

Why is the fertility rate

A discussion of the literature

After decades of falling birth rates, fertility in Australia is now at an all-time low.

RUTH WESTON AND ROBYN PARKER look at what might lie behind this new scenario.

Two countervailing trends dominate demographic discussion. On the one hand, the world's population is increasing rapidly; on the other, fertility is on the decline. In Australia, the population was 10.5 million in 1961 – the year when the fertility rate was at its peak for the 20th century (3.5 babies per woman) and when the oral contraceptive pill was approved for distribution. Since then, Australia's population has increased to more than 19 million yet the total fertility rate has fallen to 1.7 babies per woman.

In the context of long life expectancy, Australia's falling fertility has resulted in an ageing population both in absolute and relative terms, and projections by the Australian Bureau of Statistics suggest that the population will decline this century if the total fertility rate falls below 1.6 (ABS 2000). On the basis of their empirical research, McDonald and Kippen (1999) conclude that the capacity for immigration to slow down population ageing is quite limited. They provide evidence suggesting that while the first 80,000 net migrants per year have a substantial effect on this process, at higher levels there are diminishing returns.

Although the effects of population trends, and thus fertility trends, are controversial (see Guest and McDonald 2002; Hamilton 2002), they involve a number of immediate and long-term economic and social challenges, as outlined by others in this edition of *Family Matters*.

Many interacting factors underpin the fall in the fertility rate – a complexity that makes the choice of where to begin this review somewhat arbitrary. Some factors are transparent and certain; others are not. Perhaps the most obvious are the development of

modern fertility control measures and the related changing patterns of family formation, including couple formation. The review thus begins with these issues.

Control over fertility

A key explanation for the fall in fertility is that first births have increasingly been postponed thereby shortening women's total childbearing years and increasing their chances of childlessness (Jain and McDonald 1997). While some women attempt to extend their reproductive life through assisted reproductive technology, such procedures account for only 2 per cent of all births (McDonald 2001a).

It appears that, although they tend to revise their family size preferences downward when in their 20s, women now end up having fewer children than they would like to have (de Vaus in this edition of *Family Matters*; McDonald 2001b) or intend having (Quesnel-Valee and Morgan 2002). Such trends are in marked contrast to those of some 40 years ago when couples often had more children than they expected because of relatively inefficient means of contraception (Petersen 1961). Clearly, the effects of the development of the contraceptive pill and its widespread acceptance have been revolutionary.

In Australia in 1961, the contraceptive pill became available for distribution via medical prescriptions from those practitioners who approved of its use. In 1972, sales tax on all contraceptives was removed and the pill was placed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits List, thereby lowering the price substantially, increasing its use, and leading to widespread acceptance. Other advances in contraception that contribute to the modern fall in



falling?

fertility include new versions of the intra-uterine device from the mid-1960s, developments in sterilisation procedures in the 1970s and 1980s, and liberalisation of abortion laws (ABS 1998; Cica 1998; Carmichael 1998).

However, the average age of women giving birth to their first child continued to increase well after the pill became readily available. The median age of married women giving birth to their first child of this union was 25.3 in 1981, 29.3 in 1991, and 29.8 in 2001, although some of these women would have had children from previous relationships. As outlined below, advances in reproductive technology facilitated a number of other life course changes that combined to accentuate the delay in first births and fall in fertility (ABS 2001, 2002).

Life course changes

Life course changes affecting fertility include delays in those transitions that typically precede the family formation process, most particularly leaving home and forming partnerships, an overall fall in the formation of partnerships and an increase in their rate of breakdown, consequent diverging reproductive histories of potential partners, and women's increased financial independence.

