Is the myth of the nuclear family dead?

If we know something reassuringly well, perhaps even intimately or personally, we use an expression derived from the word family—we say we are ‘familiar’ with it. Of course this usage presumes that we know our family intimately. Because we ‘know’ our own families, by extension we relate to all families—or, as it is often called, the family. The family is an idea that has been used in fiction writing, in song, and in film and television. Some central themes of popular culture revolve around family issues. Seen in this way the genre of romance (girl meets boy), for example, deals with family formation. Soap operas manipulate kinship relations—rarely with much subtlety—to wring new twists out of ever-familiar plots. Commodities are presented as ‘family packs’. The association between ‘family’ and ‘family household’—or ‘home’ as it’s usually known—is the foundation of many an advertiser’s and politician’s appeal. ‘Home’ implies security, cordiality and compassion. There is even a television genre called ‘family sitcom’, most of which is highly conventional. This in turn has given rise to a counter-product—TV programs such as Roseanne, The Simpsons, and Married with Children. Much of their humour is derived from the unexpected transgression of some of these familiar associations. Such events cannot be funny unless the viewer knows what should happen. Humour is a socially acceptable method of saying what otherwise cannot
be said: that is why we laugh. The existence of this genre of anti-family sitcoms is, in its own way, a testimony to the normative power of the familiar. At the same time they point the way to a deeper understanding of the family.¹

**Not everything is what it seems**

By contrast, there is something uncomfortable, even shocking, in reading reports that betray the fact that not all families are as they should be. The divorce rate causes great alarm to many. Criminologists tell us that more people are murdered by close relatives than by strangers (as we discuss later in the next chapter). Recent campaigns against child sexual abuse and domestic violence confirm that the danger lurks within our own homes more than outside. These are events that even *Roseanne* or *The Simpsons* rarely broach. At the same time, these events call forth the intervention of health professionals—specialists in sickness and in breakdowns. Victims and perpetrators alike are offered counselling, therapy. In other words, the events are unambiguously treated as not normal, a disturbance of the regular and healthy state of affairs, beyond what can be morally tolerated by society. In short, such events have been treated as *pathological*. Sociologists since Durkheim have been aware of the social significance of the punishment of transgression as a symbolic way of representing the boundaries of what society will accept as morally ‘normal’. In this way the army of experts and professional practitioners are unleashed at the site of these ‘transgressions’ to do the necessary repair work for the maintenance of ‘the normal’.

The central idea of this book is that the family has been a difficult institution for sociologists to study precisely because these regulating ideas about ‘the family’ have been so poorly understood. We will seek to introduce the idea of the double life of the family—normative and actual. We argue that family organisation occurs on, at least, two levels—a behavioural level and normative level. Through tracing the circumstances in which the normative family becomes visible—its forms of appearance—we will try to demonstrate that the normative family exists as a social fact. In so doing we hope to elucidate something of the character of these beliefs and the features of an individual’s attachment to them. It is more than possible
that the normative and behavioural can diverge, for if there was no divergence, societies would not need any police or criminal courts. Indeed, one could say, along with Durkheim, that historical and cross-national variation in Western societies is simply a product of the degree of divergence between the normative and the behavioural (Durkheim 1933; 1938).

In subsequent chapters we will explore the dynamics of tension between people’s actual family relations and the normative family, tensions that hold implications for policy-makers and those with an interest in social change. This book is in large measure dedicated to the idea that the normative family—a set of historically and socially produced expectations, values, desires and yearnings—cannot be ignored. The normative family has played a central part in our culture and society, and may even have considerable influence on the electoral appeal of political parties.

**Opposition between myth and reality**

Sociologists have approached the normative family chiefly as a popular misconception to be dispelled by confrontation with the facts. It has been commonplace, for the last couple of decades, for sociologists to debunk the ‘myth of the nuclear family’. Unfortunately, most of their energy has been expended on trying to prove that not all family households are nuclear family households. Little effort has been put into treating the myth of the nuclear family seriously as myth.

