Parental employment and policy frameworks: aspects of Australian exceptionalism[1]

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Abstract

While Australia's recent Intergenerational Report has drawn attention to the advantages of maintaining higher levels of labour force participation over the life course, ensuing policy debates have yet to address an important aspect of Australian exceptionalism on this issue: relatively low employment levels among mothers of young children. Labour force participation rates among Australian women rose considerably over the second half of the twentieth century, but the employment rate of mothers remains significantly lower in Australia than in North America and much of Western Europe. Moreover, mothers who are employed in Australia are more likely to be in part-time work than mothers in most other OECD countries (the Netherlands and Britain providing notable exceptions). These contrasts underline a distinctive model of parental labour force engagement in Australia and raise questions over the capacity of current policy frameworks to support the needs of parents. Australia is also distinctive in terms of parental employment policies, lacking a national scheme for paid maternity leave and moving instead towards maternity payments for all mothers regardless of employment status. However, the relationship between policy frameworks and parental employment patterns is highly complex, as comparisons between Australia and the other OECD country without a paid maternity leave scheme at the national level (the United States) shows. This paper compares parental employment patterns in Australia and the United States, highlighting cross-national differences that exist in spite of some superficial similarities in policy gaps, and speculating on the policy agenda most likely to deliver progressive change in Australia.

THIS IS A WORK IN PROGRESS PAPER - COMMENTS WELCOME

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Introduction: labour force participation and Australia's 'demographic challenges'

The Australian government's concerns about meeting welfare needs in the context of an ageing population (expressed in its *Intergenerational Report* - Australian Government 2002) have drawn attention to the potential advantages of increasing labour force participation rates over the life course. Gruen and Garbutt (2004), for example, modelled the effect on the 'fiscal gap'[2] identified in the *Intergenerational Report* of increasing labour force participation by age and gender over the next 20 years to reach the top one-fifth of participation rates across the OECD, and compared this with the effect of increasing productivity growth to 2.25 per cent,[3] first across all sectors and then just in the private sector. In their models, the largest impact on the fiscal gap was made through increasing labour force participation – primarily because it reduced outlays on various types of pensions, and simultaneously delivered increased tax revenues. While the accuracy of such modeling is a matter of some debate, there is little doubt that public policy discourse in Australia in the near future will continue to reflect the perceived value of higher labour force participation rates.

However, policy options identified thus far have been limited to broad notions of enhancing opportunity and flexibility, with the only specific initiatives focused on restricting options for early retirement. *Australia's Demographic Challenges* (Australian Government 2004) identified three areas for policy development: 'improvements in the capacity for work' (focusing on health and education); 'better incentives for work' (focusing on the obligations of the unemployed, the problems of welfare payments without 'participation' requirements, and the need to reduce incentives for early retirement); and 'improved flexibility in the workplace' (extending access to part-time work, and encouraging longer working lives). The extent of Australian difference in the labour force participation of mothers of young children, and the policies that might best address this situation, have not been explicitly drawn into the framework. Raising the issue of mothers' labour force participation rates is somewhat problematic for the current government, which has supported single-earner couple family arrangements through a range of measures including tax benefits and 'non-participatory' maternity payments schemes. Nevertheless, if higher participation remains a goal it is inevitable that women's employment rates will be brought more explicitly onto the political agenda, and policy debates are likely to focus on the relative merits of encouraging parents who are welfare recipients into the labour force and developing more supportive measures for a gender egalitarian and sustainable sharing of paid and unpaid work over the life course. This paper offers a starting point with an elaboration of Australian difference in the labour force participation rates of parents, and – in light of a comparison with the situation in the US – some speculation on appropriate policy directions.

[2] Estimated to reach 5 per cent of GDP by 2040 (Australian Government 2002: 57).
[3] A level 0.5 per cent higher than the Intergenerational Report estimations.

