin, nine months into their relationship wanted to break up, before thinking better of it. 'Too soon' thoughts clearly had consumed him.

... he wanted to date other people. I was his first girlfriend. He felt he was missing out because he'd committed to me. He was happy with what he had, but wanted to play the field and then sort of come back to it I think. Yeah, he wanted both.

This sense of a need to 'play the field' – that while an early relationship had much going for it, there just might be something better round the corner – was one Teresa saw having quite wide impact, despite obvious potential for later regret that 'a good catch' had escaped.

I think there's an awful lot of pressure these days on it being the right person, and especially when you start the relationship when you're about 25, 26. You think, 'Oh my gosh ... this person might be the one I'm with for the rest of my life.' And sometimes you judge them a little bit harshly I think.

One of the hallmarks of contemporary partnering, to which the 'too soon syndrome' attests, is more wariness of commitment. Beau and Roberta (both 29 and university educated) agreed, 'absolutely' and 'without doubt', that their generation was hesitant to commit to relationships because they had other priorities, and options could be closed off. In Beau's words:

... the focus is on not committing immediately with the first person you meet. I think there is a real thinking of 'kick up your heels' basically. ... Live life, and just have fun with, you know, multiple partners if that is what it takes. And eventually, if the right person comes along ... then there might be a possibility that you might consider settling down.

The 'too soon syndrome', while not altogether new, seems to be invoked with some regularity under conditions of reflexive modernization. Early relationships can gather momentum too quickly for comfort for one party, raising fears that goals in other life areas are threatened and that one's personal biography will be truncated and rendered less rich than it could be. There is widespread concern to maintain control over one's life through one's biography-defining twenties; to let caution reign, and above all not close off options prematurely. To relinquish the social freedom being single affords, particularly when under 30, is likely to isolate one from peers and lead to later regret that experiences that they enjoyed were forgone. This sentiment clearly exists among both sexes; it just might be stronger among males.

Impediments to partnering

At the height of the postwar marriage boom several of the baulked relationships just detailed would have ended in marriage. Australian women on average married at 21, men before 24 (Carmichael 1988). Teenage relationships often progressed quickly to marriage, if not through unplanned pregnancies then on the basis that the Pill was now available to postpone parenthood, and marriage was the morally approved setting for sexual intimacy. This morality was widely re-evaluated in the 1970s (Carmichael 1998), creating an environment where acceptance of consensual partnering, reliable contraception and readier access to abortion gave unprecedented control over premarital pregnancy. This in turn, against the backdrop of a historically high divorce rate attributed partly to youthful marriages (Carmichael, Webster and McDonald 1997), and combined with changing gender relations and rising educa-

tional and work opportunities and aspirations among women, saw a more circumspect approach to forming long-term unions take root.

Traditional impediments

Some impediments to relationship formation in this environment continued to be the time-honoured ones. Thus shyness, social awkwardness, an expectation of female passivity in the partnering process, and rural upbringing (Qu and Soriano 2004) were felt by several informants to have hindered them. Roger, a teacher, attributed his singleness to shyness, and at 32, while not having closed the door on a serious relationship, was planning for later life alone. Anton, 38, a retail manager, also blamed shyness and dislike of alcohol-focused recreation for being single, but remained hopeful of having a family. The fact that nurse Linda (35) was 'quiet and home-based' had not aided her search for a husband; and Amber, through her twenties, had thought marriage would pass her by because, although interested in a couple of men, she 'wasn't going to ask [for dates] if the feeling wasn't reciprocated'. A sheltered country town upbringing and continued existence, together with being 'not interested in having children', had 31-year-old spare parts manager Frank pessimistic that he would ever not live alone.

Finding someone my age is pretty difficult here. ... I don't wanna be a lonely old man, but I've seen several [older] friends ... that've just settled for what's been available, and they've turned out to be rather bad relationships. ... I'd rather wait and find the right person, or ... go without.