There is a characteristic response to this: the broadsheet press and sociologists combine to give the kind of lecture on the family that any undergraduate in the last twenty years is likely to have encountered. This takes the form of debunking the myth of the universal nuclear family. It starts by making some rather imprecise reference to the nuclear family, which is (implicitly) variously defined as anything from a husband and wife with dependent children to the somewhat narrower category of units composed of breadwinning father, non-employed housewife/mother and the standard two children. The lecture then goes on to describe how only a minority of households conform to this definition of the nuclear family, and the newspapers sermonise about being misled by nostalgia for times past.
The main point to be made here is not simply that this unmasking is careless with facts but that it also fails as sociology. If the idea of the ‘myth of the nuclear family’ were anything more than a convenient peg on which to hang a variety of otherwise disparate ‘demographic facts’—if in other words it was taken seriously as myth—this would represent a substantial advance. In our view, what requires explanation is why politicians and their pollsters in the back room should imagine they can attract loyalty on the basis of an appeal to an allegedly obsolete social form. How, a sociologist might ask, is it possible to promulgate this ‘myth of the nuclear family’ when so few have any practical attachment to a nuclear family? Further, sociologists might inquire what the consequences of an attachment to this myth might be.

We will look first, then, at the main demographic patterns in the Australian population, before exploring the numerous forms of appearance of the normative family.

The spurious ‘myth’ of the disappearing nuclear family—statistics misrepresented

In the great exertion to prove the uncharacteristic nature of the nuclear family today, the standard approach fails to ask if this narrowly defined ‘nuclear family’ ever comprised a majority of households. It misses the important demographic changes it was devised to organise. The June 1994 Labour Force Survey\(^2\) (ABS 1994a) estimated that there were approximately 4.7 million families in Australia, of which 85 per cent were ‘couple families\(^3\) and 49 per cent couple families with dependants present. While there is some formal truth to the proposition that in the survey ‘nuclear families’—consisting of Mum, Dad and the kids—were a minority of households (49 per cent), this does not mean that institutions of marriage and family are necessarily in decline. The statistical illusion of decline is in large part created by examining only cross-sectional data, that is, data collected at one point in time.

It can be very misleading to examine household types at one point in time because family households change. They pass through a series of transitions as children leave home, start new households, have children, divorce, age and ultimately die. This means that households which are not currently
‘nuclear family households’, may have been nuclear family households in the past or, in other cases, may be about to become nuclear family households in the near future. While slightly less than half the ‘couple families’ have officially at least one dependent child, the remaining 51 per cent of ‘couple families’ fall into two broad groups: (1) a larger group—those who no longer have dependent children; and (2) a smaller group of those who have never had children. Among this second ‘childless’ group, it is estimated, approximately 20 per cent will remain childless and the remainder are transitional families on their way to becoming nuclear families (McDonald 1995, p. 44).

**Why the numerical decline of the nuclear family**

In the following few pages we shall argue that the apparent decline in the proportion of ‘nuclear family’ households in Australia is the result of increasing longevity and changes in fertility, not because the nuclear family form has become unpopular. The demographer Peter McDonald has pointed out that between the 1981 census and 1991 (the most recent census at the time of writing), the proportion of ‘households consisting of one or two persons increased from 47.2 per cent to 52.9 per cent’. This movement towards smaller households has been going on for ‘over a century’ and ‘will continue into the future’ (McDonald 1995, p. 23). There are three reasons for this. The first is to do with the historical pattern of fertility in Australia. The second and most important reason is the ageing of the population and the third is a combination of rising divorce rates and an increased proportion of people who will never marry.

**Historical patterns of fertility: the baby boom**

In the years following World War II, Australia experienced an unusual episode in its demographic history, commonly known as the ‘baby boom’. The baby boom interrupted a long-term trend of fertility decline. Demographers use the measure ‘total fertility rate’ to estimate the number of children women will have borne by the time they complete their child-bearing. Between 1861 and 1865, each woman in Australia was, on average, likely to give birth to six children over the course of
her reproductive life. By 1935 total fertility rate had fallen to a fraction over two children for each Australian woman. However, between 1945 and the early 1970s, the baby boom temporarily reversed this trend in Australia, and the total fertility rate hovered around three children for each woman, peaking in 1961 when the rate was 3.55.