Overview of parental employment patterns in Australia and the US

While the claim of Australian 'exceptionalism' in terms of mothers' employment patterns clearly requires comparison with numerous countries, this has been demonstrated in broad terms in several collations of statistics (see, for example, OECD 2003a: 37) and the intent of this paper is to develop a more detailed comparison with a single country - the US. As the only other OECD country without a national paid maternity leave scheme, the US provides a useful foil for examining Australian difference and the implications for policy directions.

The figures presented in this section of the paper are from Wave 2 of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, conducted in 2002 (for Australia), and the 2001 Current Population Survey (for the US). Unless otherwise specified, employment rates have been calculated for the 'prime working age' 25-59 years age group in order to capture the group most likely to be parents and to minimise the variation that is introduced with the inclusion of younger and older cohorts.

The data show considerable similarities between the two countries in relation to men's employment patterns - aggregate level employment rates for men in the 25-59 year age group were almost identical at this time (86 per cent in Australia and 87 per cent in the US). Among women in this age group, there was a difference of five percentage points - 68 per cent in Australia compared with 73 per cent in the US. Figure 1 extends this picture to show variation between the countries across a wider range of age cohorts. While young women in Australia were *more* likely than their US counterparts to be employed, there was a considerable decline in the employment rate in Australia among women in their mid-20s to mid-40s that was not matched in the US, and women over 55 were also less likely to be in employment in Australia than in the US. For men, cross-national differences in the youngest and oldest cohorts were in the same direction (that is, higher among the youngest and lower among the oldest in Australia), although smaller than those for women (see Figure 2), and employment levels for men in other age groups were close to identical between the countries.

Inclusion of hours of work in the comparison showed more marked employment differences between the two countries. On average, both men and women worked shorter hours in Australia than in the US. On the basis of the data sets used here, average weekly hours for men aged 20-59 were 43 in the US and 36 in Australia, while averages for women were 37 hours in the US and 25 in Australia. Thus employment differences between Australian and US women in their 30s and 40s are understated in Figure 1. Not only were Australian women in these age groups less likely to be employed than their US counterparts at this time, those who were employed worked much shorter hours on average, as Figure 3 demonstrates.[4]

[4] While the propensity of women to work part-time in Australia is well recognized, there are some discrepancies in estimates of average hours worked across the life course from different data sets. The figures presented here show a concentration of shorter hours work in the middle working life cohorts, whereas Kelley and Evans (2002) show a more marked decline for older age cohorts in Australia.

Further sharpening of the cross-national contrast is gained through a comparison between the employment experiences of those with and without children. Table 1 shows the expected gender differences in both countries: women's employment rates decline as they have children, while men's increase. On these figures, men's employment levels were again almost identical between the countries. However, the employment rate of Australian women, which was only three percentage points lower than that of US women among those with no children, was 20 percentage points lower for those with a child under one year, 10 percentage points lower for those with one child under 6, and 11 percentage points lower for those with more than one child under 6 years.[5] This cross-national contrast was compounded when hours of work were taken into consideration – around 40 per cent of employed Australian women aged 25-59 were working fewer than 30 hours per week at this time, compared with only 14 per cent in the US. For those with children under six years of age, 64 per cent of employed women in Australia worked part-time, compared with 21 per cent in the US (see Table 2). Table 2 elaborates this contrast, showing the ratio of women's to men's average weekly hours in their main job for those with and without children. While the ratios for those without children were significantly different (17 percentage points lower in Australia), the cross-national difference among those with children under six years increased to 35 percentage points, and remained at 30 percentage points for those with children under 18 years. [6]

Additional disaggregation of employment rates – by household income quintiles - is shown in Tables 3 and 4. This analysis was undertaken for couple families[7] (de jure and de facto married couples) in which both partners were in the 25-59 age group. Unsurprisingly, the tables show increasing levels of employment with successive quintiles of household income; and – in line with the aggregate data - indicate that within each quintile women's employment rates were highest for those without children and lowest among those with children under 6 years of age.[8] For men, again consistent with the aggregate data, the trend was in the other direction: men with children under 6 years were shown to have higher employment rates than those without children. This was especially evident in the lower income quintiles (see Table 4).

