

Attitudes towards divorce

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It appears that around one-third of all marriages in Australia now end in divorce (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2001), with the number of divorces fluctuating between 12 and 13 for every 1,000 marriages for around two decades. Most Australians would therefore have had some experience of marriage breakdown, divorce and its aftermath—that is, they may have obtained a divorce themselves, seen their parents divorce, and/or witnessed other family members or friends undergo the process.

While the *Family Law Act 1975* made it much easier to obtain a divorce, the divorce rate itself was already increasing in the 1960s and early 1970s. There was strong recognition that many couples were trapped in unhappy marriages, and mounting social pressure on the government to introduce legislation that was not “fault-based” (see Weston, Stanton, Qu, & Soriano, 2001).¹

Nevertheless, marriage breakdown is almost always a highly disruptive and stressful experience—an experience that may begin well in advance of separation, at least in the eyes of one spouse. Furthermore, there is ample evidence that children of separated or divorced parents have an increased risk of experiencing a broad range of adjustment problems, including high anxiety, social withdrawal, low self-esteem, delinquency in adolescence, and poor school achievement. As adults, these children are more likely than those who grew up living with both biological parents to divorce and become single parents themselves (see Amato, 2000, 2001; Rodgers & Prior, 1998). Although the risk of negative outcomes is only modest—in the sense that most children of separated or divorced parents do not exhibit such problems—the minority who do represent a large number of children (Rodgers, 1996).

Such trends have sparked a great deal of research into and debates about key reasons behind these trends. Included here are the roles of pre-separation difficulties (e.g., levels of conflict and hostility between spouses), the separation itself, and post-separation upheavals in explaining children’s elevated risk of negative developmental outcomes. In addition, adverse circumstances that may independently contribute to both marriage breakdown and children’s adjustment difficulties have received considerable attention (e.g., parents’ mental health problems, financial pressures).²

The general public is unlikely to be aware of all this research. Rather, their views about marriage and divorce are likely to be shaped by their beliefs about the significance of marriage vows and the impacts on couples and any children of sustaining unhappy marriages or achieving divorce. Also important may be beliefs about the chances of unhappily married couples resolving their difficulties.

What, then, are the attitudes of Australians regarding divorce? How similar or different are the views of men and women and of people of different ages? To what extent do the views of those who have obtained a divorce differ from other marital status groups (never married or in first marriage)? These issues are explored through analysis of data from the 2005 wave of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey.³

In the HILDA survey, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: “Marriage is a lifetime relationship and should never be ended” and “It is alright for a couple with an unhappy marriage to get a divorce, even if they have children”. The response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Ratings between the two extremes were not given any label. In this article, a rating of 4 (the mid-point) is considered to reflect a neutral (“sitting on the fence”) position. This may result from uncertainty or mixed feelings.

- 1 The *Family Law Act 1975* allowed divorce based on only one ground—“irretrievable breakdown”—as measured by at least 12 months of separation, thereby removing the need to prove “fault” or to wait for five years of separation (both requirements of the *Matrimonial Causes Act 1959*, which came into operation in 1961). Unhappily married people were more likely to claim desertion or adultery than wait until five years had elapsed.
- 2 It is beyond the scope of this article to examine these issues (for reviews, see Amato, 2000, 2001, 2005; Amato & Cheadle, 2008; Rodgers & Prior, 1998).
- 3 HILDA is funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA). It is managed by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research at the University of Melbourne.

This article focuses first on the answers provided by men and women, then on the patterns of answers emerging for men and women in different age groups. Finally, the views of those who have and have not been divorced are compared.

General views about divorce by gender

Table 1 shows the proportions of male and female respondents who reported different levels of agreement or disagreement with each of the two statements.