Delayed transitions preceding having children

Although leaving the parental home remains an important transition in life, it is no longer quite the symbol of adulthood it once was. Young adults are taking this step at an older age than in the past, and the first move is likely to be temporary rather than permanent. Between 1979 and 2000, the proportion of those in their early 20s living with their parents increased from 46 per cent

to 52 per cent for men and from 25 per cent to 39 per cent for women. In two surveys conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in 1981 and 1998, the proportion of those in their early 20s who had returned after leaving home increased from 52 per cent to 67 per cent for men and from 44 per cent to 57 per cent for women (McDonald 1995; Weston, Stanton, Qu and Soriano 2001).

Where marriage used to be the main reason for leaving home, these days young adults leave for a variety of reasons, and start living together as a couple later in life than previously (Qu and Weston 2001). Furthermore, their first union is unlikely to start with marriage – in 2001, for example, 69 per cent of marriages that were first marriages for both the bride and groom were preceded by cohabitation (or de facto relationships). Yet couples still typically wait until they are married before having children, although this trend is weakening. While the proportion of babies born outside marriage has been increasing progressively, a trend that probably largely reflects the increase in cohabitation, two-thirds of babies are born within marriage (69 per cent in 2001, compared with 90 per cent in 1976) (ABS 1995, 2002).

Research in the United States reported by Barber and Axinn (1998) suggests that, while some individuals opt for cohabitation rather than marriage because they do not want to have children, the experience of cohabitation itself may lower intentions of having children. Although such research is by no means definitive, it is possible that one partner may opt for cohabitation because he or she does not want to have children and, over time, changes the other partner's views about having children.

More broadly, individuals' life decisions are usually influenced by general societal trends, decisions which can then perpetuate these trends. Delayed milestones that precede having children represent an example of this process (ABS 2001). In turn, as marriage becomes increasingly delayed, people who wish to marry eventually can increasingly afford to wait because the pool of eligible partners remains large at a later point in the life span (Kohler, Billari and Ortega 2001).

Nevertheless, the rate of overall partnering has fallen. In essence, while cohabitation rates have increased, this increase is not large enough to offset the fall in marriage rates (Birrell and Rapson 1998), a trend that would contribute to the increased rate of childlessness which is now expected to apply to at least 20 per cent of women who are currently in their early childbearing years (Merlo and Rowland 2000).

While partnering rates have fallen, the fragility of relationships, coupled with postponement of childbearing, increases the chances of childlessness, or of smaller than intended families.

Fragility of relationships

As noted above, cohabitation is now the dominant pathway to marriage. To outsiders, the period of cohabitation might thus be seen as an "engagement" or at least a symbol that the partners are committed to each other. But for some couples, the meaning of cohabitation may be uncertain, may differ for each partner, or change with time. In the meantime, with the delay in the establishment of this union, the woman's "biological clock" is ticking. There is some evidence that first unions that begin with cohabitation are increasingly likely to end in separation and that relationship breakdown is an important reason for women losing opportunities of having the children they once intended to have (Qu and Weston 2001; Qu, Weston and Kilmartin 2000).

Like cohabitation, the fragility of marriage can also limit opportunities for having children. The divorce rate rose dramatically following the Family Law Act 1975 as the backlog of long-term separations were formalised and some divorces were brought forward. The divorce rate then subsided but has remained at a much higher level than prior to the Act. In the mid to late 1980s, the rate varied between 10.6 and 10.9 divorces per 1000 married women, and has since fluctuated at the higher level of 12.0 to 12.9 divorces per 1000 married women between 1995 and 2000.

While fragility of relationships may disrupt opportunities for childbearing, there is also evidence to suggest that unhappily married couples are less likely than other couples to have a (further) child (Lillard and Waite 1993). This may be more likely in contemporary marriages given that their survival is often under threat when emotional, sexual and companionship needs are not being met (Wolcott 1999). That is, intact but unhappy marriages may also result in lowering fertility.

Parents without partners

In a context of high relationship breakdown, there are also many parents without partners, some of whom may have hoped for more children. But their status as parents appears to lower their likelihood of forming new partnerships and may also lower their likelihood of having more children should they partner (Greene and

Biddlecom 2000; Stewart 2002; Thomson 1997a, 1997b).

