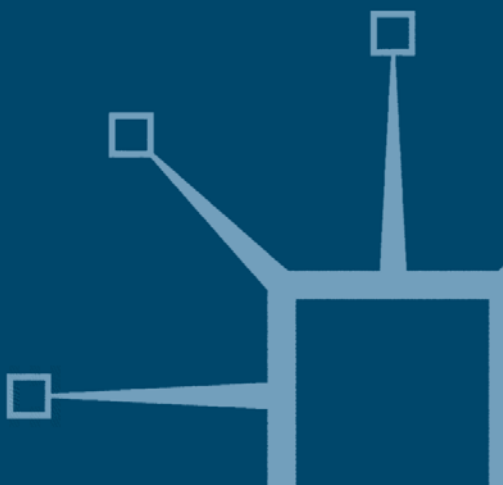


palgrave
macmillan

Governments and Marriage Education Policy

Perspectives from the UK,
Australia and the US

Elizabeth van Acker



Governments and Marriage Education Policy

Also by Elizabeth van Acker

DIFFERENT VOICES: Gender and Politics in Australia

GOVERNING BUSINESS AND GLOBALIZATION (*co-editor*)

GLOBALIZING GOVERNMENT BUSINESS RELATIONS (*co-editor*)

Governments and Marriage Education Policy

**Perspectives from the UK,
Australia and the US**

Elizabeth van Acker

*Department of Politics and Public Policy,
Griffith University, Australia*

palgrave
macmillan



© Elizabeth van Acker 2008

Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2008 978-0-230-00337-8

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1T 4LP.

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

The author has asserted her right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in 2008 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

Companies and representatives throughout the world.

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN is the global academic imprint of the Palgrave Macmillan division of St. Martin's Press, LLC and of Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. Macmillan® is a registered trademark in the United States, United Kingdom and other countries. Palgrave is a registered trademark in the European Union and other countries.

ISBN 978-1-349-28103-9 ISBN 978-0-230-22757-6 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9780230227576

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Van Acker, Elizabeth.

Governments and marriage education policy : perspectives from the UK, Australia and the US / Elizabeth van Acker.

p. cm.

Includes index.

1. Marriage – Government policy – English-speaking countries – Case studies.
2. Marriage – Government policy – United States.
3. Marriage – Government policy – Great Britain.
4. Marriage – Government policy – Australia.
5. Family life education – Government policy – English-speaking countries – Case studies.
6. Family life education – Government policy – United States.
7. Family life education – Government policy – Great Britain.
8. Family life education – Government policy – Australia. I. Title.

HQ515.V36 2008

306.872'0973—dc22

2008011267

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08

*For
Jessica, Declan, Jake and Kieran*

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

<i>Abbreviations</i>	viii
<i>Preface</i>	x
Introduction: Government and Marriage: Strange Bedfellows?	1
Part I Changing Perceptions of Marriage	
1 The Problem of Marriage	15
2 Tensions within Marriage: Public Institution or Private Choice?	33
Part II Marriage Education in Three Liberal Democracies	
3 The UK – Governments Supporting Children	63
4 Australia – Government Shifts in Supporting Marriage and Relationship Education	93
5 The US – Governments Promoting ‘Healthy’ Marriage	120
Part III Challenges for Governments	
6 Individualism and the Private Sphere	159
7 Managing the Public Policy Process	183
Conclusions: Reinventing Marriage?	207
<i>Notes</i>	213
<i>Bibliography</i>	219
<i>Index</i>	239

Abbreviations

AAME	Australian Association for Marriage Education
ACF	Administration for Children and Families
AFA	Australian Family Association
AFDC	Aid to Families with Dependent Children
AGD	Attorney General's Department
AGMARS	Advisory Group on Marriage and Relationship Support
ALI	American Law Institute
BCFT	Bristol Community Family Trust
BSA	British Social Attitudes
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CLASP	Center for Law and Social Policy
CMPs	Community Marriage Policies
CSME	Catholic Society for Marriage Education
CWA	Catholic Welfare Australia
CYPF	Children, Young People and Families
DCA	Department for Constitutional Affairs
DFES	Department for Education and Skills
DHHS	Department of Health and Human Services
DOMA	<i>Defense of Marriage Act</i>
FaCS	Department of Family and Community Services
FaCSIA	Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
FFRF	Freedom from Religion Foundation
FOCCUS	Facilitating Open Couple Communication Understanding and Study
FLA	<i>Family Law Act</i>
FPI	Family and Parenting Institute
FRCs	Family Relationship Centres
FRSA	Family Relationships Services Australia
FRSP	Family Relationship Services Program
FSA	Family Services Australia
FTF	First Things First
HMGR	Healthy Marriages Grand Rapids
HMHR	Healthy Marriages Health Relationships
HMI	Healthy Marriage Initiative