Negative 'trial-and-error' experiences

As Qu and Soriano (2004) have also recently reported, the trial-and-error nature of modern relationship formation fuels wariness and delay when early experiences are negative. Maurice had had 'a nasty relationship' before meeting his wife Samantha. 'It made me very cautious. I didn't want to be hurt again. ... it was definitely once bitten, twice shy'. Katrina, too, was 'a bit unsure to start with' about getting involved with Gavin. 'I didn't wanna get into another relationship and sort of get hurt again'. Jane's husband Harry, a broken engagement behind him, had been 'just wary', and 'concerned' that, aged 20 to his 28, she 'hadn't lived'. Deyna, 39, had been 'cheated on' in her one living-together relationship, and several years later, it was still 'I'm not even looking. Stay away'. Graham was 'hesitant' on meeting Jacinta in his late twenties, having just had an 18-month relationship end, and Jeremy was at first reluctant to accept Kim as his 'girlfriend', having had trouble extricating himself from two previous relationships. For others, failed marriages had generated circumspection. Stan was resisting friends' urgings to seek a new relationship. 'I don't wanna look at that. Jumping from one to another and I haven't even sorted this one'. Dave, after a 10-year marriage, had been wary of involvement with Liz – 'I just didn't want it to be a rebound type of [thing]' – while Greg, his first marriage over, had invoked the 'too soon syndrome' in a subsequent relationship.

Once my parents [observed] that she seemed very keen to get married, it was pretty much the death knell for me. ... it was just, 'I'm not ready for this. I need to be with other people and see what life's like'. ... And when the sense of that started to kick in, looking at rings and things, I started to really freak out basically.

Caution derived from negative previous partnering experiences is understandable, but some informants did put more positive spins on past relationships. Grace,

whose first serious relationship had begun at school, recognized that she and that boyfriend had been 'too young ... for it to go anywhere', and saw their time together as a chance 'to find out'. Similarly Janine and Brad, each with 'former relationships that had gone by the wayside', treated them as learning experiences: 'We were eyes open and knew the questions to ask and what we wanted, and I suppose actively, positively discussed what we were looking for, and found it'. In these two cases past failures had been anything but impediments to pursuit of future happiness.

Studying – no time

Preoccupation with obtaining tertiary qualifications then establishing careers has become a significant impediment to forming relationships, especially for young women. While the impact can be more one of delaying marriage or parenthood than of delaying relationship formation, serious relationships also are postponed as social life is curtailed. For many, as also reported by Qu and Soriano (2004), there 'isn't time' for a serious relationship.

I think going to uni[versity] does have a big role to play [in delaying marriage]. ... between the time spent studying, working [to support yourself], you don't have much time for a life. ... uni is a lot of stress and pressure. I think you'd be quite foolish to get married while you're both still studying. ... you lose five years by going to uni, and you need to find yourself again after that. If you're lucky you find someone while you're at uni, but if not, like five years at uni, then I have to find someone to spend my life with. By the time you get that relationship sorted, started and ready for a couple of kids, another two or three years (**Krystal**, aged 26, newly in her first relationship).

I ... not long before [meeting Barry] upgraded to my degree. I probably wouldn't have considered doing that if we'd been married or had a young family. ... It was three years of no social life, but, you know, I was single and had the opportunity to do it (**Jenny**, teacher, married mid-thirties).

One of the things I disliked about my work was the training, because before I went overseas I had exams to do which took quite a long time, and a lot of energy when I wasn't working to study for those. You limit your social life quite a lot (**Gail**, aged 31, doctor, met husband volunteering overseas).

For some, like Rebecca, 26, the education and career establishment process drags out as they search for their niche in life (more trial and error), and a serious relationship is for the time being not a priority; again, there isn't time.

I finished high school and became a professional student. I started off doing Law and Japanese. I changed my degree after two years. Went overseas for 12 months. Came back, did Linguistics, Japanese, Dutch and Italian. Then dropped the Italian and Japanese ... and picked up Journalism. Then in my last year of Journalism they introduced Public Relations. ... that was five years, and then another three years at a public relations firm. And I'm still a consultant, so there's a lot more to do. ... You can't really socialize effectively for a romantic aspect when you're out trying to sell your business and what you do. ... I just don't have time I suppose.

Teresa, like Jenny above, pointed to the significant amounts of time entailed by decisions to pursue tertiary courses, and their particular capacity to inhibit relationship and family formation when made beyond the immediate post-school period. At 27 she had just decided on a change of career direction, and while not ruling out a relationship, could not see one progressing rapidly to family.

