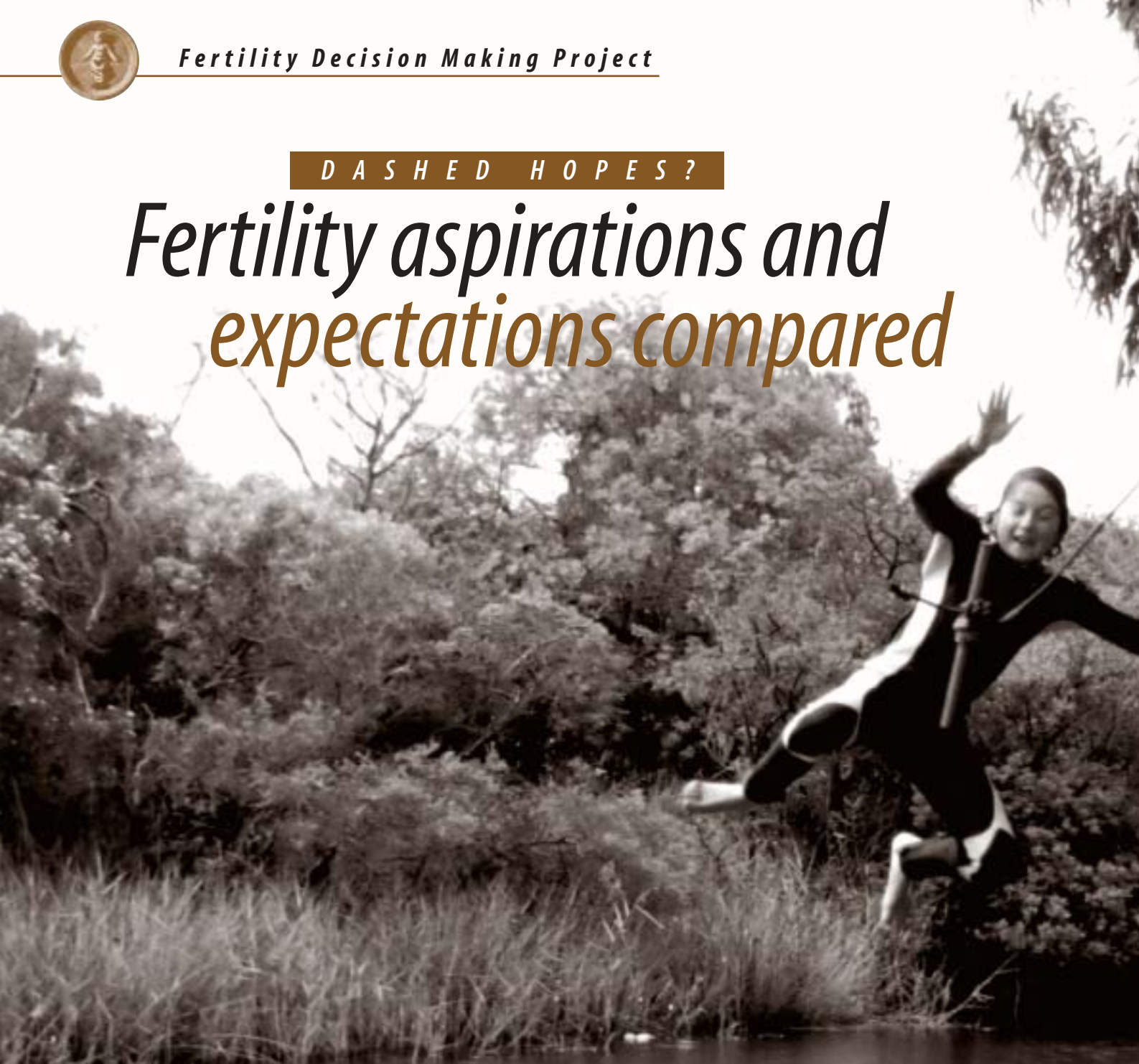




D A S H E D H O P E S ?