The baby boom was associated with a unique combination of (1) an increasing rate of marriage, (2) a pattern of earlier marriage, and (3) low rates of childlessness. The baby boom, it has been widely argued, was accompanied by an extraordinary ‘marriage boom’ (National Population Inquiry 1975). A good indication of the universality of marriage is given by the proportion of women who never marry. The pattern prevailing for women born in the last half of the nineteenth century was that 14 to 17 per cent would never marry. The proportion of women born after 1950 who never marry is returning to these high levels characteristic of last century and is predicted to exceed them. Among women who were the mothers of the baby boomers (women born between 1920 and 1950) it is estimated that only 4 to 6 per cent never married (McDonald 1995, p. 33). While during most other periods of Australian history less than seventeen women out of every twenty would marry, in the period that gave rise to the baby boom, nineteen out of every twenty women married.

Not only was the rate of marriage exceptionally high during the baby boom but the age at marriage was extraordinarily low. In the years leading up to the baby boom about 30 per cent of women aged 20–24 years were married. Towards the end of the baby boom era (1971) this had risen to 64 per cent, while currently less than 20 per cent of women aged 20–24 are married. A similar trend is evident among men (McDonald 1995, pp. 33–4).

The third characteristic associated with the baby boom was low rates of childlessness. During the baby boom the rate of childlessness was less than half that of earlier generations and this rate was ‘only marginally above the expected rate of childlessness due to physiological reasons alone’ (McDonald 1995, p. 43).

From the mid-1970s Australia has experienced an equally spectacular but far less publicised ‘baby bust’ (Hugo 1992, p. 15). By 1976 the total fertility rate had fallen below the
replacement level. The estimated number of births has remained below two per woman through the 1980s and early 1990s (Hugo 1992, pp. 8–9). Since 1971 a pattern of postponed birth has become evident, and ‘the percentage of first births occurring to married women aged 30 and over rose from 7.6 per cent to 31.1 per cent’ (McDonald 1995, p. 46). In 1971 one in four Australian women became a mother before her twentieth birthday, whereas the current figure is closer to one in ten (McDonald 1995, p. 47).

### Longevity and the effects of an ageing population

A baby boom followed by a baby bust has produced a bulge in the age pyramid. The grey shaded area between the age of 34 and 49 years in Figure 1.1 shows how this ‘middle-aged’ bulge has appeared over the last two decades. In 1911 the age pyramid of the Australian population was very broad in the base and low in height, reflecting a high birthrate and much shorter life expectancy. Since that time the base of the pyramid has narrowed, so that at some ages the total population has actually shrunk in the last twenty years, while life expectancy has risen markedly. Since the fertility among those born in the baby boom is lower than that of their parents, and is expected to be lower still among their offspring, this bulge will become more pronounced. At the other end of the life course there have been remarkable increases in life expectancies in Australia. Male children born in the 1990s can expect to live for an average of 74 years and females can reasonably expect to live to 80 years of age. This is eight to ten years longer than their counterparts born in 1947, and a staggering nineteen to twenty years longer than those born at the beginning of the twentieth century (Hugo 1992, pp. 75, 86). This historical trend towards greater life expectancy is elongating the age pyramid. It is expected that between 1991 and 2011 the population over 65 years of age will grow at twice the rate of the population overall (McDonald 1995, p. 59). The age ‘pyramid’ has begun to resemble a pear or molten Coca-Cola bottle. And this baby boomer bulge can be expected to move up the pyramid in the coming decades.

The oldest of the baby boomers are now at the age when their children are leaving home. A large number are without
official dependants because their children are over fifteen and not at high school or in tertiary educational institutions. These changes are producing a disproportionate increase in the number of two-person, ‘empty nest’ households. The post-war
The baby boom has led to an end-of-the-millennium ‘empty nest’ boom. The overwhelming number of these households were once ‘nuclear family’ households and cannot reasonably be produced as evidence that the nuclear family has been rejected by Australians.