I have committed myself to this other course, and it's gonna take me two or three years to do. Saying that, you know, if the perfect man walks in this afternoon ... I won't necessarily

say that I'm set in stone. ... [But a] child doesn't happen at the moment. ... There's only so many hours in the day.

Krystal had been open to marriage and family on finishing university, but 'the person for me to marry wasn't there', so 'you find other things to fulfil yourself'. For her they included a Ph.D, and although she was now in a relationship, the Ph.D, for several years, would take priority. Her window of opportunity for marriage and motherhood rather than further education had been quite narrow. Roberta, an arts graduate, had like Teresa decided, at 29, to resume study for a vocational qualification that would take 2–4 years. She was already married, so forming a relationship would not be impeded, but parenthood would be. Roberta also observed that relationships formed at university often failed to survive the transition to work, as people went in directions dictated by their career and travel aspirations. Paradoxically, leaving university inhibited relationship formation, by making it much harder to meet 'likeminded' people.

[Since university] a lot of people we know rely on the bar scene, or going out, or on friends of friends to actually meet new people and get together. And then the likelihood of that being the right person for you long term is very, very slim.

This scarcity of venues for meeting serious partners was also a theme to emerge from Qu and Soriano's (2004) data. Young people spent a lot of time at work, but workplaces could be highly gendered, small, and populated by professional competitors who did not provide a contrast with work life; and they could offer little opportunity for meeting 'available' people. Nightclubs, on the other hand, were geared to socializing and to meeting people casually and in groups rather than to finding lifelong partners.

It has also been argued (Jackson 2002) that the HECS fees charged for tertiary education courses in Australia in more recent years could hinder family formation. No AFFD informant claimed that a HECS debt had delayed relationship or family formation, but most were products of an earlier time of free tertiary education.

A career focus

The capacity of a career focus to disrupt relationship formation was evident in several earlier accounts of professional women who in their thirties had had difficulty finding partners matching their expectations. Jack's 27-year-old sister may have been headed down that path. Having moved from rural Victoria to Melbourne, she was reportedly 'too busy to have a relationship. ... she can't ever see herself settling down because of her job'. Norman had ended his first serious relationship because his career focus was at odds with his girlfriend's desire for a family: 'I didn't want to be peaking in my career role as my family was coming through'. And Frances, a 35-year-old academic, had had a fraught relationship history due to being 'passionate' about her work. Now married with a child and in a quandary over whether and how a second child would mesh with her career, she related earlier anguish that her relationship with her husband would become yet another casualty of career obsession.

I won [a] post-doc[toral position] ... and I had to take it up [in another city] six months into our relationship. And I had this huge crisis ... because I felt that I had always put my relationships secondary to my career. ... I felt like I'd ruined several relationships through working [while also doing a Ph.D.]. ... [So] I had a big sort of crisis about whether or not to take up the post-doc, and potentially ruin another relationship.

For others, work-related travel or non-standard hours impeded relationship formation. Jack had broken off with a girlfriend who was regularly interstate working: 'it was too hard'. Geologist Adam concurred with mining engineer Luke that it was 'hard to get something cemented in a relationship when you're travelling a lot'. Janice observed that television production employed 'a lot of women who aren't married' and was 'not good for relationships ... if someone goes away for months working, you've ... gotta keep in contact [or] it all goes very wrong'. And Rebecca, as a public relations consultant, did a lot of evening and weekend event work that had her 'actively avoiding' a relationship and settling for 'just having fun with my friends'. Other informants alleged that mixing socially in narrow, work-related circles stifled the search for a partner. Thus Emma's kindergarten teacher colleagues 'only know that lifestyle. They haven't branched out and thought, let me look somewhere else to get that fulfilment'.

Coming from a different perspective, Norman saw greater insecurity in the workforce than his parents' generation had experienced hindering people from making both emotional and financial commitments, and hence discouraging formation of relationships capable of supporting families. This insecurity is regarded as a core characteristic of individualized life under reflexive modernization. For Norman it impaired building up 'commonality' between partners, or what Richard termed 'continuance of relationship': forming relationships 'long enough ... to allow the talk of raising children to come naturally'. Norman's observation has wider significance than is suggested by his being its lone AFFD advocate, given the finding of Birrell *et al.* (2004) that partnering fell sharply in Australia among less educated men with incomes that were low and increasingly insecure through the late 1980s and the 1990s.