Division of the data by household income quintiles showed contrasting patterns between the countries, particularly within the lowest levels of household income. In Australia,

[5] This is a more moderate difference than that shown in a recent OECD publication, which indicated a 21 percentage point difference between the US (in 1999) and Australia (in 2000) in the employment rates of mothers with one child, and a 22 percentage point gap for those with two or more children (OECD 2003a: 37).

[6] More explicit links between parenthood and the choice to exit the labour market or take up shorter hours working can be gleaned through longitudinal data. Unfortunately there is as yet insufficient longitudinal data in Australia to provide a comprehensive analysis, but the first two waves of the HILDA survey (conducted in 2001 and 2002) provide a preliminary picture. Among women who'd had a child between Wave 1 and Wave 2 and who were in employment at Wave 1, 50 per cent left the labour force by Wave 2, almost all citing family reasons. Of those who stayed in employment, most were already part-time, but 18 per cent changed from full-time to part-time, almost all citing childcare reasons. (For a similar picture drawn from a different Australian longitudinal data set see Baxter 2004).

[7] Analysis of one-parent families is still in progress.

[8] With the exception of the far left cell in the lowest quintile group in the US (results for this cell have varied depending on the measure of household income adopted).

within the first (lowest) quintile, there was a 40 percentage point difference in employment rates between women with no children and those with children under 6 years; a difference that declined with successive quintiles to reach 26 percentage points for the fifth (highest) quintile. In the US, differences were considerably narrower, and narrowest within the lowest quintile, where there was only a 7 percentage point difference between those with no children and those with children under 6 years. Differences in the US gradually increased with quintiles, reaching 20 percentage points within the highest quintile. These 'motherhood employment gap' contrasts are illustrated in Figure 3.

The data presented thus far have uncovered substantial contrasts lying beneath the relatively moderate aggregate level differences in employment rates between Australia and the US. Patterns for men were similar between countries across different age cohorts, for those with and without children, and broadly across income quintiles.[9] For women, a modest overall difference in employment rates was shown to conceal significant discrepancies across age cohorts, with employment rates and hours worked considerably lower among prime working age women in Australia, and gender inequality in hours worked and 'motherhood employment gaps' and considerably wider here. Moreover, motherhood employment gaps showed opposite relationships with household income in the two countries.

Explanations for difference: the role of policy?

An extensive literature examining cross-national differences in women's participation in paid work (see, among others, Bardasi and Gornick 2003; Brusentsev 2002; Daly 2000; Gornick, Meyers and Ross 1996; Rubery et al 1999) has highlighted a wide range of influences on female employment patterns, but also illustrated the difficulties of establishing causal links, and the complex interactions of policies, institutions and social contexts that confound attempts to identify universally consistent determinants. In this section of the paper, commonly reported influences on mothers' employment rates are examined, showing that in several ways the differences between Australia and the US illustrated above run counter to expectations, and that limited parental policy provision in both countries excludes a number of variables as the source of difference. Nevertheless, possible reasons for the cross-national disparities are identified, and their implications for policy development are considered in the conclusion.

To begin with, a number of frequently cited influences on the demand for female employment rates can be excluded as contributing to Australia/US differences. These include the availability of part-time work (considerably more restricted in the US than in Australia), and the scope of service sector and public sector employment (the former high at around 75 per cent of total employment in both countries, the latter somewhat higher in Australia [21 per cent] than the US [18 per cent]) (OECD 2003b: 16-17; HILDA 2002 and Current Population Survey 2001 data). Although extending access to part-time work has undoubtedly been associated with increasing female employment rates over time in some countries, high maternal employment rates coexist with low levels of part-time work in a number of others (notably Finland), while Australia provides an example of the

[9] Again, with the exception of far left cell in the lowest quintile group in the US

reverse situation. Government rhetoric in Australia is currently strong on extending the availability of part-time work as a 'family friendly' strategy, but this is in effect a substitute for the provision of parental employment policies such as paid maternity and paternity leave. If increased employment rates among mothers is a policy goal, this may be better effected by supplementing the availability of part-time work with paid parental leave and a right for full-time employees (fathers and mothers) to return part-time (an issue contested in a number of recent cases in anti-discrimination tribunals and currently an aspect of a work and family test case before the federal industrial tribunal).