HRSCFCA	House of Representative Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs
HRSC/LCA	House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs
IPPR	Institute for Public Policy Research
IRBs	Industry Representative Bodies
LCD	Lord Chancellor's Department
MAREAA	Marriage and Relationship Education Association of Australia
MARENC	Marriage and Relationship Education National Conference
MARS	Marriage and Relationship Support
NOW	National Women's Organization
NFI	National Fatherhood Initiative
OMI	Oklahoma Marriage Initiative
PAIRS	Practical Application of Relationship Skills
PREP	Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program
PREPARE	Premarital Personal and Relationship Evaluation
PRWORA	<i>Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act</i>
RA	Relationships Australia
RECC	Relationship Enhancement and Couples Communication
SJPG	Social Justice Policy Group
TANF	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

Preface

Why on earth is a political scientist studying marriage education? I asked myself this question many times over the past few years. I was initially interested in the role of romance which has such powerful meanings in our individualistic society and how government policies deal with it. This led me to examine marriage and relationship support in Australia and I soon discovered that policy developments were also occurring in the US and the UK. In 2003, I decided to conduct a comparative study of what was happening within this area in these three liberal democracies.

Marriage and families are the focal point of a number of important, contentious public debates. Should the institution of marriage be shored up as vital to the social health and well-being of citizens? Can governments do anything to stem the tide of cohabitation, divorce and out-of-wedlock child bearing? This book sheds light on some of the shadowy spots of the measures underway in the three countries to address the 'marriage problem'. By including the voices of a range of people who passionately champion – or oppose – marriage and relationship education, I hope to contribute to a clearer understanding about the issues and to illuminate some of the misapprehensions. The research for this book discovered that although there is much enthusiasm and active support for marriage education policies, there is also cautious resistance and in some situations downright opposition. Some view marriage programs as an important element in enriching people's intimate relationships, or as a useful measure in the fight against child poverty and family breakdown. Others oppose funding programs that have not been sufficiently evaluated because they may be wasting taxpayers' money. A further criticism suggests that more funding should be provided for basic economic support and services that are necessary for family welfare. Another response is that strengthening marriage is none of the government's business. My interviews revealed that the various players in this story have not only an intellectual but also a passionate engagement in the issue of marriage support. Any policies influencing citizens' intimate relationships go to the heart of people's lives and many of the participants have an emotional investment in improving relationships in society.

The book utilizes my interviews with staff and stakeholders from a range of organizations involved in different ways with marriage education.

This includes policy makers, researchers, civil servants, service providers, representatives from think tanks, community organizations and religious groups, as well as couples who have taken classes. Some of the people have a public profile and were pleased to be quoted, while others wished to remain anonymous. Therefore, in accordance with their wishes, some of the interviewees are named, while others are described by their work title. To all of those who took the time to talk to me, thank you so much for your willingness to cooperate and for your generosity. Apart from the interviews, I attended forums and conferences, participated in reference groups and presented seminars, conference papers and keynote addresses. Many participants allowed me access to data and information about marriage education programs. I conducted approximately 70 interviews from 2003 to 2007 across the three countries to obtain people's views on a range of issues such as marriage and relationship education programs, policy developments and the role of governments.

Naturally I have many people to thank. I would like to express gratitude to Bill Coffin from the Administration for Children and Families in Washington, DC who provided an enormous wealth of information. Thanks also to Belinda Hartsell for her friendship and to Nisa Muhammad for generously allowing us to sit in on her relationship classes. This of course leads to a big thank you to the friendly couples in those classes. Bob Lerman and the staff at the Urban Institute provided support during my visits in 2006 and 2007 when I was a visiting scholar. I also appreciate the kindness and help of Penny Mansfield, Fiona Glenn, Laura Dimmock and all the staff from One Plus One in London when I was based there. Their 'Cake Wednesdays' should be mandatory in all work places.