Travel and enjoyment

Often intertwined with a career focus, but also operating independently to impede relationship formation, are desires to travel and give priority to lifestyle and personal enjoyment. As earlier quotations illustrate, these are often elements in the 'too soon syndrome'. Mass air travel changed forever life options in early adulthood, especially in a remote outpost like Australia, and from the 1960s made overseas travel, often in conjunction with employment or education, for many young people a rite of passage. As blue-collar worker Nick noted:

Cars, trips. Most young people want to go overseas these days. Like young blokes at work, instead of getting a trade or settling down, go to the bank, get a house. They'd rather do a lot of travelling and get it out of their system. ... then they'll come back and restart again.

For Elaine, meeting her husband at 28 was 'later than I thought it would happen', but after an early relationship ended she had spent her mid-twenties teaching in Europe, and did not expect to find a life partner until back in Australia. Teresa's priorities in her early twenties had been 'wanting to study, wanting to travel, wanting to do a few things', and a relationship had been of interest only if it could accommodate those desires. In Trevor's case, freedom to 'travel when I wanna travel, [and] not have to plan things around other people' had been paramount through early adulthood; committing to a relationship had been 'a bit of a scary thing ... it gives you less options'. Kitty could identify a group of female friends in their thirties for whom travel and being unpartnered coalesced; they were 'single and travellers ... [they] have chosen travelling'. Gail, within her medical training, had specialized in emer-

gency medicine mainly because it provided 'flexibility to be able to move around and see new places', while for Grant extensive overseas travel had incorporated three relationships, but not serious ones. He had not wished to settle overseas and had constantly wanted to 'keep on travelling' until finally, 'sick of the travel', he had returned 'home' to find a wife. Roberta saw his situation as common; overseas relationships had exotic appeal, but typically did not endure because parties ultimately retreated to their cultures of origin.

I mean the world is becoming more and more of a global village, so people are travelling all over the place, particularly people our age [late twenties]. So they are meeting people from other cultures, and maybe having relationships overseas. And often what happens is that those relationships break up when the parties go their separate ways and back to their own countries and cultures.

There is certainly these days a real sense that overseas travel is an opportunity to be grasped, that other life goals should be put on hold to that end, and that not to travel is to 'miss out'. It can, of course, be a shared experience within a relationship, whence the goals postponed include marriage and, in particular, parenthood. Thus Susan and Duncan had 'accomplished most things in life that we wanted to before we had kids. We'd done the travelling bit'; Andrew and Eliza, having 'just returned from a European trip ... thought it was time [to have children]'; Oscar and Barbara, when deciding to start a family, had 'been to Europe twice, we'd done the big holiday thing'; while for Joe and Phoebe extensive travel had been 'a bit of *our* time' that might soon give way to 'a bit of family time'. For others, however, serious partnering itself is postponed. So Maurice saw overseas travel having made him 'a more worldly person ... who was able to deal with relationships a lot better'. Jason had ended a six-year overseas relationship to avoid 'giving up the opportunity' to satisfy further travel ambitions. And Paula's desire to travel and work overseas had ended a relationship in which it was not shared. Others looked back wistfully at what they had missed. Carol, married at 19 and asked what she would do differently answered: 'same as the girlfriends ... I probably would've gone travelling as well'. Lyn, a mother at 22, 'wanted to travel ... and I couldn't do it. And even now at times I'll think ... "Oh, I wish I could"'. Jane, too, when asked what she would have done if she had not married at 22, responded: 'I would've travelled. I really would've travelled, and I think I'd have studied as well'.

