

CHAPTER 1

The work/life collision

This book is about the collision between work and care and its consequences for life in Australia – *beyond the workplace*. Most significantly it is about *the interactions between the spheres of paid work, gender relations, consumption, community and family*.

Household patterns in Australia are changing. A quarter are now single person households, and this has steadily risen over the last decade. The majority of Australian households are families, and in more and more of them, couples work while they have dependents at home. Changes occurring in workplaces have reduced the number of hours we have available to spend on our homes, communities and care. Activities that were once mostly the province of women at home – cooking and care of small children, for example – are increasingly provided by the market. In contrast, some forms of market work are now being done at home, or in new ways. Accompanying these shifts has been a steady decline in men's participation in market work, as women's participation has steadily risen. This long-term, secular shift in men's and women's market work rates has given rise to, and reflects, very significant social change.

However, all this change is not mirrored in compensating changes in the key cultures and institutions that shape behaviours at work, at home and in the market. Australian households reveal not only unchanging patterns of domestic and care work that remain largely the work of women, but also unrenovated models of motherhood and fatherhood, and workplaces that still have at their centre an 'ideal-worker' who is care-less.

Workplaces, and the other institutions that frame them like the law, the labour market, schools, preschools and the institutions of care, have changed all too little. The 'ideal worker' (with

a wife at home) now forms the minority of those participating in the Australian labour market at any particular point in time.

Care – care of ourselves, each other, our households, families and communities, and our quality of life, care in childhood, old age, sickness and death, and our efforts to live well and to reproduce – these are the casualties of the collision between the changing and the unchanging spheres.

A model of the Work/Life Collision: A map of this book

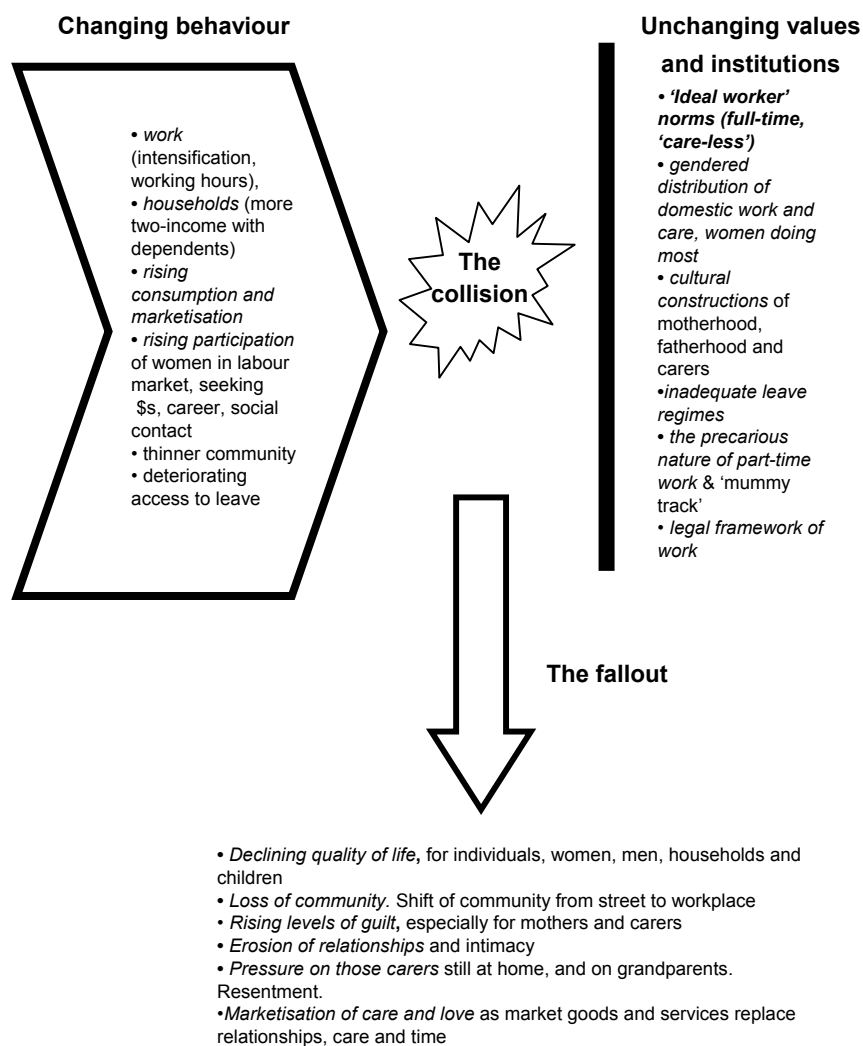
Figure 1.1 opposite provides a visual key to the argument presented in this book. It represents the collision of the Australian ‘Work/Care’ regime – a moving vehicle of change in work patterns and in family structures, meeting a solid wall of relatively unchanging labour market institutions, culture and practice.