Table 1: Attitudes towards divorce by gender

	Men	Women	Total
	%	%	%
Marriage is a lifetime relationship and should never be ended			
Strongly agree	22.7	19.4	21.0
Somewhat agree	33.3	31.2	32.2
Neutral	16.8	16.3	16.6
Somewhat disagree	16.1	19.3	17.7
Strongly disagree	11.2	13.8	12.5
Total	100.1	100.0	100.0
It is alright for a couple with an unhappy marriage to get a divorce even if they have children			
Strongly agree	22.1	31.2	26.7
Somewhat agree	41	38.9	39.9
Neutral	16.9	14.1	15.5
Somewhat disagree	13.2	11	12.1
Strongly disagree	6.8	4.8	5.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	5,283	6,042	11,325

Notes: Ratings of 2 and 3 are here classified as “somewhat disagree”, while ratings of 5 and 6 are classified as “somewhat agree”. Neutral refers to a rating of 4 (the mid-point on the 7-point scale). Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Source: HILDA 2005

Men and women most commonly agreed (either strongly or moderately) with the statement “Marriage is a lifetime relationship and should never be ended”. Roughly half the men (51%) and a slightly higher proportion of women (56%) agreed with the statement, while close to 30% disagreed, with a marginally lower proportion of men than women expressing disagreement (27% vs 33%). The remaining 16–17% selected the mid-point of the scale, indicating neutrality. Strong endorsement of this statement was provided by 19–23%, while strong rejection was indicated by only 11–14%.

There was even greater consensus, however, about the acceptability of divorce when a marriage is unhappy, with a slightly higher proportion of women than men endorsing divorce: 63% of men and 70% women agreed with the statement, “It is alright for a couple with an unhappy marriage to get a divorce, even if they have children”. Only 16% of women and 20% of men disagreed with this statement, while 14–17% selected the mid-point rating. Strong endorsement of this statement was indicated by more women than men (31% vs 22%).

Combination of responses to the two statements

The above trends may seem contradictory. To throw further light on general views, the proportion of respondents who provided various combinations of ratings for the two statements were derived, after ratings of 5–7 (reflecting different levels of agreement) were combined and ratings of 1–3 (reflecting different levels of disagreement) were also combined. This yielded nine combinations, as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Combination of ratings for the two statements reflecting views on divorce

Statement 1. Marriage is a lifetime relationship and should never be ended	Statement 2. It is alright for a couple with an unhappy marriage to get a divorce, even if they have children		
	Agree (ratings 5–7)	Neutral (rating 4)	Disagree (ratings 1–3)
	%	%	%
Agree (ratings 5–7)	29	10	12
Neutral (rating 4)	12	3	2
Disagree (ratings 1–3)	27	2	3

It is interesting to note that nearly 30% of all respondents endorsed both statements (i.e., they provided ratings of 5–7 for each statement). Why would such a substantial proportion agree with these two statements when, on face value, such paired responses suggest contradictory views: that marriage is a lifetime relationship and should never be ended, and that divorce is acceptable for unhappily married couples? It seems more likely that many, if not all, of these respondents interpreted the statements in such a way that agreement with both would not be contradictory.⁴ Possibly, most respondents who agreed with both statements held at the outset the ideal of marriage being a lifetime commitment and believed that partners should only marry if they fully intend the relationship to last “until death do us part”. At the same time, they may also believe that the wellbeing of family members represents the paramount consideration as the course of the marriage unfolds: the ideal of marriage as a lifetime commitment may need to be set aside where continuing the marriage would seriously jeopardise the wellbeing of family members. Their responses, then, may reflect a qualified acceptance of divorce, rather than contradiction of views.⁵

Much the same proportion (27%) rejected the concept that marriage is a lifetime relationship and accepted the idea of couples divorcing if unhappily married. This group, then, consistently accepted divorce. It also seems that another 14% were inclined to accept divorce, in that they either disagreed with the first statement (regarding marriage being for life) and provided the mid-point rating for the second statement (regarding couples divorcing) or agreed with the second statement and provided the mid-point rating for the first statement. It seems reasonable to suggest that 41% seemed to express clear, rather than qualified, acceptance of divorce.

Only 12% consistently rejected divorce in the sense that they agreed that marriage is for life and disagreed that it is alright for an unhappily married couple to divorce, but another 12% were inclined to reject divorce in that they provided the mid-point rating for one statement and indicated rejection of divorce via the other statement. Overall then, it seems reasonable to assume that 24% rejected divorce. Given that they did not provide contradictory views, we classify this group as indicating clear rejection of divorce.

These classifications are approximations only. Of respondents who held the ideal that marriage is for life while also believing that there needs to be an “escape route” from marriages that have become irretrievably damaging for family members, some may have accepted the first statement (about marriage being a lifetime relationship) to emphasise their attachment to this ideal, while others may have rejected it because they interpreted it as being too inflexible.