Concern to preserve lifestyle can deter formation of relationships or, as illustrated already, help undermine them through the 'too soon syndrome'. Fred, just married in his mid-thirties, noted that in their mid-twenties neither he nor his friends had been interested in serious relationships. They were 'still having fun' and 'weren't looking for that option'. Gordon had terminated a long-term relationship because with 'a lot of time to enjoy myself ... I really wanted to be single', as had Grant because 'when you're young you've got lots of things you wanna do first'. Ben likewise had opted out of several relationships because they became too intense: 'I think when you're younger all you think about is drinking and having a ball and going to parties and seeing live bands'. And George, 25 and divorced from a wife unwilling to maintain a social lifestyle, was in no hurry to find a family-focused partner. 'I'm looking for fun all the time. ... I'm trying to keep that [outlook] alive as long as I can'. It may or may not be pertinent that all of these informants were male. Pursuit of lifestyle is, however, far from fatal to a relationship if both parties see it as the priority. It is widely agreed that a child, not a partner, is the main curb on lifestyle (Carmichael and Whittaker

2007). Grace described a 20-year relationship during much of which she and Chad had agreed not to have children. 'We were having a really good time and partying. We were going out a lot for dinner'. As they aged, though, this existence had become humdrum, and they had married and had two children. Kerrie and James likewise told of 11 years focused on fun and career before marrying. Only now, in their early thirties, were they contemplating whether their childlessness should end.

We go through phases I think, where both of us are saying, you know, this is really cruisy. We've got a really good life. You know, we go out to tea when we wanna go out. We can go out three times a week and not worry about finances. Go away on trips. Buy things. ... And we've spoken about that. That it would be a nice lifestyle just to say no children at all. ... It's [children, lifestyle and career] gotta fit together nicely, like a little jigsaw (Kerrie).

Having children already

Birrell *et al.*'s (2004) study suggests that there are many female sole parents in Australia who are uninterested in partnering the less-educated types of men with unreliable incomes who are likely to be available to them. For those desirous of forming relationships, however, having children already is often a major impediment. As Qu and Soriano (2004) note, it makes both meeting potential partners and pursuing the development of relationships complex, and there is invariably dual concern about not only whether a relationship is good for oneself, but also whether it is good for one's children.

Carol, 37, had two children, and had been divorced three years following a 15-year marriage. She craved 'a provider, someone who's financially stable, a good conversationalist ... compatible with me and not violent', but finding one was 'really difficult, really hard'. She had had one relationship with a separated father of three ('He was just gorgeous'), but after two months it had 'just got too hard'. Her 12-year-old daughter had 'made it very hard for him'. Carol resented her interference ('she won't live her own life'), but recognized it was 'important' a new partner be accepted by her children. She found her situation awkward, feeling a need always to be frank about being divorced with two children (and expecting a negative reaction), but also a need to be secretive: having her children stay overnight with grandparents if men were calling, or pretending to be going out with girlfriends.

Lyn, 38-year-old single mother of two by different fathers, also found trying to form relationships frustrating.

... a relationship's different when you've got kids because it's, 'Come over and watch a video ... but I've gotta do this and I've gotta do that, and I've gotta bath them'. And the boy would come out of the bedroom 25 times - 'Mum, I want a drink, I can't sleep'. And, you know, this new boyfriend would be going, 'What the hell is going on?' And they would leave. And that happened a lot.

Lyn had also had a relationship end because, after her experiences with the fathers of her two children, she declined to accede to the request of a 'fantastic' later partner to have *his* child.

... it's not one more and five years. It's one more and your whole life. ... [It] was the most painful process I've ever been through. ... But I couldn't. I couldn't do it again. ... I've had people leave me because I've got children; people leave me because I won't have theirs.

Jack saw relationships with single mothers from the other side of the fence, and had sworn to avoid them in future.

If I ever went [into] another relationship I would aim more towards single, like no children. ... if you're trying to deal with someone else's child it's so hard. ... you [can't] behave as your own self. If you're with someone who's single you can act your own self. You can be an idiot if you want to be an idiot. You can be romantic if you want to be romantic. But it's hard to be romantic with someone who's always looking over their shoulder for their child.

Unquestionably the pluralistic biographies not infrequently caused by the fragile nature of relationships under reflexive modernization greatly complicate the partnering process for some. Those with custody of children from past relationships (typically women) often find that their parental obligations severely circumscribe their capacities to meet new partners and nurture new relationships. Those (typically men) who encounter sole parents and contemplate relationships with them may find that stepchildren introduce insurmountable obstacles to the partnering situation. True one-on-one intimacy is likely to be compromised, and the realization may dawn that despite the appeal of a prospective relationship with another adult, the relationship comes with strings attached that can reduce and even cancel that appeal.