Turning to the main policies explicitly designed to assist parents manage the intersection of work and family - child care and parental leave – there is again no immediate contribution to an understanding of Australia/US differences. These policies are frequently identified in cross-national analyses as influential for maternal employment rates (see, for example, Core and Koutsogeorgopoulou 1995; Daly 2000: 487; Gornick, Meyers and Ross 1996; Mandel and Semyonov 2003), although not always in the expected direction (see Pettit and Hook 2002). They are policies with potentially contradictory effects on employment rates for women, depending at least in part on their underlying philosophy (that is, whether they have been designed with the primary intent of supporting motherhood and child well-being, or facilitating gender equality in work/family intersection) (see, for example, Kamerman 2000; Korpi 2000; Sjöberg 2004). In practice, classification along such a continuum is rarely clear cut, as policies and political agenda are multi-faceted, and broader policy and institutional frameworks affect the implementation process. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw some contrasts between Australia and the US in these policy areas, and locate them in broader cross-national perspective.

With respect to child care, for example, most cross-national analyses place Australia and the US towards the bottom of the ladder. According to Daly (2000: 488; see also Gornick, Meyers and Ross 1997) the proportion of children aged 0-2 years in publicly funded[10] childcare places was amongst the lowest in the OECD in these two countries in the mid-1990s – recorded as 2 per cent in Australia and 1 per cent in the US at this time. These figures gloss over important differences and complexities in the mix of public and private funding and other means of delivering assistance for childcare, but examination of the broader range of policy initiatives does not suggest that either country is exemplary, and certainly not that provisions in the US are sufficiently superior to Australia's to account for the difference in maternal employment patterns. For example, while programs in both countries provide some incentives for employment – in couple families both partners must be in work to receive the maximum support - there are disincentives in each case due to income thresholds (Blau 2000; McDonald 2002). As Daly (2000: 491) argues, the capacity of low levels of publicly funded child care to affect employment is highest where high wage and non-wage costs raise the price of child care – her argument being that a relatively low paid workforce does this work cheaply in the US, ensuring an adequate supply of child care places. It is also the case, however, that a high proportion of child caring in the US is done through the care of relatives.

[10] Defined as at least 75% publicly funded.

In relation to parental leave, the US and Australia again stand out as towards the bottom of the scale among OECD countries, primarily due to their lack of paid maternity leave. Australia comes closest to providing the type of leave that Kamerman (2000) classes as most likely to facilitate combination of work and family, with job protected leave times adequate but not overly long (a year), but without the important component of recompense during leave. This unpaid leave is, however, universally available (including to part-time and casual employees) with the only eligibility criterion being 12 months continuous service with the employer. However current maternity payment schemes in Australia take the policy framework in a direction that moves away from encouragement of workforce attachment by providing payments to all mothers regardless of employment status. In the US leave time is both very short (12 weeks) and unrecompensed, and a high proportion of employees fall outside the scope of the legislation (coverage is extended to those in enterprises with 50 or more employees and with one year and a minimum of 1250 hours service, leaving around 46 per cent of the private sector workforce covered [Cantor et al cited in Han and Waldfogel 2003]). In both countries there are avenues through which some employees gain access to paid leave – around 20 states provide paid leave programs in the US (Han and Waldfogel 2003: 199), while in Australia public sector employees are covered by specific legislation for paid leave (12 weeks paid maternity leave has been available for federal government employees since the early 1970s). Nevertheless, lack of universal provisions indicate limits in both cases in this policy area, and the explanation for higher employment rates among US mothers must lie elsewhere.