I would especially like to thank those who read and commented on some of the chapters: Bill Coffin, Giorel Curran, Robyn Hollander, Wade Horn, Kerri Kellett, Theodora Ooms, Robyn Parker, Penny Mansfield and Anne Tiernan. The book has benefited greatly from their feedback. For taking the time to discuss the book's ideas and progress, the following people were supportive along the way – Catherine Althaus, Janis Bailey, Kaye Broadbent, Sharon Broughton, Kim Halford, John Kane, Joanne Kelly, Brendon O'Connor, Haig Patapan, Mike van Acker and Pat Weller. For research assistance, I thank Colleen Knight and Cliff Smith. For production of the book I thank Daniela di Piramo. Thanks also to Julie Howe and to Jean Norman. The editorial assistance of Philippa Grand and Hazel Woodbridge from Palgrave Macmillan is much appreciated 'as is all the great work of the team at Newgen Imaging Systems'. Needless to say, any errors in this book are my own.

I am grateful to the Centre for Governance and Public Policy which supported this project and provided some travelling funds. I also acknowledge the funding provided by a Faculty of Commerce and Management Research Grant and a Griffith University Research Grant. Colleagues at the Department of Politics and Public Policy provided encouragement and cheered me on. Finally, thanks to the many engaged and newly married couples who graciously indulged my curiosity at weddings, parties, functions – any event really – where I asked all and sundry whether they had taken marriage and relationship education classes. This book is for my younger niece and nephews – Jessica, Declan, Jake and Kieran – in the hope that when they grow up, they will enjoy happy, healthy and loving relationships.

LIZ VAN ACKER
Griffith University

Introduction: Government and Marriage: Strange Bedfellows?

In previous times, when people considered marriage, a fitting phrase for many couples may have been ‘what’s love got to do with it’? Yet at present, when many people marry for love, this is not the case. Romance is alive and well – starry-eyed lovers enthusiastically consume all the trimmings associated with romantic love. If or when the romance dies, many people move on because for them, marriage and relationships are disposable. Today, marriage is typically understood as a very personal matter. One might therefore question any connections between government policies and marriage. Can governments influence the progress of blossoming love? Is it possible for them to encourage couples to work on their intimate relationships? Why is marriage the last area of family life to enter the realm of national family policy? Without a doubt, it is difficult for governments to regulate what goes on behind closed doors or get involved with how people relate to each other in the privacy of their own homes, especially when couples are not facing any particular difficulties in their relationships. Nonetheless, government interest in this most private domain has been expanding over the past few decades.

This book examines the role that governments play in managing policy challenges in response to social changes in marriage. It analyses some of the marriage education policies that attempt to foster lasting and satisfying marriages, especially a broad range of programs and marriage and relationship support services. The new governmental measures seem to stand against and resist the romantic tide, reminding those citizens who will listen that ‘all you need is love’ is just a love song; that a healthy and happy marriage needs much more. In attempting to address social changes such as increased cohabitation, divorce and out-of-wedlock births, the three governments under study have

adopted quite different approaches although they all wish to avoid being seen as 'interfering' in private matters. The US government is particularly anxious about the wider context of changing social relations, but wants to introduce support for one family form that has been absent from government policy: marriage. The intent is to add a new service – marriage education – to the myriad of social services already being offered. In contrast, the key objective for the UK government is to assist in developing positive outcomes for children and families. For Australia, the main goal is to strengthen families at different times in the relationship cycle, from pre-marriage to post-divorce.

Within these three nations, many relationships have become more equal and fluid, and based on individual needs. Given this context, it seems to make common sense that relationships should be robust, whether they are founded on marriage or not. With this in mind, it is worthwhile to note at the outset that some programs refer specifically to marriage education, though for other programs, the more appropriate term is 'marriage and relationship education'. Thus the book covers the various types of education, ranging from marriage preparation, support during marriage and helping people to stay married. Other programs may have less emphasis on marriage *per se* and more emphasis on developing the knowledge and skills needed for a successful relationship. In any case, marriage education is conducted in group settings making it distinct from face-to-face individualized counselling and therapy which focuses specifically on marriages in difficulty. This approach is based on a diagnosis and treatment by a therapist or counsellor, while marriage and relationship education is not.