Parental marriage breakdown

It is well known that divorce became much more common in Australia from the mid-1970s (Carmichael *et al.* 1997), and it is widely believed that parental marriage breakdown can inhibit family formation. Grace, for example, was of this view.

I think a lot of kids are growing up seeing their parents split up, seeing marriages not working, remembering what it was like to be an unhappy child ... [and] I think to them the idea of being married and having children is not something they can cope with. They know what they went through.

Although not numerous, there were examples supportive of this thinking in the AFFD data. The parents of Georgia's husband had divorced when he was five. So 'scarred' by the experience had he been that '[a]s soon as he started getting into a relationship he panicked'. Georgia had had to nurse him through his fear of failure, which had in any case delayed entry into a relationship until he was 37 (she was much younger). Krystal had a 'very close' friend who was not unpartnered but who, owing to the trauma of her parents divorcing when she was 11, was adamant that 'she's not having kids and not getting married'. Only this way could she be sure of not repeating her parents' experience, and more importantly of not inflicting it on another child. Sophie's husband Jared's problem was less his parents' divorce *per se* than the paternal abuse that led to it. '[B]ecause he comes from a really bad childhood he spins out a bit. ... It's like he thinks that things can't be this good, so something has to go wrong with it'. Their 12-year relationship had been disrupted several times at Jared's initiative, and fear that he would not know how to behave as a father had seen pets acquired as surrogate 'children' in a bid to build his confidence for the role. This experiment having been quite successful and certain economic goals attained, a first child was now being seriously contemplated.

There were other AFFD informants, however, whose reaction to childhoods disrupted by marriage breakdown was a steely determination to make a better job of their own relationships. Lucy and her husband were well aware of the threat of failure 'hanging over' their marriage because the parents of both had divorced when they were young, but 'we're gonna prove them all wrong'. Similarly, Maureen and Ryan both came from broken homes, but she was determined 'to prove to the world what

a good family is and a good marriage, and have children that [are] loved'. Elaine's growing up in 'a nasty fractured family' had not turned her off marriage and children either. Instead it had warned her to avoid a slavish adherence to the breadwinner model of family life; of 'the importance of having that break from domestic duties for self-fulfilment', the absence of which she saw as having eventually 'take[n] its toll' on her 'intelligent' mother.

Other informants saw having divorced parents in other ways. Anton was 16 when his parents parted, and while still single at 38 did not attribute this to that experience. He still aspired to marry, and was philosophical about the divorce: 'circumstances change'. For Donald the breakup of his parents' marriage when he was 'very very young' was due to his mother being unsuited to parenthood, and had not deterred him from marrying quite early himself. His wife was 'a different kind of person', so the source of his parents' problem did not exist. Jed agreed that two sets of divorced parents had made him wary of marrying his former wife, but it had 'also made me see how really easy it is ... to walk out of a marriage'.

The AFFD evidence seems to be that parental divorce can affect people's family formation aspirations and experiences in a variety of ways. Promoting wariness in forming relationships is one of them, and Qu and Soriano (2004) report evidence of this, but there are also those for whom the family-formation issue is whether to formalize rather than whether to form a relationship, and/or whether to have children in one. Smart (2002), however, reports for a sample of Australians aged 17–18 no significant relationship between aspirations for long-term relationships, marriage and parenthood, with experience of parental separation or divorce, and certainly AFFD informants mostly seemed undeterred by coming from broken homes. Parental divorce was variously perceived as a challenge to do better oneself, as something to learn from, as one of those things that inevitably happen to some couples, as irrelevant because personalities involved in the two generations were different, or as reassurance that there can, if necessary, be life after relationship breakdown.

Discussion

Relationship formation in contemporary Australia is characterized by a mixture of ambivalence, resignation to having limited control over the process, and anxiety. Several AFFD informants without partners took the attitude, 'If it happens it happens, if it doesn't it doesn't', while others in relationships claimed they had 'Just happened'; they had not been consciously sought. To what extent such pronouncements of the unpartnered reflected ambivalence or resignation is difficult to say. Many of the informants expressing these attitudes, however, were aged in their twenties, and the view clearly was that at that time of life not having found a life partner was no disaster, and indeed may even have been a preferred situation. All options remained open.