Fertility aspirations and expectations compared



Australia's total fertility rate is now below replacement level. In other words, women are having fewer than two children on average. But does this trend reflect what people really want?

RUTH WESTON AND LIXIA QU

The very name of the Australian Institute of Family Studies 2004 *Fertility Decision Making Project* may suggest an underlying assumption that childbearing today is a matter of choice rather than circumstance. Such an assumption is consistent with several changes in the external context in which childbearing occurs. For instance, people now have ready access to contraception, restrictions on abortion have been eased, society has become increasingly tolerant of varied life courses including single parenthood and childfree lifestyles, and

women have increased opportunities to pursue a fulfilling life without children.

Such trends might suggest that today's low fertility rate, which is below the replacement level of 2.1 babies per woman, simply reflects general trends in personal preferences. After all, some 45 years ago, many couples had more children than they expected before these developments took place (Peterson 1961).

Nevertheless, a number of explanations for today's low fertility rate focus on other aspects of the



external context that can have such a profound impact on decision-making that, for many people, choice may be more apparent than real (see the overview article p. 4 in this edition for a summary of these explanations). For instance, the virtual disappearance of well-paid and secure jobs for early school leavers, along with uncertainties regarding employment security, have led young people to invest heavily in their education and occupational development. This investment contributes to delays in partnering and to opportunity costs for women should they have children. Allied

to these trends are the many practical difficulties women in particular are likely to face in combining work with family life – difficulties that may lead couples to have fewer children than they would like to have.

How many children do Australians in their prime childbearing years ideally want, and how do these aspirations compare with the number of children they *expect* to have? How close are men and women aged in their late thirties to achieving the number of children they would ideally like, or at least expect to have? What factors help explain any discrepancies between ideal and expected family size? These were some of the key questions addressed in the Institute's *Fertility Decision Making Project*.

Meaning of aspirations and expectations

While by definition discrepancies between aspirations and expectations suggest that respondents feel that they will not achieve their desired family size, how should consistency between aspirations and expectations be interpreted?

The question on respondents' ideal number of children, their *aspirations*, was designed to tap into inclinations that are removed as much as possible from individual circumstances, including other life goals. On the other hand, *expectations* were assumed to be strongly influenced by such circumstances. This conceptualisation is consistent with Miller's (1994) model of fertility decision-making. To Miller, aspirations (or "desires") represent what individuals want regardless of apparent constraints. Miller focused on "intentions" rather than "expectations" (which may include consideration of the chances of success in achieving intended outcomes). In his view, "intentions" refer to decisions made based on personal desires in the light of apparent constraints. In other words, desires help shape intentions, but are not affected by perceived constraints.

Nevertheless, aspirations in general (including "ideals" "desires", "preferences"), seem unlikely to be totally divorced from the perceived realities in life. First, it can be difficult to envision possibilities that are very remote from personal life experiences. For instance, the experience of having a first child provides important insights into the rewards and difficulties of parenthood and may result in modification of family size aspirations. Allied to this issue, aspirations may be strongly influenced (and thus constrained) by societal norms. For example, living with a partner prior to marriage would have been unthinkable to many people some 50 years ago when there was a strong stigma attached to sexual relationships and childbearing outside marriage, and when the contraceptive pill was not yet available. Nowadays, nearly three quarters of couples who marry live together first (ABS 2003).

Perceived constraints (including competing aspirations) can also help shape or modify aspirations through various defensive psychological processes (Brandtstädter and Rothermund 2002; Festinger

1957; Lazarus and Folkman 1994). These defensive reappraisals may result in the attainable becoming more attractive than the unattainable, so that a positive sense of wellbeing is maintained or achieved.

Finally, aspirations may also change as objective circumstances change. New opportunities may generate revision of aspirations. Finding a partner may lead some people who previously set store on achieving certain opportunities afforded them by being “child-free” to change their priorities. Raising a family may emerge as a highly prized pathway in life.