Chapter 2 introduces a model of total labour, and of ‘Work/Care’ regimes, through which we can analyse work and care outcomes. The importance of transitions in increasingly dynamic labour markets is also discussed. The chapter maps significant social and labour market behaviours that are reshaping work, households, the gender composition (and, consequently, care-loads) of the labour market, and the market exchange of goods and services for earned income.

Chapter 3 considers the impact of these collisions and changes upon our community fabric. The location of community has increasingly shifted from the neighbourhood to the workplace, with important implications for carers at home, and for the overall health of our communities and neighbourhoods, social capital.

Chapter 4 discusses many of our cultural habits and embodied history. The ideas and practices of motherhood and fatherhood are just one part of this embodied historical and social apparatus. The cultural constructions of ‘proper mothers’, and ‘proper carers’ have not changed commensurate with change in their roles in paid work. Many still think of a good mother as an ever-available generous carer – exactly what the worker-mother finds

Figure 1.1 The Collision: A Model



it hardest to be. More than most, working mothers must elaborately plan and adapt, and they privately experience guilt. Mothers at home caring for their families are not immune: they are asked to pick up the care in their streets, they face pressures to become 'real workers', their identities are undermined by the greater role of paid work in constructing identities, and their streets are increasingly deserted of other carers, leaving them more isolated. The market is increasingly implicated in the processes and compromises of motherhood – as it undermines care on the one hand and substitutes for it on the other. Some working mothers attempt a straight symbolic trade, hoping that 'more stuff' – particularly for children – conveys 'more love'.

Chapter 5 discusses how the changes in work and households on the one hand, and the resistances to change in the distribution of housework and in cultural constructions like 'proper mothers' on the other, have effects well beyond workplaces and kitchens: they reach into the bedroom. They impose hidden costs on intimacy and love. The gendered mal-distribution of domestic work and care is persistent – entrenching a 'double-day' – and affects an increasing number of women. Women have turned to the market to get domestic work done, finding it easier to buy help than to change men's behaviour. Intimacy is crowded out by the pressures of paid work and the strain of navigating and negotiating workloads.

Chapter 6 considers the significant costs on the increasing number who work long hours and those they live among or work alongside, as the regulatory regime which controlled hours and effort, has eroded.

The failure of workplace and labour market institutions to keep up with the changing care loads of Australian workers is nowhere better reflected than in relation to part-time work, discussed in Chapter 7. Those who voluntarily work part-time seek paid jobs that sit more comfortably with their larger lives. However, many find themselves paying a big price for their adaptation. The Australian 'mummy track' of part-time work – with its poor job security and lower rate of benefits relative to

full-time work – has entrenched the peripheral status of carers in many workplaces. The price of their care is marginal labour market status.

Chapter 8 considers how we are caring for those who depend upon us. There are particular, repetitive crisis points in the lives of many: not least in the event of sick dependents. Institutions have struggled to meet new needs and some workplaces, for example, respond much better than others. Care institutions – like child care centres – have strained to support new care demands, while in other households informal care creates new demands – and sometimes pleasures – for grandparents and the extended family.

Chapter 9 considers the critical issue of leave from work for men, women and carers who hold down jobs. The amount of paid leave – in all its forms – has barely changed in its formal provision over the past 30 years despite the transformation of work and household. However, access to many forms of leave has eroded with rising rates of casual work.

The rigidity of market work patterns, domestic workloads and some social and cultural beliefs, contribute to important phenomena like our falling birth rate. Women and carers know most intimately the ways in which market work is squeezing care. If women believe that they must have their working lives on track before they have children, or see that the current terms of parenting will overload them, they delay birth and reduce the desired size of their family. As they age, their fertility options narrow. The work/life collision has important effects beyond how we *feel*: it affects vital economic and demographic trends.

Meeting these problems is not a trivial task. It is not a matter of tweaking the workplace, or the home. Nor is it a matter of adopting the Swedish model of care, or the French model of hours – or any other country's solution. In the middle of the 19th century, Australia led the world on fair wages (for men) and reductions in working time through a unique industrial system. We must again find our own approaches for our own time and place. These are in the final chapter.