There are, however, also those, mostly but not exclusively women, for whom establishing a long-term relationship takes on greater urgency. One such group is women seeking to escape unhappy home lives. The danger here is of making a hasty, and ultimately rash, decision. There are other women for whom the 'traditional' wife-mother role retains considerable appeal, and they, too, can be keen to find long-term partners. But the most interesting group is drawn from so-called 'career women' who avoid committed relationships through their first 15 or so potentially reproduc-

tive years, then seek long-term partners in their thirties. Many succeed, but for others the cry 'Where are all the men?' resounds as the perceived exigency of their situation increases with age and growing consciousness of potentially waning reproductive capacity. The men theoretically available to them do not face the same age constraint on procreation, can be averse to parenthood, may not meet their aspirations for a partner, and can be intimidated by female confidence and worldliness in a culture which still casts men as the hunters in dating. These women are in Cannold's (2004, 2005) terminology candidates to become 'thwarted mothers', some of whom respond by accepting 'Mr Approximate' in place of 'Mr Right' or opting for donor sperm and sole parenthood, but others of whom end up single and 'childless by circumstance' (Carmichael and Whittaker 2007).

The search for a relationship of substance in contemporary Australia is typically a trial-and-error process involving people who place varying degrees of emphasis on 'having fun' and securing a life partner and potential co-parent. For a relationship to endure both parties need to be on a common wavelength in these expectations. A couple intent on pursuing lifestyle and enjoyment can survive if both maintain that outlook. Friction can arise, however, if one party's outlook alters to embrace a desire for family, or was interim and assumed or hoped that in due course the other could be talked around. This latter approach seems quite common among women, and arises easily from a partnering process that sees marriage typically preceded by cohabitation. Pressing the issue of parenthood can be off-limits while cohabiting, leading to couples marrying with it still unresolved (Carmichael and Whittaker 2007). But in addition, those focused on fun are apt to have personal agendas for study, travel and career that can abruptly end relationships should agenda and relationship come into conflict. Life is heavily individualized under reflexive modernization, and young people have few qualms about putting self first in building 'do-it-yourself' biographies. For creating relationships open to family formation, timing is a major issue. The task is to find someone 'available' for *that type* of relationship. When marriage was the accepted setting for sexual intimacy and the primary path to independence from parents, and women saw their life calling as to marry then become full-time mothers, it was fairly straightforward. Nowadays, though, readiness for family forming relationships spans a much wider range of ages and competes with an unprecedented array of education, career, travel and lifestyle options. Marriage and parenthood are discretionary; living together allows the benefits of cohabitation to be enjoyed while holding ultimate commitment at arms' length; and wariness in the partnering market is promoted by 'baggage' from previous relationships, a desire not to compromise personal agendas, awareness that modern unions are fragile, and heightened emphasis on getting 'private companionate' aspects of relationships right (Clulow 1995; see also Giddens 1992). These forces make it much more challenging than formerly to find a partner open to having children. As Lewis (2001: 123) writes, 'Intimate relationships have become more subject to choice and more open to negotiation'.

Trial-and-error partnering has seen the 'too soon syndrome' activated much more frequently. This phenomenon means that relationships with many positive attributes are abandoned because they are perceived to be progressing too rapidly towards commitment, marriage, mortgages and children. It is related to a tendency for some individuals to decide that they should at all costs avoid these things until some arbitrary age (often 30) is attained, to a sense that there are other priorities and objectives

in life before 'settling down', and sometimes to a feeling that while an existing relationship has many attractive features, patience just might be rewarded with something better.

A number of impediments affect the partnering process in contemporary Australia. Some are time-honoured, such as male shyness, social awkwardness, women feeling they must await a man's initiative, and limited options in rural environments. Trial-and-error partnering also inevitably generates negative experiences, and these can make young people ultra-cautious in choosing long-term partners, although they can also be viewed more positively as providing lessons for the future. Full-time study is now common in early adulthood, and while tertiary educational institutions offer clear opportunities to meet likeminded peers, the time demands of study and part-time employment can severely restrict social life and the capacity to nurture a relationship. The heyday of universities as marriage markets has in any case probably passed as median ages at first marriage have risen into the late twenties (Carmichael 2002). But increasingly, too, undertaking more specialized vocational and postgraduate courses well into one's twenties and beyond inhibits relationship formation, although its effect may also be to delay marriage or parenthood within relationships.