Whatever the processes involved, it seems likely that people will vary in the extent to which they take into account their personal circumstances (and possible competing aspirations) when working out or re-evaluating how many children they would ideally like to have. For instance, some may decide that a family of two children is ideal for them because they would not be able to afford private education for more than two children, or because their age makes it unlikely that they could have more than two children. Others may take less account of competing aspirations and practical constraints when establishing their ideal family size, while acknowledging that their ideal family size is unachievable. In other words, “ideals” may not mean the same thing to all respondents in a survey.

While aspirations in this article refer to the number of children respondents considered personally ideal, these aspirations are sometimes referred to as



The need for young adults to invest in their education and establish themselves in their work before they can start a family. Finding a lifelong mate during this demanding time can be difficult.

“desires”, “wants”, or “preferences” or “aspirations”. “Family size” refers to the respondents’ number of biological or adopted children. The analysis focuses first on the popularity of different family sizes, then on gaps between the averages derived for ideal, expected and actual family sizes. The proportions of respondents who believed they would have (or already had) the same, more or fewer children than they considered ideal are examined.

Socio-demographic groups examined

If ideals or at least expectations about having children are shaped by circumstances, such causal connections should be revealed through comparison of the views of respondents who vary in terms of characteristics that reflect the experience of these circumstances. On the other hand, childbearing aspirations may encourage the adoption of certain characteristics (for example, couples who want children may decide to get married), although for some statuses, there is no choice (for example, age). While a variety of different circumstances may relate to ideals or at least expectations about having children, those examined in this article are gender, age, relationship status, educational status and whether or not respondents already had children.

Table 1 shows that, across the four five-year age groups, men were less likely than women to be married and more likely than women to be single. Less than half the men under the age of 35 and women under the age of 30 were married, while more than half the men under 30 and women under 25 had no partner. Although only a minority in each age group were cohabiting, women in their twenties were the most likely of all groups to be cohabiting (24 per cent) and men and women in their late thirties were the least likely to be in this situation (10 per cent).

Patterns of educational status were similar for men and women. The greatest difference emerged for

Table 1 Relationship status, highest qualification achieved or being pursued, and parenthood by age and gender

	Age			
	20-24 %	25-29 %	30-34 %	35-39 %
Men				
Married	5.3	25.0	40.2	54.0
Cohabiting	15.6	18.6	17.9	9.8
Single	79.1	56.4	41.9	36.2
Total	100	100	100	100
Women				
Married	12.0	40.0	58.9	64.3
Cohabiting	23.7	21.3	13.2	9.5
Single	64.3	38.7	27.9	26.2
Total	100	100	100	100
Men				
No post-school qualification	24.3	30.6	26.5	31.3
Non-degree qualification	27.0	27.6	31.0	26.4
Degree or higher	48.7	41.9	42.5	42.3
Total	100	100	100	100
Women				
No post-school qualification	27.4	28.4	29.7	37.9
Non-degree qualification	24.5	26.2	26.7	24.6
Degree or higher	48.1	45.4	43.6	37.5
Total	100	100	100	100
Ever had children				
Men	8.3	22.4	45.4	62.7
Women	24.7	48.9	70.6	83.7



those in their late thirties where, in contrast to all other groups, women were equally likely to have the lowest or highest educational statuses listed in Table 1 (38 per cent). All other male and female groups most commonly had or were pursuing a degree or higher qualification (42 to 49 per cent) while much the same proportions were represented in the other two educational status groups (24 to 31 per cent).

Parenthood was, of course, closely related to relationship status, while relationship status also varied with age. Given that men tend to be older than women when they partner, it is not surprising that men were less likely than women to have had a child (34 per cent compared with 59 per cent). This gender difference applied across all five-year age groups. While men and women in their twenties and thirties who were married were the most likely of the three relationship status groups to be parents, most women in their thirties who were married, cohabiting or single were parents, but only a minority of cohabiting and single men of this age were parents.

