LIFE PATTERNS PROJECT
PATHWAYS IN ADULT LIFE:
SUMMARY REPORT ON THE 2019 INTERVIEWS

Johanna Wyn, Eric Fu,
Jenny Chesters, Hernan Cuervo,
Helen Cahill, Dan Woodman,
Andres Molina, Mark Mallman

Youth Research Centre
The University of Melbourne
June 2020
INTRODUCTION

We are pleased to provide you with this update on the Life Patterns research project in which you are a highly valued participant. This report presents the results of the interviews we conducted with some of you in 2019. The interviews are part of an ongoing research project by the Youth Research Centre, at The University of Melbourne, which explores different areas of adult life. With your contribution, we are able to provide valuable insights that can inform governments and social institutions about your generation.

The interviewees were selected from a pool of 256 participants who completed the survey in 2017. In 2017, about 70% of our participants were female, 77% of the participants had a university level qualification. Slightly over half were working full-time and 35% were working part-time. Over 60% were living with a partner and 72% were in a parenting role. Of the 31 participants who were interviewed, 21 were male, 15 were working full-time, and 19 were in permanent employment. In terms of education, 13 had a Master’s degree, 10 had a Bachelor degree. Sixteen were living with a partner, and 23 were in parenting role.

The interviews were conducted by phone during October and November 2019 and covered a range of topics including: their ties to their geographic location; challenges and achievements; employment; concerns for younger generations; and concerns or Australia.
MAIN THEMES

In this section, we provide an overview of the eight main themes from the interview data: sense of belonging; juggling work and family; health; job security; inequality; generational differences; children’s future; Australia’s future.

SENSE OF BELONGING

Of the 31 participants who were interviewed in late 2019, 11 were living in suburban Melbourne; 17 were living in regional/rural Victoria and three were living in regional/rural NSW. The majority of the participants had been living in the same area for at least nine years. The chart in Figure 1 provides an indication of their residential stability.

Participants living in regional and rural areas frequently commented on the sense of community and the natural environment as key reasons for why they felt they belonged. Over the years we have found that connections to people and places have been critical in building a sense of belonging. For example:

*Really beautiful. Mountains all around us. Lots of greenery and great natural sights around us...We’re on an acre of land. I’ve planted about 100 fruit trees...I guess we stayed largely because we fell in love with the environment and the local community.*

[male consultant living in rural Victoria]

*To have the most gorgeous oxygen, and all the peacefulness of living the way we do is all very beautiful...we have lots of activists and volunteers in our community, so we bond very well over doing those good works together.*

[female consultant living in rural Victoria]

*It’s good because it’s quiet and it’s a reasonably peaceful community. I guess everyone knows everybody, so it’s a friendly, relatively friendly place.*

[female receptionist living in rural Victoria]

*It is a nice community. It’s a bit more rural and they’re a bit more real...the people are more caring actually, more authentic about their care of the land and the bush.*

[female librarian living in rural Victoria]
Participants living in suburban Melbourne were more likely to talk about the availability of services such as public transport, good schools and shopping centres; being close to their place of employment; or being close to their extended families.

My parents live next door to me… It’s very close to the city so I can get to the city in lots of different ways when I need to. The schools are good… We’re close to shops, the local shopping centre, which we use all the time. We’ve got the train line right next to us, some local parks within walking distance.
[female bookkeeper living in suburban Melbourne]

I’m a three-minute walk from my parents and local conveniences, I go to the supermarket on foot.
[male consultant living in suburban Melbourne]

We chose the much smaller house, but inner city, versus bigger house that’s further out because of the sense of community.
[male business owner living inner city Melbourne]

It’s a very easy place to live because you have really good public transport connections. I like that it’s close to the city so I can get in and out to work pretty easily.
[female project manager living in suburban Melbourne]
Some participants living in suburban Melbourne were able to have the best of both worlds: easy access to work and services; and living close to the bush.

It’s a really good area to bring children up in. So I love... where I actually live, I border on a bush area, so we’re very close to the city, but we’re also close to nature. We have really good resources in our area, and really good schools.
[female senior manager living in suburban Melbourne]

I love it because there’s lots of trees and lots of possums and wildlife. It’s quite green around here… my parents are only like half a kilometre away and so they helped me a lot with the kids… Pretty much everything we could ever want is just right nearby.
[female professional living in suburban Melbourne]

In some cases, participants mentioned that they were co-parenting with their ex-partners and were therefore not able to move too far from their children’s schools.