Leaving full-time tertiary education can be a watershed that undermines relationships formed while studying. Career and travel aspirations can take partners in different directions at a time of life when it is widely still considered too early to 'settle down'. Careers can also demand, or be perceived to demand, a commitment that leaves little time for a serious relationship. Young women in particular can be intent on establishing themselves professionally, and loath to consider such a relationship until satisfied they have accomplished that goal. Moreover, specific requirements of some careers – frequent travel, long periods absent from home and long or non-standard hours, for example – can be detrimental to serious relationships. And if social life revolves substantially around one's workplace, this can hinder meeting a broad range of potential partners and even, if a vocation is highly gendered, isolate one from social interaction with the opposite sex.

Young people in Australia, as in other Western countries, nowadays frequently have personal agendas in which travel and 'having fun' or 'living life' feature prominently. Those drawn into family formation without travelling often feel an acute sense of having 'missed out'. Travel can be enjoyed within a relationship, but probably more often the urge is to undertake it independently or with same-sex friends, with all options open in terms of interaction with members of other cultures. Relationships formed while travelling can face a battle for long-term survival, given understandable urges to return to cultures of upbringing. But longevity aside, they can be valued parts of the varied young adult life experiences widely coveted in the early twenty-first century.

Serious relationships are widely deemed incompatible with 'having fun', 'living the moment' and 'embracing life', and this belief plays a significant part in invocations of the 'too soon syndrome'. These aspirations are equated with personal autonomy in decision-making, and a committed relationship is seen as inconsistent with that. That said, pursuit of lifestyle and enjoyment within relationships is possible, provided both parties agree that those are the goals, at least for now. As another AFFD paper has shown (Carmichael and Whittaker 2007), couples today can spend extended periods jointly committed to lifestyle, enjoyment and bypassing parent-

hood, only to change their attitudes as this focus becomes stale and the window of opportunity for parenthood closes. Others, of course, maintain their commitment, and contribute to the minority who are childless by choice.

It is clear that several of the impediments to relationship formation canvassed above have their effect, at least in part, by limiting the time available to establish and nurture serious relationships. Claims that 'I don't have time' were commonplace, as they were among unpartnered 20–29-year-olds interviewed by Qu and Soriano (2004). Some were based on the demands of study and of part-time employment to survive on. Others reflected the time demands of careers, both in aggregate and in terms of requirements to work nights or weekends, or to travel regularly. Still others were results of having accorded priority to individually tailored social and lifestyle agendas: young women doing what they wanted to do, and young men likewise. That word 'priority' is essential. To become established, mature and enduring, relationships need priority, and in today's individualized environment they often struggle to acquire it through the early adult years.

The fragile nature of contemporary relationships means that sole parenthood due to relationship breakdown is common. Those who have custody of children of disrupted relationships (chiefly women) and are desirous of repartnering, which, Birrell *et al.* (2004) argue, many at lower socio-economic levels are not, can find their prospects severely hampered. They must find someone acceptable not only to themselves, but also to, and accepting of, their children. And they must somehow also find a way to combine parenting with courtship. Especially when children are young they report great difficulty on both fronts, and men can be very wary of involvement with sole mothers because of the need to accommodate more than just a partner.

The role of parental marriage breakdown in impeding relationship formation would seem, from this study, to be easily overstated. While undoubtedly some from broken homes are led in consequence to tread more warily in forming their own relationships, delaying the process and perhaps even on occasion eschewing it altogether, avoidance of the formality of marriage and in particular of parenthood are possibly more frequent responses. But it is far from inevitable that any of these effects will occur. Parents' experiences can galvanize offspring into determination to do better themselves, and can also be interpreted in a variety of other ways that do not hamper personal relationship formation.

Family formation depends on relationship formation. Compared to the early decades following World War II the latter has become a more complex and stressful challenge as reflexive modernization has dictated a more individualized approach to life. Preparing oneself for employment in the education system and then seeking to realize on that investment in the labour market have become priorities, for both sexes. And in building 'do-it-yourself' biographies in these areas it has become important to also incorporate life experiences in areas such as travel, variety of association with others and simple enjoyment of life that enrich those biographies in ways earlier post-war generations never contemplated. It follows from these developments that forming families has also become more complex and stressful.

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