**Rising divorce rates and increased proportion of people who will never marry**

There is no denying the growth of single-parent families, whose absolute numbers have more than doubled since 1976. By June 1994 it was estimated that there were 627,300 one-parent families, representing 13.2 per cent of all family households in Australia. Eighty-four per cent of these were lone-mother families. In the mid-1990s approximately one out of every eight children aged 0–14 lived in a single-parent family (ABS 1994a). Over one-quarter of Australian children will spend at least part of their childhood in a single-parent family (Hugo 1992, p. 30). However this should be balanced by a recognition that the bulk of Australians will spend their childhood living with both parents. Peter McDonald, using data from Western Australia in 1986, has calculated the proportion of children still living with both their natural parents. The results are shown in Table 1.1

Concern about single-parent households arises from two sources: (1) an anxiety about the moral disintegration of contemporary society; and (2) the rising cost of government benefits paid to this group. Worry about the cost of sole parents is related to the disproportionate number of sole-parent families living below the poverty line and the consequent demand for welfare services (Saunders & Matheson 1991, p. 21). Anxiety about the family and moral disintegration is almost as old as sociology itself. Durkheim (1952), in his

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<th>Age of child</th>
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<td>1 year</td>
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<td>6 years</td>
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<td>12 years</td>
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*Source: McDonald, 1995*
1897 discussion of suicide, suggested that family membership was a bulwark against the kind of suicide that resulted from normlessness. Subsequent research has questioned whether families are equally beneficial for women (Bernard 1976, p. 43), but many thinkers continue to view divorce as a threat to social order.

Rates of divorce in Australia rose steadily from a low base at the beginning of this century until the introduction of the 1976 Family Law Act. In 1921–25, there were 2.7 divorces per 10 000 of the population. By 1960, the rate had risen to 6.9. Before the introduction of the new Act in 1974 the rate had reached 13. After the new legislation, the divorce rate rocketed to 45.5 in 1976 (when a backlog of people waiting for the new legislation was processed), and by 1991 had settled back to 26 per 10 000 (James 1979, p. 205; Joint Select Committee 1980, p. 45; ABS 1991). If current rates of divorce apply over the next 30 years, it is estimated that one in three marriages will end in divorce (McDonald 1995, p. 53).

Interpreting this apparent epidemic of divorce is less than straightforward. Firstly, before the law changed and when official divorce rates were low, there was widespread reporting of men deserting their wives (Roe 1987). However, as Pixley points out, ‘desertion figures are difficult to assess partly because of enforced absences due to work or lack of work, and gold lust frequently extended for years’ (1991, p. 300). The Western Australian census of 1901 found that 28 per cent of men were living away from their wives (Burns 1983, p. 51).

Secondly, few marriages at the beginning of this century would have survived 30 years without enforced separation due to the death of a partner. This implies that much of the apparent rise in divorce is a by-product of longer life expectancy. Peter McDonald has calculated that 100 years ago the percentage of couples still together after 30 years (taking into account both widowhood and separation) would therefore be about 46 per cent. The proportion of ‘today’s couples who can expect to be still together after 30 years is 53 per cent’ (McDonald 1995, pp. 52–3).

Thirdly, high divorce rates, rather than symbolising a modern decay of marriage, may actually be the outcome of an increased value placed on marriage. Contemporary expectations of marriage are high. Mate selection on the basis of
romantic love, as distinct from economically advantageous unions, places great emphasis on companionship and is far less tolerant of physical cruelty, neglect and lack of financial support (O’Brien 1988). It could be argued that the expectation of such complete companionship promotes high levels of dissatisfaction with anything less, and a search for the perfect partner (see for example, McDonald 1989, pp. 103–4). Support for this argument comes from the high rates of remarriage after divorce. As Hugo points out: ‘in 1982 some 30 percent of Australia’s 117,275 marriages involved at least one divorced person, and in 10 per cent of cases both participants had been divorced’ (1992, p. 44). In 1992 an estimated 202,900 families contained at least one stepchild, of which 43 per cent lived in blended families (ABS 1993a, pp. 4–5, 9). The moral panic surrounding divorce cannot alter the fact that the overwhelming majority of households with dependent children (82 per cent) are currently two-parent family households (ABS 1994a, p. 1).