However, Stewart (2002) points out that few fertility studies have taken into account the impact of stepchildren, and most of those that do, have not only ignored their "step" status (by combining biological children with stepchildren), but have also limited their attention to the children of the mother who are living with her and her partner.

Little is known about the extent to which parenting responsibilities of fathers without partners (including the amount of child support they are required to pay) affect their views about, and their likelihood of, partnering and having further children. In the United States, where child support regimes vary across states, research by Bloom, Conrad and Miller (1998) suggests that child support enforcement reduces the likelihood of marriage for low income men. On the other hand, if marriage does occur, fathers (low income or otherwise) are just as likely as "non-fathers" to have a child in this relationship.

Women's growing financial independence

Women's increased workforce participation and financial independence appears to be centrally linked with fertility trends. Women can now earn high incomes and are thus no longer as reliant on finding a partner for financial support as in the past. Indeed, women's high incomes may pose a barrier to partnership formation (Birrell and Rapson 1998).

Furthermore, women's opportunities to remain in paid work after they marry have increased over the past 35 years. It was not until 1966 that women were permitted to be appointed or to remain as permanent officers of the Commonwealth Public Service upon their marriage and to return to their jobs after the birth of their children. Since this period, participation in the labour force has increased dramatically for married women in all age groups (Weston et al. 2001).

Such a major social change inevitably requires other adjustments within the home, workplace and community to facilitate the new way of life. But as Moen and Yu (2000) point out, some of these adjustments take time to occur. A number of explanations for low fertility relate to such time lags. These include inflexible workplace practices; women's "double burden"; limited access to affordable, high quality child care; financial, career and other work-related costs linked with giving up work partially or fully to care for children; and potential clashes in values, attitudes or beliefs about family and paid work responsibilities.

Summary

In short, two-thirds of babies are born to married couples and most of the remainder appear to be born to couples who are cohabiting. The fertility rate thus depends largely on the formation and continuation of "live-in" partnerships, most particularly marriage. But partnerships are occurring later in life, their rate has fallen overall, and the risk of their breaking down within the first few years of their formation is considerable.

Furthermore, the presence of children from previous relationships may lower chances of partnering and of having additional children. Finally, women now have opportunities for financial independence and career success – opportunities that may interfere with partnership formation or their plans to have children.

What is behind these changing life course patterns?

Labour market, economy and other broad structural forces

Several authors maintain that trends in the labour market and the economy in general influence fertility rates, in part through their impact upon life course patterns.

Not surprisingly, there is strong historical evidence that Australia's economic circumstances have played a major role in influencing fertility rates since well before modern methods of birth control were introduced. Indeed, the sharp fall in fertility in the 1890s is explained in terms of the sudden economic collapse that occurred in 1893 (Ruzicka and Caldwell 1982). As de Vaus points out in this edition of *Family Matters*, the Great Depression of the 1930s saw the total fertility rate falling to 2.1 babies per woman in 1934, then rising as the economic outlook improved.

But if the economic outlook is so important to the fertility rate, why has the rate continued to fall in recent times?

Several authors have implicated the globalisation of the economy and associated labour market changes of the last two decades. Low-skilled yet relatively highly paid and secure jobs available to early school leavers have

assess perceived benefits. Perhaps the most well known is the large-scale study on the *Value of Children*, conducted in the 1970s in nine countries that varied in terms of development (for example, the Philippines and the United States). Benefits included economic, practical and psychosocial gains such as receiving help with household chores or economic support in old age, experiencing pride, love and companionship, deriving pleasure from watching the children grow up, making life more purposeful, and carrying on the family name (Hoffman and Manis 1979). More recently, Schoen and colleagues (1997) emphasise the importance of children in expanding and strengthening social ties, which in turn provide avenues to many other resources.