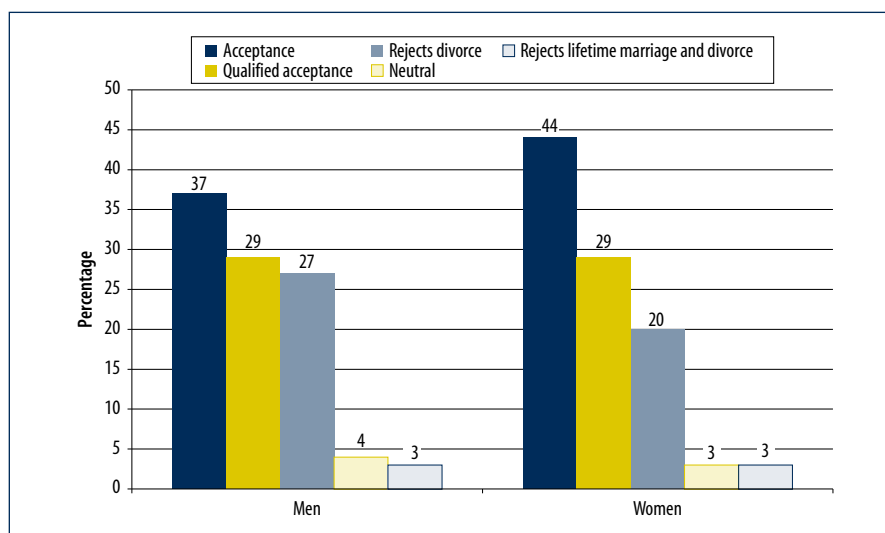
Only 4% indicated a neutral stance regarding both statements (i.e., they provided the mid-point rating), while another 3% rejected both statements. Again, the latter pattern of answers may not necessarily be contradictory: these respondents may have considered divorce to be acceptable for unhappily married couples who do not have dependent children, but not for those with dependent children. In this case, they would reject the notion that marriage is (necessarily) a lifetime relationship as well as the argument that divorce is acceptable even among unhappily married parents.

It is also important to note that this classification system is used to compare groups (men and women in general, and men and women in different age and marital status groups). Hopefully the extent and direction of errors in classification would not differ markedly across these groups.

Comparison of the views of men and women

Figure 1 shows the proportions of men and women who indicated clear acceptance of divorce, qualified acceptance, clear rejection, and the small groups who provided a neutral stance or who rejected the notion that marriage is for life as well as the acceptability of divorce.

- 4 The two statements were embedded in a list of statements tapping attitudes to various matters. We therefore checked for the possibility that agreement with both statements, disagreement with both statements, and use of mid-point against both statements reflected a tendency to respond in the same way across all statements in the total set, regardless of their content. Such tendencies were unusual and had a negligible impact on the overall pattern of results.
- 5 Of course, there may be others who held precisely the same views and disagreed (rather than agreed) with the statement that marriage is a lifetime relationship because of their concerns about the wellbeing of family members should the marital relationship become irretrievably unhappy. That is, our classification regarding the proportion of respondents expressing “qualified acceptance” should be considered a rough approximation based on ratings provided for two statements only.



Source: HILDA 2005

Figure 1: Attitudes to divorce by gender

The most common response pattern provided by both men and women suggests clear acceptance of divorce, as defined above. Women, however, were more likely than men to indicate this level of acceptance (44% vs 37%). The same proportion of men and women (29%) provided “qualified” acceptance of divorce. However, men were more likely than women to clearly reject divorce (27% vs 20%). Only 3–4% of men and women rejected both statements and only 3% provided the neutral response to both statements.

In total then, it appears reasonable to suggest that two-thirds of men and nearly three-quarters of women tended to accept divorce (including divorce between parents) as an option for people in unhappy marriages, although nearly 30% did so while also expressing endorsement of the ideal of marriage as a lifetime relationship—an ideal that, in their apparent view, cannot always be achieved.

It is possible that this gender difference applies more to some subgroups than others. The following section focuses on patterns of answers provided by men and women in different age groups.