Growth of de facto marriages over the last decade (Brachter & Santow 1988, pp. 9–10; Khoo & McDonald 1988) has been accompanied by official moves to treat them as legal marriages for such purposes as occupational benefits and official statistics. About 8 per cent of couple families in Australia are de facto relationships. De facto couples are more likely to be young; 69 per cent are less than 35 years of age. One-quarter of the persons living in de facto relationships had been divorced. Over the last two decades the proportion of couples living in de facto relationships before beginning a marriage has risen steeply from 15 per cent in 1975 to almost 60 per cent in 1991. Only about one in three de facto couples has children present, compared with one in two married couples. De facto couples with children are fairly evenly divided between step and blended families, and children living with their natural parents (ABS 1993a, pp. 4–5, 9). Summarising the statistics on de facto relationships, Peter McDonald comments that, ‘while other forms of relationship are becoming more common and are more socially acceptable, couple relationships in Australia are still dominated by marriage (1995, p. 32).

Homosexual culture in Australia in the last decade has gained a high profile, with the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras
through the streets of inner Sydney becoming a tourist destination and a national television event. It has been noted that homosexual unions may also follow a path of ‘normalisation’, in order that they may be officially accepted as the equivalent of the married couple. This development is, however, by no means certain (Gilding 1991, p. 131). There have been wildly divergent claims made about the number of homosexual unions in Australia. Until the 1996 census, the findings of which were not available at the time of writing, the Australian Bureau of Statistics treated gay and lesbian couples as cohabiting strangers. In the 1991 census only 5 per cent of all households were households officially classified as households containing unrelated individuals—so-called group households. This suggests that the number of cohabiting homosexuals is relatively low. It does not tell us anything about the number of gay and lesbian people who do not cohabit, nor the relative change in the number of people who prefer this lifestyle. Group households are predominantly two-person households and their members are likely to be young (76 per cent under 35 years of age) (McDonald 1995, p. 20).

Nor has the arrival of ‘multiculturalism’ altered the numerical dominance of the nuclear family household. Contrary to popular opinion, on average only 1 per cent of families where the reference person (a gender-neutral replacement for ‘household head’) was born overseas are multi-family households. The proportion is higher within some communities and lower in others. While immigrants from Indo-China and Turkey are ten times more likely than the Australian-born to live in multi-family households, the proportion of people in these communities who do so is never greater than 6 per cent. Nine out of ten immigrants from Southern Europe, the Middle East and Indo-China live in families (per se), compared with three out of four amongst Australian-born households. Eighty-eight per cent of migrant families are couple families (Bureau of Immigration and Population Research 1994, pp. 1–8).

In June 1994, only 16 per cent of Australians (an estimated 2,159,800 people) aged fifteen years or over and living in private dwellings did not live in a family household. Among this group, the clear majority (62 per cent) live alone (ABS 1994a, p. 6). The proportion of one-person households has almost doubled over the last 30 years and is even tipped by
some to continue its rapid expansion (Ironmonger & Lloyd 1990). While rising divorce rates and a lower rate of marriage have contributed to the growth of one-person households, the most important factor behind the growth of these households has been the ageing of the population. According to McDonald, ‘in June 1992, 56 per cent of all people living alone were aged 55 years or older’ and ‘reflecting the earlier death of men compared with women, 70 per cent of these older people living alone were women’ (McDonald 1995, p. 19).

The double life—the social efficacy of myth

Summarising these observations, what is often passed off as the ‘decline of the nuclear family’ is not what it seems. When those who believe in the disappearing nuclear family list the causes of the supposed decline, they cite declining marriage, rising divorce, the growth in numbers of single parents and the spread of gay and lesbian lifestyles. But when they require numbers to give weight to their arguments, they rely on figures relating to parents in empty nests and widows: the consequences of processes such as falling family size and ageing of the population. A careful examination of population statistics shows that, despite the hand-wringing of some conservative commentators, most children are born and raised in two-parent households, and that the overwhelming majority of the population has some direct experience of living in a nuclear family. To paraphrase a famous saying of Mark Twain, reports of the ‘demise of the nuclear family’ are greatly exaggerated.