In developing countries young children are often relied upon to contribute financially to the family. However, in countries (like Australia) where child labour laws virtually eliminate children's direct contribution to the household economy, child-related benefits are mainly psychosocial. Some authors argue that these benefits do not accumulate with increasing family size. Kağıtcıbası (1997) concludes that parents can derive all the love they need from one or two children. Similarly, Schoen and

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virtually disappeared, having been replaced by jobs entailing fixed-term contracts and part-time or casual hours, thereby providing limited economic security (Kohler et al. 2001; McDonald 2000a, 2001c; Saunders 2001).

McDonald (2001a) also argues that this era of job insecurity has been accompanied by a strong economic cycle of "booms and busts" and rising or fluctuating house prices which combine to encourage continuing dual employment amongst couples as an insurance against dual joblessness, and to lead young people to invest in their own "human capital" (their education and career development) before considering having children. Investment in education, in turn, increases debts which may lead to further postponement of childbearing (Jackson 2002). According to McDonald (2000b, 2001d), childbearing is also discouraged by the limited financial, child care and other supports available to couples when mothers wish to participate in the labour force.

Inextricably linked with these broad structural forces are the considerable costs of having and raising children. These costs and their interplay are likely to cast a shadow on the benefits of having children and reinforce the need for educational and career investment.

Are the benefits of having children decreasing?

Schoen and colleagues (1997) point out that explanations for modern fertility trends can often be reduced to the argument that the fall in fertility has resulted not only from increasing costs of having children but also from decreasing benefits. Is there any evidence that this might be the case? The following discussion focuses on arguments in the literature about links between fertility trends and the nature of benefits and costs of having children.

While much of the literature has focused on costs of having children, relatively few studies have attempted to

colleagues (1997) argue that few children are required to strengthen family and friendship networks, and Kohlmann (2002) maintains that restricting family size may even increase the chances of receiving some benefits. According to this argument, in countries where economic benefits of children only apply in old age, it is more efficient for parents to have few children thereby allowing strong investment in their education.

In short, while having children can be very rewarding, several researchers maintain that such rewards do not accumulate as family size increases. In fact, the chances of receiving some benefits may decrease as family size increases. The financial costs, on the other hand, can be a force by themselves – as can the many non-financial costs of children.

Are the costs of having children increasing?

The fall in fertility rate has been attributed to a number of rising costs of having children, most particularly direct and indirect financial costs, but also emotional costs relating to giving up paid work and costs that might never eventuate but that nonetheless encourage couples to "think twice" about having children.

Financial and work-related costs

Over time, material living standards have increased in modern societies, with many of yesterday's perceived luxuries becoming today's perceived necessities – thus highlighting the importance of values in shaping considerations about whether or not a couple can afford to have children. Indeed, divergent views about the material necessities in life and associated expenditure patterns may partly explain the fact that the people who can least afford it are having the largest families (see de Vaus elsewhere in this edition).



In addition to the *direct* financial costs of having and raising children (for example, food, clothing, housing, education and possibly child care) are the *indirect* costs such as reduced earnings and potentially curtailed careers when caring for children takes precedence over paid work. While it appears that the foregone earnings of women who have children have diminished somewhat since the 1980s, when cohorts with the same level of education are compared (Gray and Chapman 2001), women's improved career opportunities mean that increasing numbers have a great deal to lose should they decide to relinquish full-time work to raise a family. Such losses are emphasised by McDonald (2000a, 2000b) as a central reason for the fall in fertility.

The deprivations are not only monetary, but can be felt in relinquishment of work-related prestige and diminished opportunities for social relationships, job skill development, and mental stimulation and challenge (see Barnes 2000; Perry-Jenkins, Repeti and Crouter 2000). Thus, while the labour market and economic context may encourage the accumulation of educational and career-based accomplishments, the benefits of this pathway may compete with having children as alternative avenues for self-fulfilment (Quesnel-Vallee and Morgan 2002).