Comparison of the views of men and women in different age groups

Figures 2 and 3 present the response patterns provided by men and women in seven age groups. For simplicity, attention is directed to the most common responses: clear and qualified acceptance of divorce and clear rejection of divorce. Across all age groups, only 2–5% indicated a consistently neutral stance and only 2–4% rejected both statements.

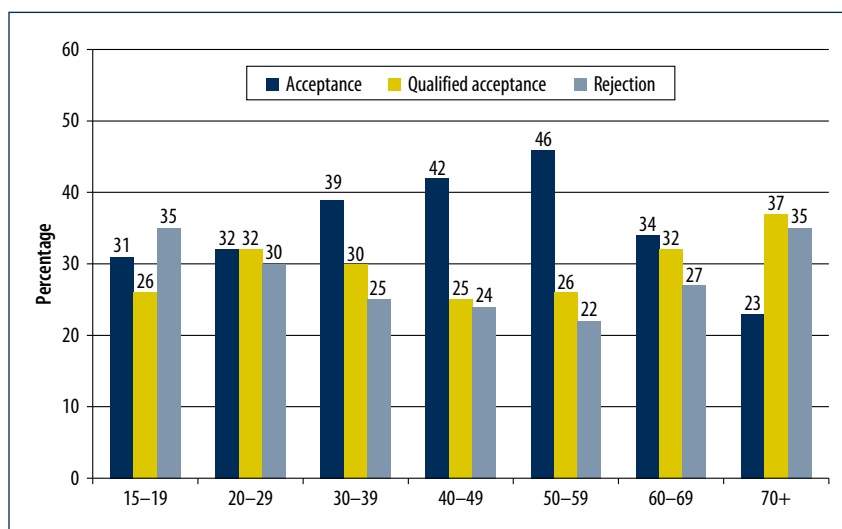
Four clear patterns emerge from Figures 2 and 3. For clarity, these are set out in a series of points below:

- Firstly, compared with their male counterparts, a higher proportion of women in all age groups clearly accepted divorce and a lower proportion clearly rejected it.
- Secondly, compared with their counterparts of the same gender, those in their fifties were the most likely to indicate clear acceptance of divorce, followed by those in their forties, then those in their thirties.
- Thirdly, of all male and female groups, rejection of divorce was highest among men in their teens and twenties, and among men and women aged 70 or more years (30–35%).
- Fourthly, the views of teenage boys differed considerably from those of teenage girls: the teenage boys most commonly expressed clear rejection of divorce while the girls most commonly expressed clear acceptance of it.

Men and women aged 30–59 years: Comparison of views according to marital status experiences

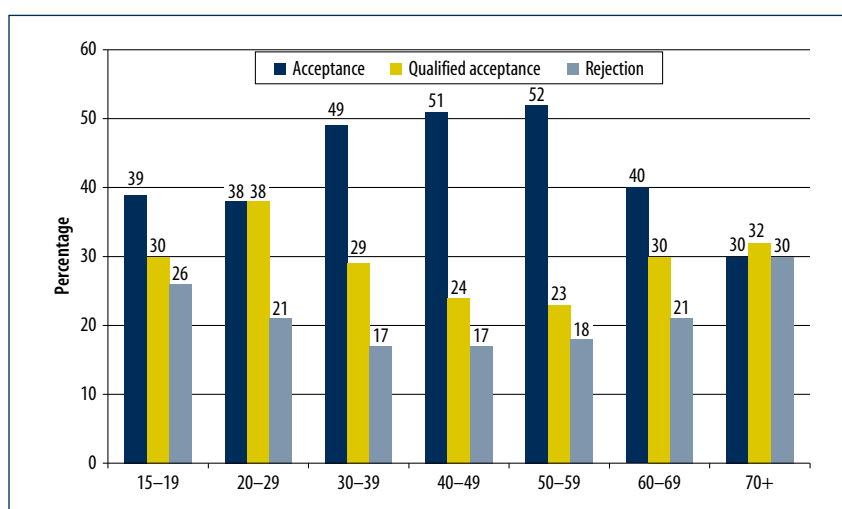
As noted above, men and women in their thirties, forties and fifties were more likely than their older and younger counterparts of the same gender to accept divorce. Table 3 shows that those who were in their forties or older were more likely to have divorced than never married. This is particularly the case for men in their fifties and for women in their forties and fifties. However, Table 3 does not take into account cohabitation and separation from cohabiting relationships. It appears that the experience of either divorce or separation from a cohabiting relationship is more prevalent among men and women in their thirties, forties and fifties than younger and older aged groups.⁶

⁶ This analysis is based on HILDA Wave 1. The proportions of men who had experienced two or more partners (whether married or cohabiting) were: 29–32% of those in their thirties, forties and fifties, and 11–22% of younger and older groups. For women, the respective percentages were 27–29% and 13–21%.