Unpacking the cover stories

There are a range of ‘cover stories’ that obscure the complexities and compromises that arise from the work/life collision. These include the cover stories that domestic work is now shared and the egalitarian household has arrived; that paid work has meant liberation and equality for women; that ‘family friendly’ workplaces now smooth the way for parents; and that flexible work practices now facilitate flexible parents. The cover stories obscure the truth. We must get beneath them to garner a more accurate picture of experience and improve the terms of work/life in Australia.

Pressure is not new to Australian households. The work-time squeeze is not new. Households with dependents, where single parents or both adults work, have always existed and always been time pressured. However, the long-term rise in the proportion of children being raised in such households, and the growing proportion of couple families where adults are in the labour market, means that the problem is now much larger. And as more people experience it, our communities are affected more broadly. When ten per cent of a school’s parents all work, sport coaching and classroom reading is easily accommodated. When 60 per cent are in paid work, the squeeze is on.

Social commentators have long pointed to the effect of new labour market patterns on Australians: Hugh Mackay drew attention to the exhaustion and guilt of Australian working mothers in 1993. In the UK, Patricia Hewitt proposed radical reforms to working time in 1993 and is now part of the Blair Government which is implementing change in the slip stream of European reform (1993). In the US, American sociologist Juliet Schor has documented the phenomena of ‘overwork’ and ‘overspend’, while Arlie Russell Hochschild has documented the double shift worked by women and that society’s ‘time bind’ (1997). There are those who speak of an *intersection* of paid work and home life, while Lisa Belkin, the work and family writer for the *New York Times*, more accurately refers to these as ‘the collisions that happen daily at that intersection’ (2002).

Some labour market changes in Australia bear close parallel with those in the US and the UK. The remarkable thing about the work/life collision in Australia, however, is not its existence, but the lack of analysis of its broad effects on our public and private lives, and – most surprising of all – *the persistence of the collision and lack of real response to pressures that are reverberating in more and more households.*

The effects of this collision are now obvious in any newspaper on many days of the week in Australia, with stories of growing hours of work, jobs hungry for the unpaid overtime of employees, and families and carers under pressure. Some of its effects cause bitter division. Lively ‘mother wars’ are underway in the letters pages, as mothers are pitted against non-mothers, and ‘mothers at home’ are pitted against – or attack – ‘mothers at work’. The ‘types’ are set in opposition to each other. While this makes a fascinating fight for some, we might ask where do these wars get mothers? We might also ask: where are the ‘father wars’?

Other divisions are also incited by the work/care collision. Phoney wars are provoked between those who ‘selfishly’ choose not to have children, against those who ‘selfishly’ do. The gender struggle between women and men is sharpened by the squeeze of work on households and care. While the paid workplace is increasingly occupied by both sexes, the unpaid work of care and home still falls mostly to women, but not without cost to relationships and families. Overshadowing these clashes is the larger collision between the market – with its logics of self-interest and cost-benefit calculation – and the logic of care, especially selfless mothering.

The work/care collision also raises questions about some of feminism’s legacies and its future prospects. Any claim that women’s liberation lies down the road of paid work has unravelled as the super-woman myth has soured in the face of unchanging work practices, an unchanging burden of domestic work, and the model of the care-free worker that squats at the centre of the factory or legal firm. Of course feminism’s claims – always diverse – cannot be reduced to a narrow claim to paid

work. That goal always sat (and sits) beside other claims, including the redistribution of work and care at home, and changes in the paid workplace. However, a key goal for feminists has been women's entry to public life through paid work, and much progress has been made towards it. This goal has found its happy co-conspirator in a market greedy for women's labour, its 'flexibility', and enthusiastic for the spending power of women's earnings. Of all feminism's goals, entry to paid work has been the most compatible with the globalising market.

However, access to paid work was always, at best, only half the change sought. This book confirms that this advance is seriously undermined by society's inattention to the questions of care, its redistribution, its powerful role as an engine of community, and its (in)compatibility with market work as it is currently organised. While some delight in the failure of a 'feminist' strategy of entry to paid work – a straw feminist figure if ever there was one – the failures of policy and our established institutions are greater. It is not feminism that has let women down, but the institutions that are our workplaces, families, markets, governments and methods of organising work and care. Ironically, feminism's 'failure' lies in its success in winning the right to a job and significant individual equality in paid work, while essential accompanying changes on the household, personal and institutional front have been puny, fragile and energetically resisted.

The key question now is what goals are appropriate for those who want to see a fairer world, with less disadvantage and damage to women, children and men, and a more robust community?