Parents may, of course, use non-parental child care to enable each partner to remain in full-time work, but this introduces other monetary and time costs, with women typically carrying most of the child care and other domestic responsibilities (Bittman and Pixley 1997; Bittman and Matheson 1996; Moen and Yu 2000). These costs, along with potential difficulties in



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accessing high quality child care and worries about the suitability of child care for very young children, may contribute to couples' decisions to have few if any children, or to continue to defer decision-making.

The above issues relate to the "gender equity" explanation for low fertility. McDonald (2000a, 2000b) maintains that, in countries where educational and work opportunities of women are similar to those of men, but are seriously diminished for women if they have a child, then women will have fewer children than they might otherwise have had. In his view, high cost of non-parental child care and tax benefits that operate as disincentives for taking up part-time work combine to encourage women to have small families, as does lack of access to family-friendly work benefits.

While several policies have been introduced to adjust to workers' caring responsibilities, access to such work benefits appears to vary both between and within organisations (Gray and Tudball 2001). Furthermore, workers with family responsibilities may be reluctant to take advantage of existing benefits if they believe that doing so is likely to cause major disruptions at work, or jeopardise either their career advancement or their relationships with others in the workplace (Judiesch and Lyness 1999; Galinsky 1999; Marshall and Barnett 1993). The prevalence of such hidden barriers in Australia and their relevance to decisions about having children remains uncertain.

But how much value do women attach to paid work? McDonald (2001e) cites research suggesting that women tend to approve of and adopt a gradual return to the labour force as their youngest child grows older. But some authors argue that McDonald gives undue emphasis to the importance of paid work in women's lives (Hakim 2001; Manne 2001). In the United Kingdom, Hakim (2000) concludes that, while some women are career-centred (giving priority to work rather than raising children) and others are home-centred (giving priority to family and thus preferring not to work), the majority try to achieve a balance between the two. This debate highlights the relevance to fertility trends of values and beliefs about children's needs, and has sparked lively discussions about the appropriateness of some policies directed towards supporting women (or couples) in their roles as paid workers and parents (see interview with McDonald and Hakim in this edition of *Family Matters*).

In summary, it seems quite easy to identify many potential financial and work-related costs that may contribute to the falling fertility rate. Most of those discussed above are tangible costs, but the spectre of the intangible may also deter couples from having children, encourage them to postpone starting a family, or defer making decisions about having children.

Dealing with the "unknowns"

McDonald (2000b) points out that economic and non-economic (psychosocial) costs of having children can be difficult to decipher, and that negative "unknowns" may encourage individuals to err on the

side of caution. For instance, people may decide against having children because of uncertainties about job stability, housing prices, interest rates, or about chances of returning to paid work should they take time off to care for a child. Some couples may worry about the possible disruptive effects of a child on their relationship, the possibility that this child may follow worrying pathways or be harmed in some way, and the difficulties in coping with raising a child. These worries may be more prevalent than in the past, in line with the arguments of some authors that the social world has become increasingly hostile to the health and wellbeing of children and young people (eg Eckersley 1998; Garbarino 1995).

Kohler et al. (2001) point out that postponing having children can reduce some of the uncertainties, such as those relating to financial and relationship stability. They further note that starting a family is irreversible while planning or lack of planning is not. In their view, this situation encourages couples to postpone the decision to have children. Over time, choices thereby become increasingly restricted to having few if any children (and for those who postpone too long, there is no choice).

Costs linked with societal norms and personal values

As already noted, perceptions of the financial costs of children are inextricably linked with people's values. Allan, Hawker and Crow (2001) maintain that today's

parents (in Britain and Europe) express greater concern about the quality of their children's everyday experiences, their emotional development and educational achievement compared with parents in earlier times. Consistent with these observations, Australian time use surveys suggest that parents are investing more time in fewer children (Bittman 2002). Given these issues, children are expensive in terms of time, money and energy.