The book considers whether governments in the UK, the US and Australia can or should intervene in the area of marriage and relationship support. To various degrees, these governments are facilitating and funding programs because they deem it necessary to protect and preserve the family. Politicians are not only attempting to restore and acknowledge the social and economic benefits of stable families for society, but are also attempting to instil the values of personal responsibility for individuals. This illustrates the close connections between the public and the private. Accordingly, the book examines the challenges that governments face in their attempts to deal with issues relating to marriage in both the public and the private spheres. The public sphere encompasses institutional features such as social norms, as well as legal and economic regulations, while the private domain refers to the area where individuals make intimate decisions and choices. Historically, the divide between overtly public institutions and the

domestic sphere of the family meant that there have been many areas of civil society where governments could not intrude. The public nature of the wedding ceremony, the legal contract and social customs surrounding marriage, however, indicate that marriage is not a completely private arrangement between two individuals. Over the years, governments have developed many public policies that have favoured married couples, by providing a number of special entitlements, rights and duties in relation to matters such as tax, welfare, inheritance and caring for children. These measures interact with other policy areas such as immigration, citizenship and social security. What is different and interesting about the recent policy agenda is the growth of policies which specifically assist training for marriage.

Governments are concerned with four main indicators which influence the family: marriage; divorce; out-of-wedlock births and cohabitation. Many politicians and policy makers are anxious about the changing patterns of intimacy in relationships. Over the long term, first marriage rates are declining, while age at first marriage is higher for both men and women. Birth rates have plummeted, while cohabitation rates and out-of-wedlock births have risen. There is political uneasiness about the high divorce rates and the effects of single parenthood. Governments are therefore seeking appropriate policy responses to these trends. The perceived solution to the 'marriage crisis' is to protect the traditional family unit: married heterosexual parents with children. This idea is especially prevalent in the US, where the federal government has developed strategies specifically designed to create 'healthy' marriages by offering early intervention and prevention activities, with the intention of providing people with the tools to bolster and sustain their relationships and to prevent difficulties from expanding into unresolvable problems. There is milder support in Australia for these programs, while the focus in the UK appears centred more on the well-being of children, with no spotlight on strengthening marriage.

The book compares government policies, categorizing the range of available programs in the three case studies. By facilitating access to education and support services, governments are encouraging partners to safeguard their marriages and avoid relationship distress which has detrimental effects not only for the individual but also for families and communities. The political message is that couples have to rescue themselves from the potential of poor relationship behaviour and can do so by participating in government-funded programs. Although public efforts to strengthen marriage have the potential of considerably influencing the future development of family policy, the expansion of relationship

education and support services has been quite contentious. Governments are experiencing pressure from conservatives who argue for the defence of heterosexual marriage. In addition, some progressives argue that marriage is a public health issue and that two-parent married families fare best, financially and emotionally, as do their children. Alternatively, libertarians see government attempts as intrusive meddling in people's most intimate relationships, while feminists argue that the policies will do little to improve the lot of women and children.

Aims of the book

Government intervention in family life is not new. Books on family policy and comparative family policies have been written before. But none of these has dealt with a critical, core component of family life – marriage and the relationship between couples. This is because couples and marriage education is a brand new field for public policy. This is the first book to identify and describe these developments from a political perspective. This book does not assume that conditions in any of the three case studies under investigation are necessarily applicable to any of the others. Despite the evidence of a divorce revolution worldwide among wealthier nations, it is unlikely that policy proposals of different countries can realistically be transferred to others. Nevertheless, it is timely to examine policy developments and it is possible to glean some nuanced understanding of the different policy approaches. In any case, the goal here is to compare and contrast government policies concerning marriage education and to provide answers to the following questions:

- Should governments facilitate people's preparation for successful and stable marriage?
- What difficulties and problems do governments face in attempting to support marriage programs?
- Who advocates and who opposes government policies in marriage and relationship support?
- How do governments manage this complex area, made more complicated by the disparate demands from various lobbyists and community groups?
- How do factors such as class, race, religion and people's romantic expectations influence the goal of promoting marriage?