The inadequacy of special 'family friendly' measures

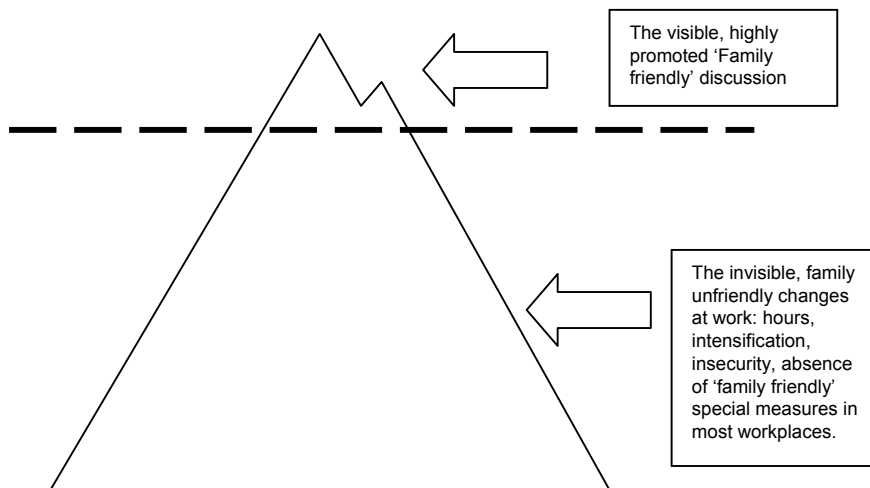
Much of the public discussion to date about dealing with this fundamental shift in men's and women's participation in home and work has focused on changing the workplace through special 'family friendly' measures – or increasingly 'Work/Life balance'

initiatives. These include supportive statements by senior managers, employee counselling, flexible start and finishing times, sick leave to care for sick children, middle manager and supervisor training, job-sharing, telecommuting, and part-time work (Spearritt and Edgar 1994, Russell et al 1992). These programs are significant. They have been widely celebrated and publicised through government reports and national annual work and family awards. In a growing number of larger companies and the public sector, carers have access to special arrangements that are designed to help bridge their roles. One 2002 Australian survey of 195 workplaces (including members of CCH Australia and others who have volunteered to participate) showed that around 60 per cent of employees in these workplaces had access to part-time work and to flexible start and finish times, with just over half having access to paid parental leave of some kind. The top quartile of surveyed companies with a high incidence of 'work/life' measures that are used have lowered their employee turnover by an average of 3.7 per cent, their absenteeism by an average of 3 per cent, and increased the return rate from parental leave by an average of 23 per cent. (*Managing Work/Life Balance* 2003). However, such measures exist in only a small minority of Australian workplaces. The 'enterprise as island' approach – which relies on individual workplaces adopting changes as they wish – cannot deliver for most (Buchanan and Thornthwaite 2001: 3).

The celebrations of these islands of change and innovation have been accompanied by changes in work organisation – rarely marked – that have moved in the opposite direction, complicating the business of work and care, and causing many to experience a deterioration in their quality of work and family life. Even 15 per cent of the 'best of the best-practice' companies included in the 2002 'Work/Life' survey (the top quartile) report an average increase in stress related absence in 2002, and 8 per cent report increases in labour turnover 'due to the 'long hours' culture' (*Managing Work/Life Balance* 2003: 2). 'Special measures' are not enough – alone – to combat the hidden

changes in work/life that contradict the more visible initiatives mostly in larger companies. We can think of these as the concealed bulk of the 'family friendly' iceberg as in Figure 1.2, with the innovative measures adopted in a minority of workplaces – the visible and energetically promulgated tip of the iceberg – outweighed by significant changes in the nature of work itself, along with care and community. As long as the lower bulk of this iceberg remains invisible, many workplaces, families and individuals will founder upon it. And as long as innovative examples are publicised in ways that obscure the experience of the majority, that majority cannot advance. Our task is to make the invisible obvious and clearer, and to consider ways to respond to its bulk and effects.

Figure 1.2 The Family Friendly/Unfriendly Iceberg



The evidence: Who speaks?

Fifty years ago, C Wright Mills argued for a social science that helped make sense of ‘personal troubles’ by illuminating the larger social and historical context in which they occur, to understand ‘the intimate realities of ourselves in connexion with larger social realities’ (1959: 22). This study is in that tradition, attempting to link personal experience with larger issues, to link the public and the private, and to build upon a range of concepts arising from the analysis of gender and the analysis of labour markets in recent decades.