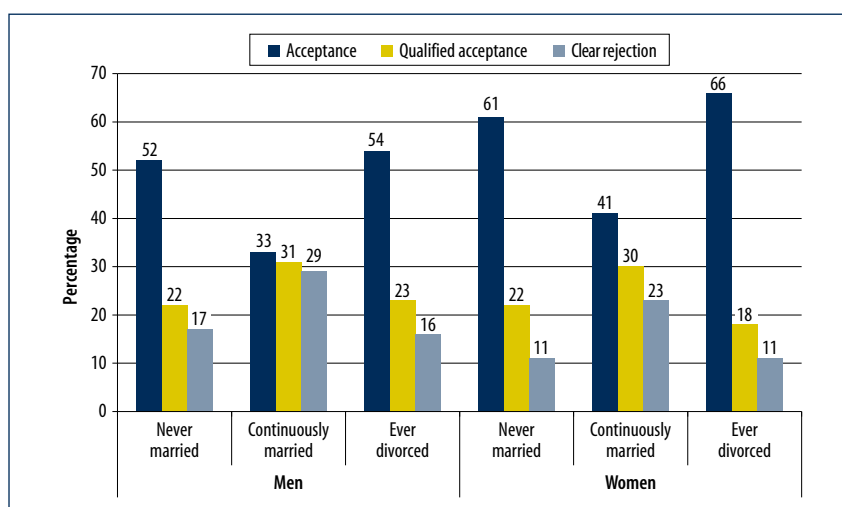
Source: HILDA 2005

Figure 2: Attitudes towards divorce of men in different age groups



Source: HILDA 2005

Figure 3: Attitudes toward divorce of women in different age groups



Notes: "Continuously married" refers to those who were in their first marriage and were not separated at the time of the survey. "Ever divorced" includes those who were in their first marriage but separated from their spouse. "Ever divorced" respondents were single, remarried or cohabiting.

Source: HILDA 2005

Figure 4: Attitudes towards divorce by marriage history and gender, persons aged 30-59 years

Table 3: Marriage history by age and gender

	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70+
	%					
Men						
Never married	80.6	34.1	19.5	9.2	6.5	3.6
Married never divorced	17.3	55.0	55.3	54.2	59.4	62.7
Ever divorced	2.1	10.9	24.8	34.5	28.1	14.5
Ever widowed (& never divorced)	0.0	0.0	0.4	2.2	6.0	19.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.1	100.0	100.0
N	802	934	1072	830	599	531
Women						
Never married	73.9	25.7	13.3	7.9	2.7	2.6
Married never divorced	22.9	57.4	52.5	51.1	51.8	37.9
Ever divorced	3.2	16.7	32.3	35.5	26.6	10.3
Ever widowed (& never divorced)	0.0	0.2	1.9	5.6	18.9	49.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.1	100.0	100.0
N	930	1104	1235	928	635	660

Notes: The data refer to respondents who provided ratings concerning the two statements tapping attitudes to divorce. “Ever divorced” includes those who had obtained a divorce and were single, remarried or in a de facto relationship at the time of the survey. Only less than 3% of men and women (separately) were in their first marriage but currently separated from their spouse. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

Source: HILDA 2005

Figure 4 depicts the pattern of the most common responses to the two attitudinal statements of the other groups of men and women aged 30–59 years.