Parenthood was also related to educational status. Those who neither had nor were pursuing post-school qualifications were the most likely to be parents, while those with or pursuing a degree or higher qualification were the least likely to be in this position. These differences were particularly marked for women in their twenties: 65 per cent of women in the lowest educational group were parents, compared with only 19 per cent of those with or pursuing a degree or higher qualification. However, those most likely to be parents were women in their thirties in the lowest educational group (91 per cent).

Interestingly, while men in their twenties and thirties who neither had nor were pursuing post-school qualifications were more likely than other men to be parents, those in their thirties in this lowest educational group were less likely to be partnered (46 per cent compared with 35–39 per cent).

In summary, compared with men, women were more likely to be married and less likely to be unpartnered, while for most age groups, patterns of educational status of men and women were similar. Married men and women, and those who neither had nor were pursuing post-school qualifications, were the most likely to be parents. Nevertheless, most women in their thirties were parents, regardless of their relationship status and educational level.

Popularity of different family sizes

In this section, level of popularity of a different family size is based on the proportions of respondents who nominated the different family sizes as personally ideal. Figures 1a and 1b show that, across all age groups, two-child families were the most popular, followed by three-child families. A family of four or more children was more popular than no children or only one child (taken separately). In fact, each of these latter two alternatives (taken separately) was considered to be ideal by less than 10 per cent of men and women in all age groups.

Although two-child families were the most popular of all family sizes for both men and women, this preference applied to less than half the women in all age groups (44–49 per cent) and less than half the men in their late thirties (47 per cent, compared with 55–60 per cent of other men). On the other hand, women in each age group were more inclined than men of the same age to consider at least three children to be ideal (43–44 per cent compared with 31–37 per cent).

These proportions are based on all men and women in each age group, including those who were already parents. As noted above, women were more likely than men of the same age to have children. Nevertheless, two-child families represented the most common ideal family size of childless respondents in the four age groups (applying to 51–63 per cent of men and 44–56 per cent of women).

While three-child families were the second most common preference for childless respondents

Figure 1a Men: ideal number of children by age

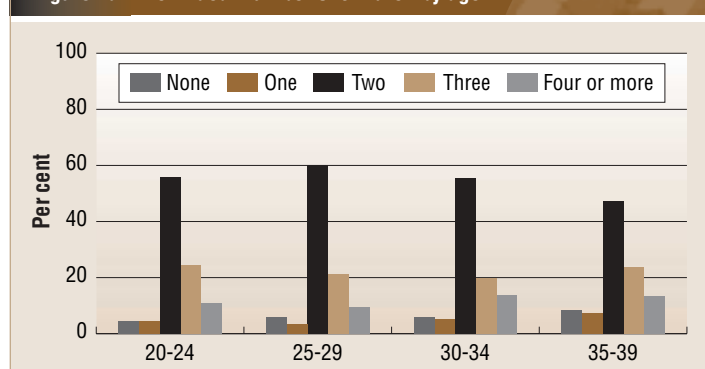
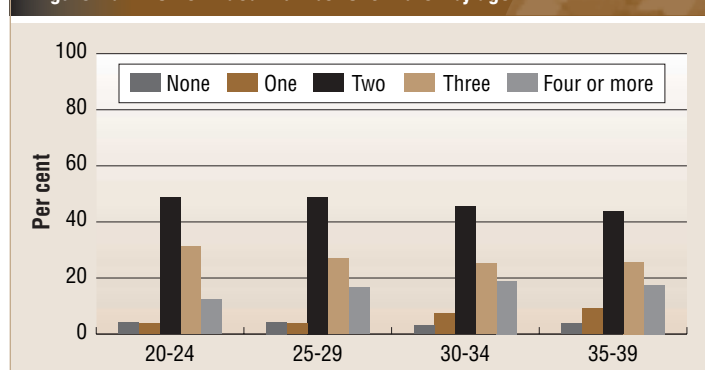