I separated from my husband. We sold the family home, and I moved close so that my daughter could easily go to the same primary school… it’s very close to the station, and my son takes the train to school.
[female bank officer living in suburban Melbourne]

Two and a half years ago my marriage fell apart. I choose to live here because my kids are still living just up the hill and at the moment it’s easier for access and all them things. I have shared custody of my two boys.
[male VET teacher regional Victoria]

Overall, we find that people’s choice of place is a constant negotiation between the needs of different family members; access to the facilities and resources that family members needed; and the cost of living that families need to manage. For example:

We moved to regional Victoria about 15 years ago. Once my daughter finishes year 12 at the end of next year, we’re planning to move back to Melbourne and part of the reason is to give the kids that kind of a stable place to live while they’re studying… and we’ll be closer to both sets of parents and be able to provide the support as we need.
[female editor living in regional Victoria]
JUGGLING WORK AND FAMILY

The majority of participants are working to earn an income and also have caring responsibilities leaving little time for their own personal needs and care. The increasing demands of their work tend to encroach on the time that they need for other commitments and activities in life. Consequently, many feel that they are constantly juggling the demands of their employment with the needs and wants of their families, and in many cases with extended families, and their need for personal time and space. Over the years we have found that this has been a constant pressure in your lives.

My partner and I have two children each. They’re at three different schools. We reside, at the moment, between two different living locations… between the two businesses, we run seven, eight staff… I have to manage my schedules and my calendars a little bit differently to ensure I’ve got the right day of the week and the right week of the month.

[male business owner living in suburban Melbourne]

Just trying to work and look after kids and look after the household and have some time to just chill out and do things that I want to do for myself. That’s hard to fit it all in.

[female professional living in suburban Melbourne]

I’m about two hours out of the city on public transport, so my day starts at about 5:25… get home at 6:00… I don’t think I anticipated just how tired I would be with that level of travel in the early mornings.

[male consultant living in rural Victoria]

Trying to meet all the conflicting demands of obviously running those businesses and then family commitments. That’s always a challenge, but always trying to keep things in perspective and focus on the important things, which is family.

[male business owner living in inner city Melbourne]

Weekends are not a relaxing time. I think that we increasingly feel like we’re on a very fast merry-go-round and it’s just not enough time to do the important things in life.

[male consultant living in suburban Melbourne]

Other participants, however, indicated that their work fitted in well with their family responsibilities. From their comments, we are able to identify factors that contribute to having a good work-life balance: flexible working conditions, short commute to work, and a more balanced view about the meaning of jobs for life.

It (work) does get in the way of life but I think I’ve got a very flexible working environment. The other great thing for me is I’m about five minutes travel from where I live.

[female corporate secretary living in regional Victoria]

So, I generally will get in at 7:30 and leave between 3:30 and 4. So, I think the working conditions are excellent. In the previous job, it depended on your line manager, and so, there definitely wasn’t any flexibility to work from home on an ongoing basis. So, I found that really draining.

[female researcher living in suburban Melbourne]

The job I have now is perfectly pleasant and flexible and all those things but it’s just a job.

[male editor living in rural NSW]

I’m currently employed part-time, a single parent to two children- 5 and 9. So my work hours are flexible to a point where I try and work around my children’s school and kinder hours and extracurricular activities and family responsibilities.

[female public servant living in rural Victoria]
HEALTH

Health has always been an important issue for participants. We have found that your concern for health has increased over the years. Some participants commented on how their health and that of their partners and/or children impacted on their lives. Apart from the associated pain and suffering, health problems incur extra medical expenses and may compromise one’s capacity to do paid work, leading to financial difficulties. The following quotes illustrate this.