The book analyses a wide variety of information (the Appendix discusses these in more detail). These include a range of ABS surveys about work and households, data arising from the Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey (AWIRS) and (to a limited extent) the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey (Melbourne Institute, 2002). Large surveys can tell us a great deal about what is happening in our community. They have an important role to play, especially where they are longitudinal in nature like AWIRS and HILDA. However, it is also useful to look beneath the statistics about issues like family structure and working hours, to reach a deeper understanding. Surveys have limitations when it comes to discussion of complex issues like values and motivation: *why* people do things, or the *effects* of their situations, or what people might *prefer*. So this book draws on the voices of a number of Australians as they talk about the effects of work on their lives, to put flesh on the bones of quantitative data.

I rely on two main sources of qualitative evidence. The first arises from a series of focus groups and interviews among 163 mainly women living in South Australia. These investigated how work – broadly defined to include market and non-market work – is affecting people. The second source is a set of interviews of workers in 12 industries or occupations across Australia, and their partners, investigating the effects of long hours of work on individuals, families and the community. These qualitative

materials draw on relatively small, non-random samples and do not carry the weight of large randomised surveys in terms of providing indicators of population behaviour (Evans and Kelley 2002: 56). However, in many cases it is difficult to structure large, randomised surveys in ways that allow people to discuss their thinking in an open-ended way, as opposed to ‘ticking the box’ among a set of pre-selected closed options. The latter approach generally does not capture complex motivations, beliefs and actions and their intersections with the cultural and institutional realities that condition them. And it cannot capture discussion between people, as some qualitative data does. Where it exists, the qualitative sources relied on in this book are supplemented by larger survey data about labour market behaviour and so on. Ambivalence and complexity characterise much work/care behaviour and a combination of methods has better hope of illuminating this. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data gives us important insights into what is changing, what is unchanging, and the consequences of the two, for life, care and community.

Some will find the concentration upon households with dependents, and the primary focus on the relations between work and care, too narrow – missing an analysis of the diversity of household types, for example, beyond heterosexual and conventional family norms. This may be so. There are examples of homosexual parents in the qualitative study groups, along with male and female single-headed households. These differences are not the main focus of the study, however, which takes as its primary analysis the complex relations between life, care and work across a range of households. Class factors also differentiate experience: households with different levels of wealth and income experience the work/life squeeze in significantly different ways. The voices of workers in low-income and high-income households are present in the qualitative studies which draw out commonalities as well as difference. While these are important, the primary focus here is upon the impact of work on care and vice versa.

Building a better ‘Work/Care’ regime in Australia

There are those who think these issues – love, relationships, family – are personal and private, that there is no role for government or public action in these realms, given the private nature of decisions about work, family, relationships, spending, love and money. There is certainly a role for private decisions about these issues, perhaps most importantly in relation to consumption and the substitution of products for relationships. However, it is a core contention of this book that governments affect these spheres, as do employers, unions and community organisations – even where they attempt to declare themselves absent from the bedrooms, workplaces and households where personal decisions are made. Institutions play a powerful role in our lives. They affect the conditions and hours of our work through law; they affect our patterns of consumption through their construction of care regimes for children, the aged, the sick; and they shape our patterns of earnings, benefits and taxation. Governments, the media, employers, unions and community organisations powerfully affect the economic, social and cultural frameworks that naturalise, or makes strange, our ways of being at work, at home, and in our households.

Falling birth rates are increasingly a focus of public concern, given the problems they create for the social and economic base of industrialised societies (McDonald, 2001). Who will pay to care for the sick and aged when the population base – and its taxpayers – shrinks? As long as industrialised countries adopt a restrictive approach to the free-flow of immigrant labour across national boundaries (and there is little sign of this relaxing, indeed the reverse is more common), then an Australian ‘fertility crisis’ looms. It is clear that ‘Work/Care’ regimes affect fertility outcomes though the *extent* of this effect is not so obvious. The key question is, however, what regimes of work and care result in a steady birth rate, fair gender outcomes, an efficient use of our resources and a good life?

Even those who have no interest in fairness or equality in society, and who believe that all social outcomes should be the

‘natural’ outcome of pure individual choice, must recognise that the nature of choices is constructed in significant part by governments, public institutions, law and social convention. If mothers do not, for example, have access to paid leave when they have a baby because governments will not ensure paid maternity leave, or there is little support for extended periods of parental leave, the bedrooms and households of Australia – and perhaps our birth rate – reflect the consequences.

For those of us who believe that fair outcomes for *all* women and men, as well as for those on lower incomes and the disadvantaged, are worth striving for, government, employer, union and community action is essential. Without it, the penalties of the mismatch of public working life with private home and reproductive life will erode further, and the private costs rise and overflow into degraded communities, workplaces, households and life.