Figure 1b Women: ideal number of children by age



under 35 years old (15–24 per cent of men; 18–29 per cent of women), remaining childless was the second most commonly mentioned preference for those in their late thirties (21 per cent of men and 24 per cent of women). In fact, as the age of the group increased, remaining childless or having only one child was progressively more popular, while having three children, or four or more children, was less popular. For example, 24 per cent of childless women in their late thirties wanted to remain childless compared with only 5 per cent for childless women in their early twenties. With cross-sectional data it is not possible to assess the extent to which these trends reflect a re-evaluation of preferences of childless respondents as they approach their forties, and the extent to which they simply reflect the fact that those approaching their forties would include an increased concentration of people who never wanted children.

The popularity of two children, followed by three, then four or more applied to men and women in their twenties and thirties in each of the relationship and educational status group, although for some subgroups, differences were marginal regarding preferences for extreme family sizes (four or more children compared with no children or only one child taken separately). However, married men in their thirties and married women in their twenties and thirties were less likely than cohabiting and single men and women of the same age to prefer no children or one child (men: 6 per cent compared with 18–20 per cent; women in their twenties: 2 per cent compared with 10 per cent; women in their thirties: 5 per cent compared with 21 per cent).

Family size ideals varied significantly with educational status for one group only: women in their thirties (although patterns for men in their thirties almost reached the conventional five per cent level of significance). Of women in their thirties, those with/pursuing degrees or higher qualifications were the most likely of the three educational status groups to consider two children to be ideal (50 per cent compared with 41–42 per cent) and the least likely to prefer four or more children (14 per cent compared with 21–22 per cent).

In summary, a family of two children was the most popular for all groups examined. Across all age, relationship status and educational status groups, families of at least three children were more popular than one-child families or no children. Women were slightly more likely than men to prefer at least three children, but having no children was the second most common choice of childless respondents in their thirties.

Current, ideal and expected family sizes

Figures 2a and 2b show the averages (means) derived for ideal, expected and actual family size for men and women respectively in their early and late twenties and thirties. For each sex taken separately, averages for ideal family size were similar across the four age groups (men 2.3–2.4 children; women 2.5–2.6 children), as were averages for expected family size (men 1.7–1.8 children; women 2.1 children for each age group), with ideal family size being higher than expected family size. Women's averages for ideal and expected family size were slightly higher than those for men, although the difference in ideal family size was almost identical for those in their early twenties (2.5 compared with 2.4).

It is noteworthy that the average numbers of children that men and women in their late thirties actually had were below the average expected family sizes (men 1.3 compared with 1.8; women 1.8 compared with 2.1). Given that men tended to be two or three years older than their partner, it is not surprising that the gap between the actual and expected number of children was greater for men than that for women. The gap will narrow further as some men and women in their late thirties have a child or more children.

The similarity between age groups in the averages derived for ideals do not necessarily suggest that views on these issues remain stable from the early twenties to the late thirties – an issue examined by Qu and Weston in this edition of *Family Matters* (p. 18). Expectations may also have undergone considerable re-evaluation for the older groups. Despite