I have two autoimmune diseases and have just been diagnosed with cancer for a second time. I’ve also got a child with a disability so I have to manage his health as well, and another child with some special needs that we’re working on as well.医疗 expenses, ongoing medications, some private doctors that charge extra fees and those sorts of things. So that’s really difficult on a part time wage.
[female bookkeeper living in suburban Melbourne]

I have been diagnosed with osteoporosis and that, so I’ve got arthritis and that appearing in parts of my body, my hands, and my feet, and things like that. But it has started to limit what I can and can’t do. I mean, I’m a musician and just lately I’ve noticed it’s been a bit harder to play.
[male stay-at-home parent/ musician living in regional Victoria]

My husband and I both have autoimmune conditions as well and that presents some particular challenges for us, that we just look, to a large extent, we just assume and manage. We don’t treat ourselves as particularly special, but it causes some extra pressure, and extra cost, and less freedom I suppose.
[female project manager living in suburban Melbourne]

JOB SECURITY

Given the relatively high percentage of precarious workers in Australia, we were also interested in how participants felt about job security. Although having a permanent contract is the major contributor to having a sense of job security, other factors such as good opportunities for employment in one’s area of work; confidence in one’s qualification; and confidence in one’s capability were also important. Other participants commented on the general lack of job security in today’s labour market. For example:

I think I’ve been in an environment where there’s been such a lack of job security for so long. I’ve kind of had my personal meltdown and panic attacks at the time way back when. So I feel like I’m kind of living on borrowed time now anyway. Lack of job security - it’s just become a part of working.
[female bank officer living in suburban Melbourne]

Even though I am full time permanent, it’s still subject to the economy.
[male senior project manager living in suburban Melbourne]

I think my job is pretty safe. I think if the company shut down, there’s still plenty of work in that industry.
[male lighting engineer living in regional Victoria]

Some participants indicated that they chose part-time or contract work to suit their lifestyle. However, finding suitable part-time employment is not without its challenges.

I work part-time by choice. I’m in a financial position that I’ve been able to make that choice and so depending on the day of the week, I like to have at least one mid-week day that I’m not working. I guess having chosen to be part-time, I have had challenges in the last four to five years in finding appropriate employment.
[female justice officer living in suburban Melbourne]

The difficulties of finding suitable part-time employment were also an issue for participants with health issues, as the following quote illustrates.

Teaching at TAFE now the works there but it’s so hit and miss from term to term. I teach a lot of different things to make sure I get the work… I’ve got to reapply for Newstart… even if you’re working three days a week, you need full time work and I say but I can’t work full time because I’m injured.
[male VET teacher regional Victoria]
INEquality

Participants were generally aware of the social inequalities within Australian society. Some pointed to the increasing problem of housing and rent affordability, whereas others commented on the gap between the wealthy and the poor.

I’m aware of quite a few people that can’t afford to rent anymore. So the prospects of finding somewhere are very slim. Some are living in their vehicle or are homeless. So that seems to be increasing. I can talk about the gap widening and then I think that’s still the case. I’m talking economics, it seems all the big breaks happen to those that have more than enough and those that seemed to be struggling tend to get loaded up with a bit more.
[male lighting engineer living in regional Victoria]

I work with the families that are living in a caravan and I’ve worked with families that are living in tents in the bush. And when you ring the agencies, they just say, “There’s nothing, we just don’t have any houses to give them.” The whole, the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer worries me a little bit, it’s not what I think of as being Australian.
[female chaplain living in rural Victoria]

With CEOs earning millions of dollars and then the lower people are really struggling day by day. You know they’re working just as hard, or just as long and just as physically, and they’re just not getting the monetary reward for what they’re doing, and just getting by I guess. I’d say there’s a bit of inequality there.
[male electrician living in rural Victoria]

I think there is a growing divide between rich and poor and I think that is concerning. I think the casualization of the workforce and that sort of thing is a big factor in that. That people can’t get full time secure work.
[female teacher living in rural NSW]

I think inequality’s probably increasing because I think there’s quite a divide. Depends on what, I suppose, avenue you took after year 12 and the opportunities. There probably is an inequality in time... I think there’s a lot of people that are really well off and then there’s a lot of people that are struggling in my generation.
[female nurse manager living in suburban Melbourne]
GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

One topic that generated a lot of interest was that of differences between the generations. Some participants compared their generation to that of their parents whereas others compared themselves to younger generations.