Of course, if you have something more specific in mind, a ‘traditional family’ (where the father is a full-time breadwinner and the mother a full-time housewife), the case for decline is far stronger, since roughly only one-third of all families with dependent children conform to this pattern (Edgar 1992, p. 42). But even this figure can mislead. The proportion of families with infant and pre-school children where the wife is a full-time carer is much closer to one-half (ABS 1994a, p. 11), while much of the paid work undertaken by mothers of small children is part-time. As Jallinoja points out, this is consistent with a set of community values that requires a full-time mother rather than a full-time housewife.
(Jallinoja 1989, pp. 107–9). Although this represents a distinct change from the ‘traditional’ family, it preserves many elements of this former pattern. In particular, the husband’s role is merely modified to that of chief provider rather than of sole provider, and women’s aspirations are still restricted to those compatible with full-time motherhood. In other words, the form taken by the increased female labour force participation is the one most compatible with the demands of the traditional family. Moreover, while there is significant and growing support for equality in domestic labour, there is little evidence of any reassignment of domestic tasks in practice. ‘Non-traditional’ men have not assumed responsibility for tasks which are not defined as traditionally male (Bittman 1990; Bittman 1991; Bittman & Lovejoy 1993). Sociologists and many socially progressive people may earnestly wish that the nuclear family was dead, but this not to say it is currently deceased.

More importantly, lamenting or celebrating the passing of an obsolete social form distracts attention from the more sociologically significant way in which the ‘myth of the nuclear family’ has enduring effects. It is an elemental tenet of sociological and anthropological analysis that the effects of myth have little to do with the truth of the matter. The ANZAC myth projects heroic achievement despite the fact that it celebrates a military defeat. The sociological tradition of the analysis of myth goes beyond the mere counterposing of myth and reality.

**Luhmann and the normative family**

A most important characteristic about the ‘myth of the nuclear family’ is that the belief in the desirability of the nuclear family does not perish when exposed to the cold light of contradictory evidence, as shown by the failure of gender equality to emerge in the realm of housework.

It is helpful to look at the work of Niklas Luhmann in this respect. Luhmann has distinguished between two types of expectations—cognitive and normative. Normative expectations are peculiar because, unlike cognitive expectations, they are not modified when they are contradicted by events (Luhmann 1979, p. xiv).
An example may help to clarify this distinction. Imagine a traveller who is waiting for a bus with the idea that the bus runs on the quarter hour. But at 4.15 p.m. the bus fails to arrive and instead it appears at 4.27 p.m. The next day the traveller needs to make the same journey and arrives at the bus stop just in time to meet the 4.27 p.m. bus. Our traveller's expectations about the bus timetable are an example of what Luhmann has called ‘cognitive expectations’ because they are modified when the traveller experiences clear evidence that these expectations are not factually correct.

The same traveller may believe that sexual relations between fathers and their offspring are forbidden but one day learns from his sister that their father sexually abused her as a child. Instead of modifying his expectations, perhaps taking a more benign view of incest or sexual abuse, the traveller develops a deep disgust for the father. In this case the expectations about incest are not modified in the face of factual evidence of its occurrence. This is an example of what Luhmann would call a ‘normative expectation’.

Beliefs about the desirability of the nuclear family are a bit like belief in the incest taboo. Even if, at any one point in time, it can be shown that only a minority of the population live in households consisting of mother, father and their children, single individuals are still considered ‘lonely’, and even if they are in the company of a variety of partners and friends, their parents continue to wonder when they ‘are going to settle down’. Similarly the evidence that the domestic division of labour is not an equal division, does not shake people’s belief in equal partnership or in the value of nuclear families. These normative expectations are, we argue, related to the mythical dimensions of ‘the family’. Chapter 2 continues this theme and discusses the significance of ‘the myth of the nuclear family’.