Figure 2a Men: current, expected and ideal number of children

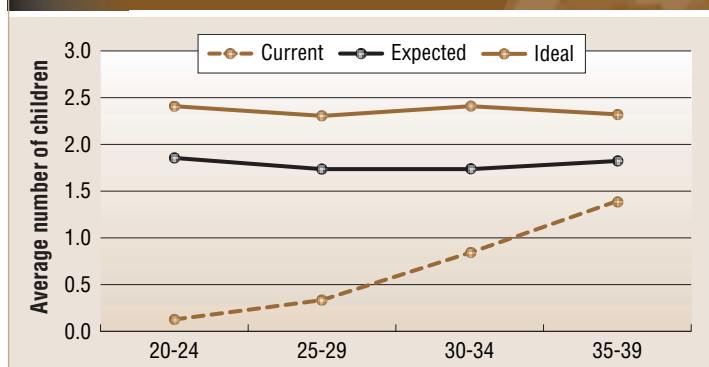
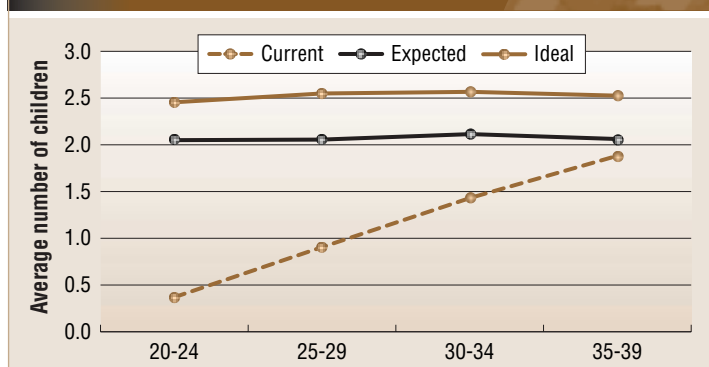


Figure 2b Women: current, expected and ideal number of children





Maintaining relationships in the hustle and bustle of modern, work-oriented life can be equally if not more demanding – particularly in the context of mounting expectations that emotional needs must be met for the relationship to last.

such possibilities, it is noteworthy that, even in their late thirties, neither the women nor the men were expecting to have the number of children they said they ideally wanted.

Regardless of whether they were married, cohabiting or single, average ideal family sizes were higher than the averages expected for men and women in their twenties and thirties. The same applied to patterns of averages for those in the three educational status groups. Of each of these different groups, the greatest discrepancy between average ideals and expectations occurred for men and women who were single (men 2.3 compared with 1.4; women 2.4 compared with 1.7), while the smallest discrepancy occurred for men and women who were married (men 2.5 compared with 2.3; women 2.7 compared with 2.4)

Prevalence of matches between ideals and expectations

Although means simplify the results, they do so by masking a great deal of useful information. For example, no more than 5 per cent of men and women in their twenties did not want any children, while 25 per cent of men and 15 per cent of women of the same ages expected to have no children. It is therefore useful to assess the proportions of people who believed that they would achieve their ideal family size, and the proportions who expected to under-achieve or even over-achieve their aspirations.

Although the means for ideal family size were higher than those for expected family size, ideals were not typically seen as unrealistic. Rather, 61 per cent of all men and 64 per cent of all women indicated that they expected to achieve (or had already achieved) the family size they considered ideal. The means derived for expectations were lower than those derived for ideals because most of the other respondents believed that they would have fewer children than they considered ideal. This belief was indicated by 34 per cent of all men and by 32 per cent of all

women. The remaining 6 per cent of men and 4 per cent of women believed that they would have more children than they ideally wanted. These general trends were apparent for the four age groups taken separately (Figures 3a and 3b).

However, while two-thirds of the childless men and women in their early twenties appeared to believe they would achieve their ideal family size (66 per cent and 67 per cent respectively), under half of those in their late thirties felt this way (49 per cent and 43 per cent respectively). In fact, a higher proportion of women in their late thirties felt that they would under-achieve rather than achieve their ideal family size (56 per cent compared with 43 per cent), while men were evenly divided on this issue (48 per cent in each group).

It is noteworthy that, even in their early twenties, around 30 per cent of men and women without children felt they would not achieve their ideal family size.