The data presented earlier suggest the most likely explanations for differences between Australia and the US lie in welfare and taxation policies. The contrast shown in Figure 4 is congruent with a 'working poor' scenario in which insufficient social protection and low wages mean that mothers are more likely to need to work in the US, and also with a situation in which important social protections like health insurance are linked with employment (see also Daly 2000: 502; Gornick and Meyers 2003). In Australia, by contrast, family tax benefits have made entry to the labour market costly in some cases. While this is a situation best remedied through tax relief measures, the risk for Australia is that the policy agenda will swing more towards punitive measures, such as the 1996 welfare reforms in the US (under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act) which requires mothers to seek and accept employment from the time their babies are three months old (Kamerman 2000: 3). Intertwined with these influences are the regulatory frameworks surrounding working time and wages which shape the benefits from employment and the scope for flexibility in hours. For example, greater wage dispersion in the US and a longer low wage 'tail' contribute to the pressure to have dual earners in low income households.

Alternative explanations of the Australia/US difference can be drawn from attitudinal surveys (see, for example, Evans and Kelley 2001), suggesting a much higher level of acceptance of working mothers in the US than in Australia. As Table 5 shows, data from the International Social Survey Programme *Family and Changing Gender Roles Survey* conducted in 1994 show Australians to be much more circumspect about the idea of mothers working when their children are young, and more inclined to see part-time work

as most appropriate even when children are older. However, while there are undoubtedly differences between countries in social frameworks and attitudes towards appropriate family and gender roles (analysed elsewhere as aspects of varying 'gender contracts', and in relation to religious and other cultural influences), the main limit to this kind of data is the extent to which policy and institutional frameworks, as well as prevailing labour market possibilities, themselves colour responses. Sjöberg's (2004) analysis, for example, suggests that family policy institutions affect not only options for work/family choices but also prevailing norms regarding the 'proper' role of women (and also draws attention to a range of methodological problems in ascertaining attitudes - see also Probert and Murphy 2001). While cause and effect are difficult to separate in analytical terms, it seems there are complex relationships between policy frameworks and attitudes recorded in surveys. It is also apparent that attitudes reflect broader social trends and change significantly over time – while data from the 2002 version of the *Family and Changing Gender Roles Survey* is not yet available, questions included in other contemporary surveys in Australia indicate substantial change since the 1994 figures shown in Table 5.[11]

Conclusion

The material presented in this paper suggests that in spite of its higher levels of maternal employment and greater gender equality in hours of work, the US provides little in the way of policy lessons for Australia. If increased employment rates among mothers is a policy goal in this country, it will be important to avoid measures that simply increase pressure to work, particularly long hours work that increases work/family tension. Even though the impact on maternal employment rates of measures such as regulated part-time work accessible to both parents, job protected and well recompensed parental leave (again accessible to both parents), and affordable and accessible child care is not always demonstrated clearly in large scale cross-national analyses, there is enough evidence to indicate that such policies tend to be associated with enhanced employment outcomes, and every reason to expect that they would generate change in labour market behaviour and associated gender contracts within a country over time. These are questions best investigated at national level in longitudinal studies over a time period of policy change.

[11] For example, strongly agree and agree responses to the first question in Table 5 were 60 per cent of all responses recorded in the AuSSA 2003 survey <http://assda224-100.anu.edu.au/nesstarlight/index.jsp>, and 37 per cent of respondents to the 2000 wave of the Negotiating the Life Course survey (Baxter et al 2002) strongly agreed or agreed with the second question. Of course, changes in attitudes on these questions since 1994 will not be limited to Australia.

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Table 1: Employment rates, men and women aged 25-59, by presence of children, Australia and US, 2001-2

	Australia	US
Women with:		
0 children	72	75
A child < 1 yr	33	53
1 child < 6 yrs	55	65
2 or more children <6 yrs	44	55
1 or more children <18 yrs	64	71
All women 25-59	68	73
Men with:		
0 children	81	83
1 child < 6 yrs	91	92
2 or more children <6 yrs	92	93
1 or more children <18 yrs	91	92
All men 25-59	86	87

Data sources Australia - Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Wave 2 survey conducted in 2002; US - 2001 Current Population Survey <www.bls.gov/cps>.