My argument is that governments in the UK, Australia and the US confront many challenges in seeking to implement policies that

encourage couples to participate in relationship and marriage education services. This book considers the similarities and the differences in the development of marriage education policies across the three countries. Governments adopt practical strategies that are concerned not only with financial costs but they also draw on particular beliefs and values about the place of marriage in society.

It is important to do research that goes beyond national borders to compare trends and policies. Accordingly, the book uses a comparative approach with two dimensions. The first is a historical one, comparing policies over time. The research on each country begins with a chronological overview, commencing from the late 1940s, and then providing a more detailed analysis of the 2000s. The second dimension is cross-national. The three case studies demonstrate many contextual similarities; for example, they are liberal democracies with similar political systems and cultures, facilitating close comparisons. In the UK, the US and Australia, governments have by and large embraced neo-liberal principles, stressing the values of freedom, the market and small government. Protecting the rights of the individual is imperative as citizens are recognized as the source from which society derives its moral standing. Liberal democratic governments see their role as establishing a framework in which a free society can thrive, while simultaneously championing a decrease in the role of government. This reinforces the notion that the individual should be self-sufficient, taking personal responsibility for his or her actions. Although primacy is given to individual choice, these governments also promote ideals of social harmony within the family.

Notwithstanding neo-liberal commitments, personal matters such as relationships are not beyond the scope of government intervention. The US and Australia have a federal system and have conservative governments: President George W. Bush has led the US federal administration since 2000, while John Howard has been the Australian Prime Minister since 1996.¹ In a paradoxical division between the public and the private, encouraging independence and individual freedom makes it difficult for governments to be part of the solution to personal problems, even at a distance. Yet this is precisely what they are attempting to do, because marriage education policies focus on individual characteristics such as values, behaviour, relationship skills and preparation. Despite the many similarities, the main difference between the three countries when comparing marriage education policies concerns political partisanship. In Britain where Tony Blair's – and Gordon Brown's – Labour government has governed since 1997, public funding

of marriage education is now virtually non-existent and strengthening marriage is no longer viewed as an important policy objective.

Governments are developing policy measures for three main reasons to do with economics, health and morality. First, they intervene for economic reasons. Governments understand and articulate the problem of marital instability in terms of the high financial, legal and social costs of divorce, not only for the public purse but also for society as a whole. Closer facilitation of strengthening heterosexual relations is designed to reduce the high rates of divorce. For example, in Australia, the approximate expense of marriage and family separation is more than \$3 billion per annum (House of Representatives Standing Committee, 1998, p. 51). The amount doubles with indirect costs, in addition to the personal and emotional suffering for parents and children. In America, more recent calculations estimate that the direct and indirect costs of divorce are \$33.3 billion annually (Schramm, 2006, p. 133). The cost of separation and divorce for the public purse and society is much higher than the cost of early intervention and prevention programs.

Second, the social health argument provides governments with what they consider a legitimate rationale for privileging marriage in their policies. Research shows that good marriage contributes to good health not only for the adult couple but also for children. As a social good, therefore, it is in the public interest to keep couples together (Wood et al., 2007). By encouraging those getting married to undertake prevention focused programs, designed to assist in learning the skills needed for lifelong and successful marriages, governments intend to serve the health interests of the community.

Third, governments are intervening for moral reasons – to uphold traditional family values – particularly in the US and Australia. Encouraging and supporting marriage is an important variant of government intervention, because it is a mechanism for regulating morality. In response to panic about the ‘marriage crisis’, governments are promoting marriage in an attempt to assert universal moral standards and improve family life. They perceive marriage as a rock of stability while also endeavouring to define marital obligations and boundaries. The US government in particular seeks to enhance self-reliance and personal responsibility via marriage, while in the UK and Australia, there is more recognition of different forms of parenting and partnering that exist outside marriage as modern lifestyle choices. Furthermore, in the UK, gays and lesbians have similar rights and obligations to those of

married couples after the passing of the Civil Partnership Act in 2004. Nevertheless, civil partnerships and marriage are not recognized as the same thing: marriage remains exclusively the preserve of heterosexual couples. At the federal level in the US and Australia, however, same-sex marriages are strongly opposed – marriage is defined as a union ‘between a man and a woman’.

