

serves as a reminder to all of us of the significance of seemingly ordinary experience in the changing context of the social whole.

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*Edited by:
Patricia Grimshaw, Chris McConville and
Ellen McEwen
George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985,
pp. 227, \$12.95*

A HARD ACT TO FOLLOW – STEP-PARENTING IN AUSTRALIA TODAY

**Whelan, Thomas & Susan Kelly,
Penguin Books, 1986.
184pp. PB: \$9.95**

A Hard Act to Follow reports on the experiences of forty Australian step-parents, partners of step-partners or both who tell with feeling of their trials and tribulations as well as their pleasures, achievements, and challenges.

This book is important in the 1980's in that increasing numbers of couples in Australia are living in step-family units and more often than not have at least one of the couple's child/children living with them. It is also timely because there is a dearth of Australian literature and research which address the complex and sensitive issues which pertain to the relationships between members of these families, particularly those between step-parents and step-children. Our understanding of the dynamics which exist in such families has often been based on the assumption that there is little difference between biological families and step-families and that once such a group comes together the relationships and dynamics will be similar. A Hard Act to Follow dispels this assumption and challenges many of the myths that surround step-parenting.

The book is based on the findings of research carried out by the authors in Melbourne. Their study comprised interviews with 20 couples all of whom were living in step families! Both parents were interviewed in order to elicit the perceptions of both the step-parent and the biological parent in the relationship.

Broadly, the objective of the study was to examine the major stresses on step-families as well as their strengths and achievements. The result provides the reader with a balanced description and some analysis of many of the delicate dynamics which exist in step-families.

The in-depth interviews provide a rich source of information about a wide range of key issues. These include: What is a

step-family? The images held by the community and the effects of these on families; the roles and expectations of the family members and the fantasies and realities about these; the centrality of the couple relationship in the development of positive and harmonious relationships within the family; the step-parent/step-child relationship; the influence of ex-partners and absent parents and some of the difficulties around specific issues such as discipline, caring and sharing behaviours, the rights of individual members and maintenance, custody and access arrangements.

The book draws on other literature and research findings as well as the author's own findings to describe and discuss the various themes. It is expressed simply and is easy to read. The style is anecdotal with the findings of the study illustrated by direct quotes from the respondents. This makes what might have been a dry report of psychological research into an interesting and human account of the perceptions of step-parents as they live their daily lives in their most recent family. For practitioners working with step-families, A Hard Act to Follow offers insights into the complex and fragile dynamics of step-family life. For those contemplating entering a step-family arrangement it highlights some of the dilemmas and difficulties which one might have to confront but which might be less of a problem if the couple is alerted beforehand. For those living in step-family units, as I am, it affirms and validates many of the ambivalences experienced. Knowing that others have shared similar experiences and found ways to handle them, engenders hope that the relationships will develop positively for all members and offer the support and companionship which in our society we have come to expect from our families.

As the authors point out, time is of the essence in establishing a new family unit. The number of people involved, each with their own history, and the intimacy of the situation in which they find themselves makes the task of building a life together a complicated and challenging one. Relationships of this kind cannot be established overnight and great patience is required to allow the family to evolve in its own way, meeting the individual needs of its members over time. In addition to patience, hard work and commitment are required. However, in all of this the overriding sense of the book is optimistic and it suggests that the struggles and hurdles are worthwhile grappling with in the long term.

A Hard Act to Follow is a welcome addition to the literature about step-families. It furthers our understanding of the complex dynamics of such families and is all the more relevant being based on the experience of Australian couples. It

provides a useful reference for practitioners and students interested in working with such families and is particularly helpful to those living in step-families or contemplating doing so.

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YOUNG PEOPLE LEAVING HOME IN AUSTRALIA

by Christabel Young

**Published jointly, Australian National University, Department of Demography and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, Canberra, 1987.
188pp. PB: \$10.50**

This study is based on a major survey of young adults carried out by the Institute of Family Studies in 1981-82 as part of its Family formation Project.

Australian households were approached to obtain a random sample of 2,500 young people aged between 18 and 35.

These years were chosen as the crucial years of decision making about further education, finding a job, leaving home, partnering, getting married, having children.

Every one of these decisions is affected by the family of origin, by one's personal values, by broad social values and expectations and by the state of the economy and the labour market.

Christabel Young, an academic staff member of the Department of Demography at the Australian National University, was contracted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies to analyse their survey in order to produce this analysis.

One of the main purposes of the study on which this monograph is based was to test whether or not young Australians were changing their attitudes with regard to life decisions.

The Institute holds the data which is available upon request for further analysis by researchers.

The views and opinions expressed in the publication do not necessarily reflect the position, policy or endorsement of the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

The book begins by providing detail on the patterns of leaving home by Australian Youth including some comparison with other countries e.g. West Germany, Britain and the United States.

Following this, Young explains the limited nature of information available about young people leaving home – apart from what could be assumed with regard to young adults leaving home at marriage.