The following trends are apparent in Figure 4:

- For both men and women, those who were continuously married were the least accepting of divorce, while the patterns of responses of the other two groups (the divorced and never married) were similar. Specifically:
 - compared with the other marital status groups, continuously married men and women were more likely to reject divorce clearly or to express qualified acceptance of divorce, and less likely to accept divorce clearly.
- While continuously married men were fairly evenly divided in their views, all other groups were most likely to indicate clear acceptance of divorce, followed by qualified acceptance.
 - This was particularly the case for women who had experienced divorce, followed by women who had never married.
- Compared with their male counterparts, women in all groups were more likely to accept divorce clearly, with the greatest gender difference emerging among those who had experienced divorce.

Summary and conclusions

While more than half the respondents believed that marriage is a lifetime commitment and should never be ended, most respondents considered it acceptable for couples (including those with children) to divorce if their marriage is “unhappy”. Women were more likely than men to indicate clear acceptance of divorce and, compared with their younger and older counterparts of the same gender, those in their thirties, forties and fifties were the most likely to express clear acceptance of divorce. The greater tendency for the “middle-aged” groups to accept divorce is consistent with age-related patterns of relationship satisfaction: men and women in their late thirties and early forties were the least likely to express high satisfaction with their relationship with their current partner (Qu & Weston, 2008). Among these three age groups, divorced women were the most likely to indicate clear acceptance of divorce, followed by never-married women.

The proportion of respondents expressing clear rejection of divorce was highest among three male groups (teenagers, those in their twenties and those aged 70 years or more) and among women aged 70 years or more. Interestingly, teenage boys most commonly rejected divorce (rather than express clear or qualified acceptance of it), while teenage girls most commonly expressed clear acceptance of divorce.

The views of the oldest group may be linked with the fact that they grew up in an era when the grounds for divorce were entirely fault-based (pre-1961), or fault-based grounds or five years of separation (when the *Matrimonial Causes Act 1959* came into operation in 1961). Those who were 70 years old would have been nearly 30 years old when the *Family Law Act 1975* came into force (in 1976). The Act allowed a divorce based on only one ground — “irretrievable

breakdown”—as measured by at least 12 months of separation. The views of some of these older respondents may have also been influenced by their witnessing the impact of divorce on their children and grandchildren, and comparing their perceptions of these lifestyles with recollections of their own when they had been of the same age.

Although applying to a minority, clear rejection of divorce was more common among men and women aged 30–59 years who were continuously married than among the never-married and those who had experienced divorce. The continuously married group who rejected divorce may have included those who had not experienced the level of difficulties that led others to seek divorce and those whose commitment to marriage remained strong despite having experienced considerable marital difficulties. The former of these two groups may become more accepting of divorce should they encounter marital difficulties, while the latter may remain highly resistant to the idea of divorce as an option for resolving marital difficulties.

It is interesting to note that, among those aged 30–59 years, the never-married respondents held similar views to those of respondents who had experienced divorce. That is, they were more likely than the continuously married to express clear acceptance of divorce. Perhaps a considerable proportion of respondents of this age (especially those in their forties and fifties) who had never married attached little value to this institution and therefore were inclined to accept divorce. The fact that divorced and never-married women were the most likely to express clear acceptance of divorce is consistent with the greater tendency of women to initiate separation.

It is important to note that the existence of a causal relationship cannot be determined on the basis of cross-sectional analyses such as this one. As the HILDA waves accumulate, it will be possible to assess the level of change in attitudes that occur as people grow older, and as some couples marry and eventually divorce. If there is a causal connection, then longitudinal analysis will help us identify the direction of such causality. For instance, people who are predisposed to view divorce as a solution to marital problems may be more “ready” to divorce when they perceive problems in their marriage. On the other hand, the experience of marital difficulties may lead some people to become more accepting of divorce—and the subsequent experience of divorce may lead people to re-evaluate their views further towards greater or lesser acceptance. Indeed, for many couples, the direction of causality may be reciprocal.

In summary, there seemed to be considerable tension between accepting divorce and adhering to the ideal of marriage as a lifetime institution. This is not surprising in an era in which most people want to marry; there is a strong emphasis on having a close and rewarding emotional bond with one’s partner; and alternative options are available for a fulfilling life should this emotional bond deteriorate (see Wolcott & Hughes, 1999, for a discussion of this literature).

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Note: This paper uses unit record data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey. The HILDA Project was initiated and is funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and is managed by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research (MIAESR). The findings and views reported in this paper, however, are those of the author and should not be attributed to either FaHCSIA or the MIAESR.