I think our generation’s been the most... has had the most benefit really. We came through the year of women can do anything, equal pay. I feel like we’ve had the best years really. I’ve had access to education and tertiary education that’s never been blocked or inhibited in any way. In fact, there were grants available at the time for regional kids to apply for university. So I feel like we’ve been the lucky ones.

[female corporate secretary living in rural Victoria]

I think my generation has probably had it very, very easy, really in terms of a lot of things. My generation haven’t had to go fight in any of the wars that they didn’t want to... our parents had a lot of time to spend with us. We did lots of things as family, that sometimes I don’t see that happening now with younger generations or the families that are coming through now.

[female business owner living in rural Victoria]

I think each generation as it goes on, gets a better and better deal. I think certainly my generation got a better deal than the previous generation... gen X and gen Y and gen Z are having a tougher deal with housing affordability. If the economy does deteriorate, this generation may struggle, and they won’t necessarily be used to it because they’re so used to a good economy.

[male senior project manager living in suburban Melbourne]

People in their 20’s- I would say it is probably harder for them. It just seems that the qualifications required to just get interviews and to basically to get work, you need to have more and more and more to even get a foot in the door getting a start is a lot harder for the next generation. Yes. They’re competing with so many more. It’s that cycle of constant up-skilling to try and be more competitive against the ones that you are up against.

[female justice officer living in suburban Melbourne]
Another generational issue was related to parenting roles. One participant who has always been the primary carer for his three children commented that society is now far more accepting of fathers being primary carers than when his first child was born 13 years ago:

it’s changed something chronic. I noticed it more now that you’ll see groups of guys with their kids…basically father’s groups or something like that.
[male stay-at-home parent/ musician living in regional Victoria]

I think there’s some generational change between men. My dad, who’s 76 this year, and I’m 40 odd this year. Someone changed the rules on normality. Someone changed the rules on parenting.
[male business owner living in rural NSW]

There were also many comments lamenting the perceived inadequacies of the current generation of young people.

I think the youth of today have got a bit to answer to, for as far as the attitude, I think they’re a bit spoilt…A lot of them don’t really want to work. I think that’s a bit of an issue as well. I think they’re a bit lazy compared to, say, my generation. Oh, as I said they lack discipline, I think they’re a bit spoilt, I think from their parents…I think they’re just handed things too easy, therefore they’re a bit entitled.
[female receptionist living in rural Victoria]

I reckon 70 to 80% of children and younger adults have just got a serious drive issue…for kids that are coming out with no direction, no determination, no stamina. They don’t have the drive or the determination…it’s going to be a serious issue.
[male VET teacher regional Victoria]
CHILDREN’S FUTURE

For those who were parents, we asked about concerns for your children’s future and for those who were not in a parenting role, we asked about their concerns for younger generations. Participants’ concerns included: environmental issues (climate change); housing affordability; employment opportunities; education; and social issues. Figure 2 illustrates the most commonly mentioned concerns.

FIGURE 2 CONCERNS FOR THE FUTURE: CHILDREN AND YOUNGER GENERATIONS

In many cases, participants who were parenting referred to multiple concerns, noting how these concerns are interlinked. For example, access to education is linked to employment outcomes which in turn are linked to the ability to purchase a home.

How our kids will afford to go to university and what sort of jobs they’re going to get and how they’re going to afford to support themselves. Are they going to be living with me til they’re 50?
[female public servant living in rural Victoria]

Probably the big one would be, I guess, housing affordability for them in the future. That would be a concern.
[male electrician living in rural Victoria]

I worry that their future in terms of their ability to move out on their own or with a partner and start a family and all that sort of stuff because of the cost of housing basically.
[male software developer living in regional Victoria]

There’s not really entry level jobs for young people to try their hand at something and learn on the job. It all seems to be tending towards an unpaid internship or a low paid internship.
[female project manager living in suburban Melbourne]

Another major source of concern was related to climate change and the environment.

I can’t think of any time in history when you’ve had 99.9% of science definitively saying that there’s a massive issue on our hands, and the politicians are going, “Oh yeah, but that’s not agreement.” So I mean tackling that globally is by far and away the biggest concern to me for the kids having a meaningful future. I mean everything else doesn’t really matter if the planet’s gone to shit. The economy’s not going to be that important if the planet’s uninhabitable.
[male business owner living inner city Melbourne]

…obviously environmentally. It makes me feel sad, and I try to keep them aware. But, at the same time, I don’t ram anything down their throats about climate change, because I don’t want them to be anxious.
[female education support officer living in rural Victoria]
AUSTRALIA’S FUTURE

When we asked all interviewed participants if they had any concerns about the future of Australia, the main issues that were raised were: climate change, work and government. Figure 3 illustrates the most commonly mentioned concerns.