Others have argued that people have become increasingly concerned about achieving self-realisation, autonomy, and freedom from the bonds of traditional forces, including religion, and that these values are incompatible with parenting (Coleman 1999). It is interesting, though, that in a similar albeit more moralistic vein, the Royal Commission on the Decline of the Birth Rate (the "Mackellar Commission"), established around the turn of the 20th Century to inquire into decline in fertility in New South Wales, concluded that the fall in the birth rate was ultimately caused by "growing selfishness", as reflected in part by "a love of luxury and of social pleasures" (Hicks 1978: 23). Nevertheless, those who emphasise pursuit of freedom, along with the belief that responsible parenting requires much self-sacrifice, may be deterred from having children.

Changing values attached to children and parenting may also add to the costs of having children. In King's (2002) opinion, Australian society has become increasingly intolerant of children and parents tend to be disparaged, while in the United States, Crittenden (2001) maintains that a job devoted to nurturing a child full-time tends to be equated with "doing nothing". The diminishing importance of motherhood in women's lives is revealed in three Australian surveys. The proportion of married women under the age of 35 who agreed with the statement, "Whatever career a woman may have, her most important role in life is still that of becoming a mother" fell from 78 per cent in 1971 to 46 per cent in 1982 (McDonald 1983), and to 26 per cent in the 1991 Family Formation Project conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Also potentially relevant to decisions about starting a family are prospective parents' beliefs about whether young children need full-time parenting and, if not, whether they can access suitable child care. Research by Evans and Kelley (2002) suggests that most Australians believe that mothers should stay home full-time to care for children under school age. Under these circumstances, the psychological costs of using non-parental child care for children under school age may be high for some parents. The psychological costs might also be high for working parents who reject the notion that young children need full-time parenting, but who are unhappy about the suitability of services available. According to Wise (2002), parents' judgments of "suitability" of child care are based on a range of issues, including the warmth displayed by carers, and health and safety issues. She also notes that some of the qualities emphasised by parents vary according to their cultural background.

Drago, Scutella and Varner (2002) have specifically linked fertility with clashes in values. In their opinion, the trend towards part-time work for mothers in Australia reflects the presence of two beliefs that have a

negative impact on fertility: that responsible mothering cannot be achieved with full-time work, and that ideal workers are committed to uninterrupted employment involving long work hours. These authors maintain that such beliefs lead many career-oriented women to opt for childlessness.

As mentioned above, the fall in fertility may itself generate social norms that further reinforce the fall – norms that would not necessarily increase the costs of having children. This issue, along with other social effects and personal beliefs that might contribute to the fall in fertility, will be considered next.

Other social influences and personal beliefs

Changing life course patterns that result in small families and childlessness lead to greater tolerance and eventually become "norms", shaping the expectations and preferences of those entering adulthood. Increasingly, partnering and having children have become "choices" rather than inevitable pathways in life. Furthermore, as family size falls, those who decide to have children will be increasingly likely to restrict their choice between having only one or two children.

The decision to delay having a family may also be influenced by beliefs about the success of assisted reproductive technology as women (and men) age. Successes, not failures, tend to be publicised. Little is known about the prevalence of such beliefs, how they may have shifted with technological advances, and their impact on fertility decision-making.

The experiences of personal friends and other associates are also likely to play a major role in influencing family formation decisions. In fact, Kohler et al. (2001) argue that the tendency of prospective parents to draw on the experiences of others in their social networks has contributed to the postponement of decision-making and, consequently, low fertility rates. They maintain that prospective parents prefer to wait until they get a good idea of how others fare. But this takes time thus further delaying the decision.

When couples disagree

Given all the above trends that may discourage child-bearing, it is increasingly likely that at least one partner will either want to remain childless or will want to defer having children. What happens when couples disagree?

As Greene and Biddlecom (1997) note, most discussion of fertility trends ignore men and the couple dynamics. There is thus scant information about the reasons for, or consequences of, divergent preferences of partners regarding total family size, whether or not to have a first or additional child, or the timing of the next child. Little is also known about the ways in which couples resolve their differences.