Table 2: Proportion of women's employment that is part-time (<30 hours/week in main job), and gender hours ratio, 25-59 age group by presence of children, Australia and US, 2001-2

	% Part-time		Gender hours ratio [a]	
	Australia	US	Australia	US
0 children	26	10	82	91
1 or more children < 6 yrs	64	21	45	80
1 or more children <18 yrs	55	18	53	83
Total	40	14	67	87

Notes

a Women's average weekly hours in main job as a percentage of men's.

Data sources Australia - HILDA Wave 2 survey 2002; US - 2001 Current Population Survey <www.bls.gov/cps>.

Table 3: Women's employment rates in couple families[a] by household income[b] quintiles, 2001-2, percentages

Income quintile	Australia			US		
	Child <6yrs	Child 6-17ys	0 children	Child <6yrs	Child 6-17ys	0 children
1	27	54	67	41	57	48
2	44	56	80	63	74	72
3	65	77	92	70	82	82
4	60	86	87	73	85	86
5 (top)	61	82	87	66	80	86

Notes

a. Married (de jure and de facto) couples within the 25-59 years age range. To reduce complexity in calculations of household income, initial testing has been based on couple families in households without other adults present.

b. Household income includes total of wages and salaries, business income, investment income, pensions and transfers, windfall income for the full year (the small proportion of households with negative income has been excluded).

Data sources Australia - HILDA Wave 2 survey 2002 (analysis based on 2226 households); US - 2001 Current Population Survey <www.bls.gov/cps> (analysis based on 18,044 households).

Table 4: Men's employment rates in couple families[a] by household income[b] quintiles, 2001-2, percentages

Income quintile	Australia			US		
	Child <6yrs	Child 6-17ys	0 children	Child <6yrs	Child 6-17ys	0 children
1	86	75	77	85	81	64
2	99	91	87	96	89	87
3	94	97	95	97	95	91
4	99	100	95	97	97	94
5 (top)	98	100	95	98	97	95

Notes

a. Married (de jure and de facto) couples within the 25-59 years age range. To reduce complexity in calculations of household income, initial testing has been based on couple families in households without other adults present.

b. Household income includes total of wages and salaries, business income, investment income, pensions and transfers, windfall income for the full year (the small proportion of households with negative income have been excluded).

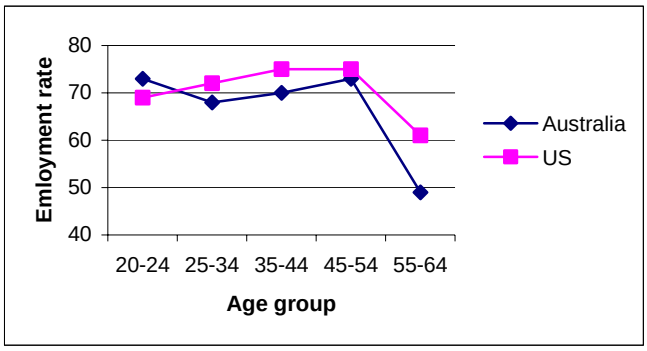
Data sources Australia - HILDA Wave 2 survey 2002 (analysis based on 2226 households); US - 2001 Current Population Survey <www.bls.gov/cps> (analysis based on 18,044 households).

Table 5: Attitudes to mothers working and the impact on children, Australia and the US, 1994 (percentages)

	Australia	US
A working mother can secure just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who doesn't work *('strongly agree' + 'agree')*	54	71
A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his/her mother works *('strongly agree' + 'agree')*	50	42
All in all, a family suffers when the woman has a full-time job *('strongly agree' + 'agree')*	50	35
Do you think women should work outside the home full-time, part-time or not at all when there is a child under school age?		
Full-time	4	11
Part-time	31	34
Not at all	65	55
Do you think women should work outside the home full-time, part-time or not at all after the youngest child starts school?		
Full-time	16	38
Part-time	73	54
Not at all	11	8
Do you think women should work outside the home full-time, part-time or not at all after the children leave home?		
Full-time	61	81
Part-time	35	17
Not at all	5	3
Did your mother ever work for pay for as long as one year after you were born and before you were 14? *('yes')*	38	53
Working women should receive paid maternity leave when they have a baby *('strongly agree' + 'agree')*	42	76
Families should receive financial benefits for child care when both parents work *('strongly agree' + 'agree')*	33	46