FIGURE 3 CONCERNS FOR THE FUTURE: AUSTRALIA

Concern for the environment was mainly talked about in the light of climate change and global warming, but it was also related to sustainable ways of living and natural disasters in Australia.

Climate change is probably the biggest thing, like the pressures on. Food production systems are probably more of a concern globally.
[female manager living in rural Victoria]

I don’t know if everyone else sees their footprint and how it does impact on our whole world… Humans, we just trash the place… I don’t see us fixing climate change because humans and whoever, political parties are all too selfish.
[female librarian living in rural Victoria]

In terms of the global degradation of the environment, the effects on the atmosphere, sea levels, and all that, ultimately it comes back to population and standard of living. We need to get more efficient at supporting our standards of living.
[male editor living in rural NSW]

Well, I think the issues with climate and definitely this is related, but it’s also an issue on its own, sustainability and the absurd amounts of waste. Australia would be better off to be adjusting and moving towards more cyclical, sustainable kind of systems in all areas.
[female editor living in regional Victoria]
On the other hand, some participants were less concerned about the environment, as these quotes reveal.

The environment will be here whether we’re here or not… unfortunately future generations will have to deal with whatever we manage to muck up or try and fix it. That’s always been the case throughout evolution.

[Male business owner living in suburban Melbourne]

As for climate change, we’ve seen these massive droughts before in past years. Before we were even born, back in the 1800s, we’ve seen massive floods, and we are in a dry cycle.

[Male business owner living in rural NSW]

The Australian government is another major concern voiced by many participants. Concerns about the government are mainly about its stability, its responsiveness to key social issues and its leadership in initiating long term strategies/actions/policies to address social and environmental issues.

The policy that our government has in regards to housing affordability that I really don’t think they have any good policies in regards to that… I think wealth inequality is a bad thing in Australia that’s getting worse… wealth inequality’s going to continue across generations.

[Male software developer living in regional Victoria]

I think politically I am also concerned about the style of leadership that we see from politicians… there’s a lot of people who are really doing it tough and their welfare safety net has been seriously curtailed. People get unemployment benefits that are really low. Access to public health care, disability and pension for people seem to not be sufficient.

[Female project manager living in suburban Melbourne]

There is just no stability whatsoever and it’s probably a reflection of what’s going on in the rest of the world as well. I think that Australians have just got fed up with it all and just don’t have much faith in the political system which is sad because that’s where all our money is going, in shaping the direction of the country.

[Female justice officer living in suburban Melbourne]

We’re just going to keep having unstable government, and that leads to unemployment, health issues, unemployed people leads to more drug issues, all those sorts of things. But they don’t seem to connect dots there. It’s only about focus on one term of government, and I don’t think that’s a good thing for this country.

[Male editor living in rural NSW]
SUMMARY

The interviews conducted at the end of 2019 provided us a more nuanced picture of multiple areas of life of the participants as they approach middle age. Our analysis of the interview data illustrates the complexities of their lives and some of the factors implicated in the negotiation of their life challenges and decisions. The majority of those interviewed were juggling work and family responsibilities, sometimes for more than one family. Overall, most of them were happy with the opportunities that had come their way and with their achievements. For some, the ability to succeed regardless of the barriers or challenges was testament to their resilience. Given that these interviews were conducted late in 2019, they provide an optimistic view of how their generation is progressing. However, the COVID-19 health crisis and the economic recession that it generated may mean that, for some, 2020 will be more challenging than they expected.
We appreciate and thank you for your contribution and we look forward to seeing how future years go for you and the group.

**FIND OUT MORE**

For more information on the Life Patterns Project visit our website: [education.unimelb.edu.au/yc/yr/research/life-patterns](education.unimelb.edu.au/yc/yr/research/life-patterns)

Or follow us on Twitter: [@YRCunimelb](https://twitter.com/YRCunimelb)