Marriage education policy has been available for decades, but it has waxed and waned as a policy issue receiving different degrees of attention at different times. While every policy development is distinctive with its own sets of characteristics, supporting healthy marriages is now on the policy agenda, particularly in the US. In 2002, President George W. Bush announced a \$US1.5 billion plan to promote marriage and the federal government now provides more than \$100 million per annum – over five years – for marriage support and related programs. The Blair government spent £5 million on marriage support in 2002–2003, but direct funding no longer exists. In contrast, the Howard government spent approximately \$AUS 4 million annually in the early 2000s on similar programs, although this has recently increased quite substantially as part of a broader package. These figures suggest that governments are becoming involved in marriage services, albeit to varying degrees. In spite of the diversity of responses the policies represent certain powerful themes recur and dominate.

Book overview

The central purpose of this book is to investigate the role of governments in attempting to strengthen marriage and relationships and the challenges they face. Accordingly, marriage is discussed in the first two chapters. Chapter 1 examines the problem of marriage and the changing trends in marriage and divorce. The chapter establishes the wider framework for the book’s discussion by setting out the debates concerning the changes to marriage. Some of the literature argues that marriage is in decline, while other literature argues that marriage is resilient. It is important to explain the different perspectives because governments need to manage these divergences. The chapter also describes the various marriage and relationship education programs which are – broadly speaking – available in the three countries.

Chapter 2 traces the tensions between the roles of marriage in the public and the personal spheres in a context of social change. The chapter highlights challenging matters for governments and society about

how marriage is changing. Marriage remains a key social institution, but in the modern world, individualism and choice have become paramount. The second chapter examines many factors that create tensions – marriage entails not only certain obligations and duties but is also about meeting individual needs and making people happy. It traces some of the major transformations such as the shifting relevance of religion and the increasing importance of love and romance. It also investigates feminist critiques which suggest that the institution of marriage oppresses women. Some feminists argue that it should be abolished, while others argue that this is unnecessary because although marriage has problems, it can be reformed. The chapter also discusses debates about same-sex marriage. Supporters of same-sex marriage claim that marriage is a fundamental human right that should not discriminate on the basis of gender. Exploring these different viewpoints and understandings of marriage provides a clear map of the complexities of modern relationships and issues which governments are expected to address, whether directly or indirectly.

Chapter 3 begins the empirical study of the three countries by examining the UK where the government has pursued a low profile effort to strengthen marriage. The chapter's historical overview traces the development of marriage and relationship support in its discussion of various government reports and policy recommendations. The chapter argues that since 1997, the Labour government has not implemented consistent marriage education policies, although there was a push for increasing programs in the early 2000s. An Advisory Group on Marriage and Relationship Support (AGMARS) delivered a report in 2002 recommending that the government should play an active role in leading policies to deliver services. Consequently, marriage and relationship support organizations received increased core funding, but this did not prevail for long. Since 2003, there has been a clear policy shift focusing on the well being of children rather than married couples. Other strategies have included attempts to reform divorce laws, increase support for lone parents and examine legal protection for cohabiting couples. A particular focal point, however, is improving the lot of children.

Chapter 3 also considers various criticisms of government strategies, illustrating that marriage education, while currently off the political agenda, is a contested terrain. Some groups are criticizing the government for not supporting marriage much more explicitly. The Tory Party has published a report and recommendations arguing that the government is neglecting marriage support at the expense of robust families

and that its primary focus on children and young people is misplaced (see Social Justice Policy Group, 2006, 2007).

Chapter 4 provides details of the Australian example. It argues that in Australia, marriage education does not receive a great deal of public attention and is not a particularly controversial policy. This may be due to the long term evolution of marriage support that has been embedded in legislation such as the 1960 *Marriage Act* and the 1975 *Family Law Act*. The federal government has gradually increased its spending on marriage education policies and support since the 1960s, broadening the definition to 'marriage and relationship' education programs by the 1990s and providing millions of dollars annually to approved community-based organizations. The federal government has recently been more concerned with what happens when marriages break down than with preparing people for marriage. In response to tackling issues such as shared parenting, child support and the role of the Family Court, the government has established Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) with the objective of smoothing the process of mediation when couples are separating and going through divorce. The FRCs also offer marriage and relationship education and support.