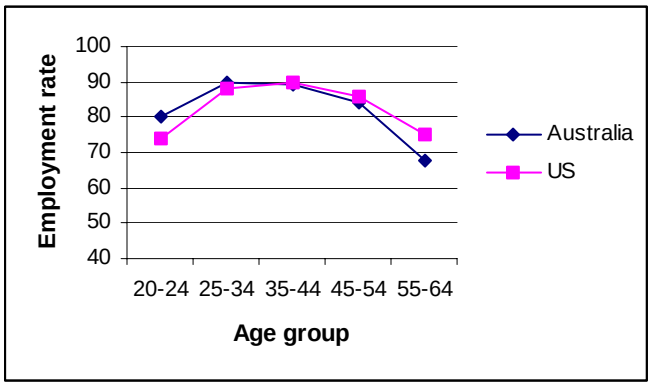
Data source: International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) *Family and Changing Gender Roles II*, conducted in 1994 in 24 countries. N=1779 (Australia), 1447 (US). <http://www.za.uni-koeln.de/data/en/issp/codebooks/s2620cdb.pdf>

Figure 1: Women's employment rates by age group, Australia and the US, 2001-2



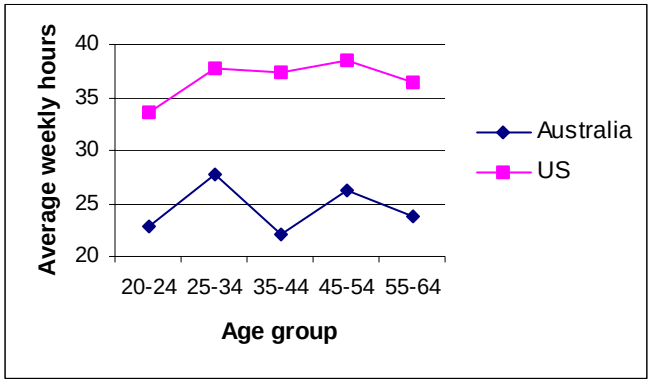
Data sources: HILDA Wave 2 , 2002 (Australia); Current Population Survey, 2001 (US)

Figure 2: Men's employment rates by age group, Australia and the US, 2001-2



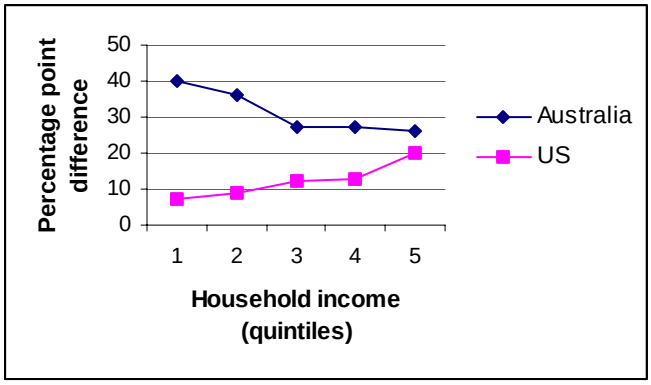
Data sources: HILDA Wave 2 , 2002 (Australia); Current Population Survey, 2001 (US)

Figure 3: Weekly hours of employed women by age group, Australia and the US, 2001-2



Data sources: HILDA Wave 2 , 2002 (Australia); Current Population Survey, 2001 (US)

Figure 4: 'Motherhood employment gap'[a], Australia and the US, 2001-2



Notes:
a Percentage point difference in employment rates between women aged 25-59 years with 0 children and those with at least one child under 6 years.
Data sources: HILDA Wave 2 , 2002 (Australia); Current Population Survey, 2001 (US)