The few studies that have taken into account the views of each partner suggest that men's preferences or expectations do influence childbearing outcomes. For instance, Thomson (1997a, 1997b) found that when couples disagree about having children, intentions tend to shift towards not having a child, while Greene and Biddlecom (2000) cite evidence suggesting that a difference in opinion over the timing of the (next) birth are particularly influential in determining whether or not a couple has a child.

Conclusion

Australia's total fertility rate is well below replacement level, is at an all-time low, and is continuing on a downward slide. This trend has created considerable angst, given its contribution to the ageing of the population and the projection that, if the rate falls below 1.6, the population will decline this century (ABS 2000).

Of course, not everyone agrees that the economic and social consequences for Australia of this scenario are necessarily dire. For example, Hamilton (2002: 1) argues that: "Population growth will not make us richer in economic terms and it will almost certainly make us poorer in terms of environmental amenity."

Nevertheless, if the master plan is to prevent total fertility from falling below 1.6, then we need to have a good understanding of the factors at play that are driving the birth rate down. These factors are complex and often mutually reinforcing, with fundamental ones being postponement of first births and consequent shortened childbearing years and increased risk of childlessness. The factors appear to include broad technological, structural, cultural and social changes, shifting pathways of friends and associates, changes in personal financial and life course circumstances, and shifts in beliefs and values of prospective parents.

However, there is a great deal of controversy about the relative importance of some issues, such as "gender equity" considerations and women's work preferences, and little is known about other issues, such as men's contribution to childbearing decisions and the impact on future childbearing of disagreements between partners. Furthermore, the nature and relative importance of forces deterring couples from having children will vary somewhat for different sub-groups in the population, and understanding these sub-group differences is a long way off.

Under these circumstances, it is little wonder that governments are struggling to develop policies that might curtail the falling birth rate. Perhaps the greatest hope stems from the fact that, despite all the known and uncertain forces operating against having children, most people want to become parents (Fisher 2002) and it appears that prospective parents want and expect to have more children than they end up

having (de Vaus in this edition, McDonald 2001b; Quesnel-Valee and Morgan 2002). That is, the spirit seems willing!

Mackay (1997) suggests that, as a consequence of having grown up in an era of relatively constant and rapid technological, social and cultural change, men and women born in the 1970s are more bent on keeping their options open. Ironically, a consequence of "drifting" is that the doors to having children are closing. Young adults need to be well informed about this matter. But they also need solid evidence that assures them that parenting will not close off all other avenues for a rewarding life, and that there will be much assistance from multiple sources (extended families, schools, neighbourhoods, communities, governments) in rearing the next generation.



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NEW INSTITUTE RESEARCH

Fertility Decision Making Project

The Australian Institute of Family Studies has joined in a partnership with the Office for the Status of Women, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, to conduct a study that will lead to a greater understanding of the reasons underlying the fertility decisions of men and women, both individuals and couples – the Fertility Decision Making Project.

A national random sample of approximately 2,500 people between the ages of 20 and 39 years will be selected to participate in phone interviews. Both retrospective and prospective data will be gathered in order to compare respondents' views of their past preferences with their current circumstances, desires, intentions, reproductive behaviour (use of contraception, sterilisation, terminations), and their expectations for the future.

The study focuses on the following themes and issues:

- the extent to which men and women have clear preferences and make firm decisions;

- the change in fertility preferences and decisions by age group;
- the relationship element in fertility preferences and decisions;
- the gender dimension of fertility preferences and decisions;
- the perceived costs, benefits and risks, including employment related and financial issues, that men and women consider in developing fertility preferences and in making decisions; and
- the outcomes of the fertility decision-making process.

The project is currently in the planning and development stage, with interviews expected to commence in April 2003.

For further information about the *Fertility Decision Making Project*, contact Ruth Weston or Robyn Parker, researchers with the Family and Marriage Program at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

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