Chapter 5 examines the US government and its marriage education policies. While historically, both the UK and Australia have considered marriage education policies – albeit to varying degrees – for decades, the US has only recently become involved in this area. The chapter argues that it is here that marriage programs are now the most advanced in terms of political support. Before the 1990s, US government policy makers did little to push policies strengthening marriage; indeed, for many years the US federal government considered marriage as private and 'off limits' to government policy. They became concerned with strengthening marriage and reducing illegitimate births, viewing this as a main cause of welfare dependency as well as other economic and social problems. In 1996, Congress passed the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act* (PRWORA). The accompanying welfare reform package provided Temporary Assistance For Needy Families (TANF) programs, including support for marriage. Low-income, unmarried families have been increasingly noticed by policy makers and are being targeted by the government. The clear message of the government's Healthy Marriage Initiative is that healthy marriage benefits women, men and children as well as the community at large.

Much lobbying from various community groups and think tanks, service providers and scholars has assisted in the push for marriage. Chapter 5 discusses the marriage movement – which is much more

vibrant in the US than in the UK or Australia – playing quite a critical role in placing marriage on the policy agenda. The chapter offers examples of available programs. It also canvasses the critiques offered by feminist organizations and social justice advocates who argue there is too much focus on pro-marriage policies at the expense of other public services that would assist in alleviating poverty, and provide better access to services such as child care and health care. In their study of the transformation of marriage in the US, Amato et al. (2007) argue that strengthening healthy marriages has become a central focus of social policy which remains highly controversial (2007, p. 35). Nevertheless, from the government's perspective, it is hoped that opposition will weaken as more people become comfortable with and understand what marriage education involves.

Chapter 6 begins analysing the challenges for governments in supporting marriage education programs by considering the traction that various factors have had on marriage. It examines variables that primarily affect the private sphere such as religion, romance, class and race which inspire people's decision to marry or not to marry, to cohabit or not to cohabit (and perhaps to divorce or not to divorce). These issues lead to different outcomes – for example, the US population is overall much more religious and therefore respectful of marriage than the citizenry of the other two countries. The problem for governments is that matters such as religious values or romantic love lie beyond the scope of political influence, not simply because they fall on the private side of the public-private divide, but because governments can do little to regulate personal aspirations or expectations, except try to prepare couples for marriage and offer them the skills and information to sustain their relationships and avoid relationship breakdown.

Chapter 7 examines additional challenges for governments which are linked to the policy process. It endeavours to understand how effectively governments can facilitate success in personal relationships and with what results. Policy makers have not sufficiently linked marriage education policies to other initiatives as part of a 'whole-of-government' approach. This includes dealing with structural issues that underlie social problems such as poverty, poor health and child care services and unemployment. These public measures have not been included as part of a wider package of marriage policies. Another contentious issue is balancing work and family which could not only improve people's economic security, but their well being. These are pressing concerns which must be confronted effectively before marriage education policies can have significant impact in many sections of society. The chapter also

develops more nuanced insights about policy capacity concerning marriage education. Finally, the chapter examines evaluation which is a critical part of the policy cycle and is crucial in uncovering whether the programs do contribute to preventing relationship difficulties and creating healthy stable relationships. One of the main differences between the three case studies is evident here: the US government is funding the facilitation and ongoing conduct of research and evaluation, but there is a lack of evaluation in the UK and Australia.

The conclusion provides some final comments about the question of whether governments should become involved in marriage education and how they should do so. It briefly revisits love, marriage and the role of government policies. Ultimately, there is only so much that governments can do. Marriage education can teach skills and provide information about how to develop rational steps to strengthen relationships. However, people develop complex relationships based on a range of rational and irrational factors. If commitment is missing or sexual attraction fades, couples may not remain together. This fundamental point about couple dynamics along with the myriad challenges that this book discusses may help to explain and provide some understanding about why governments have been slow to enter the realm of marriage education.

Part I

Changing Perceptions of Marriage

1

The Problem of Marriage

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

Recent relationship trends in the UK, Australia and the US

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