The proportion of respondents expecting to achieve their ideals was strongly related to relationship status for men and women in their twenties and thirties (taken separately) (Figures 4a and 4b). Those most likely to expect to achieve their ideal family size were married men and women in their twenties and thirties, and cohabiting women in their twenties (68 to 70 per cent), while those least likely to expect this were single men and women in their thirties. Indeed, a slightly higher proportion of these older single men felt

Figure 3a Men: match between ideal number and expected number of children by age

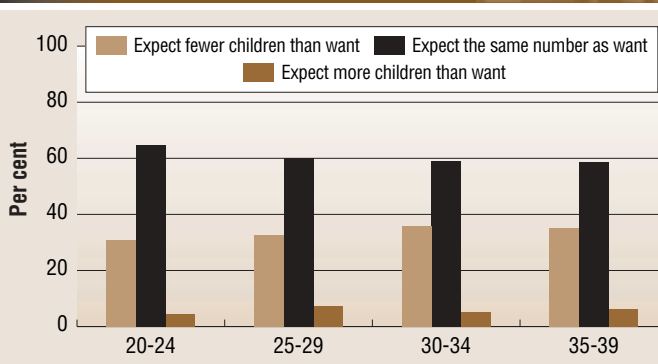
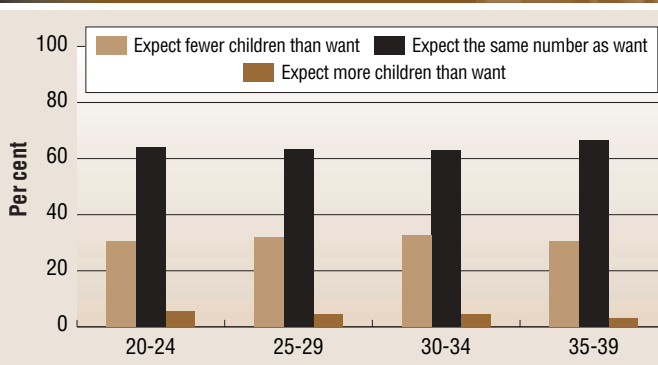


Figure 3b Women: match between ideal number and expected number of children by age



that they would “under-achieve” than achieve their preference (50 per cent compared with 45 per cent) while the reverse applied for women in their thirties (45 per cent compared with 52 per cent).

Whatever the family size ideals held by men and women, most respondents in each educational status group indicated that they expected to achieve (or had achieved) their ideal family size. Across education status groups, just over 30 per cent of men in their twenties and 32 to 41 per cent of men in their thirties believed that they would have fewer children than they considered ideal – a situation that applied to 29 to 37 per cent of women in their twenties and 30 to 34 per cent of women in their thirties. No more than 10 per cent in any group expected to have more children than they considered ideal.

Nevertheless, men in their thirties who neither had nor were pursuing post-school qualifications were less likely than other men to expect to achieve their ideal family size (41 per cent compared with 32-34 per cent). As noted above, men in their thirties in the lowest educational status group were also less likely than other men of the same age to be partnered, although single men in the lowest educational status group were more likely to have children than other single men. These trends are generally consistent with the arguments by Birrell, Rapson and Hourigan (2004) that men with poor financial prospects are

less likely than other men to be able to have and raise children in a secure relationship.

While few respondents felt that they would have more children than they considered ideal, it is interesting to note that, of the men in their twenties, a higher proportion who were married or cohabiting than single felt this way (12 per cent and 11 per cent respectively compared with 3 per cent of single men in their twenties, and 5 per cent to 7 per cent of all men in their thirties). (The proportions of women indicating this ranged from 3 per cent to 8 per cent.) Reasons provided by respondents for expecting more children than they considered ideal included desires to accommodate partner’s wishes, to give their only child a sibling, or to have a gender mix of children.

Summary and conclusions

This article has examined the number of children respondents wanted to have and the number they expected (that is, the fit between the expected and the ideal.) Three clear findings emerged. First, most men and women wanted two or more children. Less than 10 per cent of all childless respondents wanted to remain childless. Second, a gap existed between the average number of children people wanted and the average number they expected: people on average wanted more children than they expected to have. Third, despite these general trends, most individual men and women felt they already had or would have the number of children they wanted. Those who did not were more likely to believe that they would have fewer children than they wanted rather than the reverse.

These findings relating to expected achievement of aspirations varied by age for childless respondents, with those in their late thirties (especially women) being particularly likely to expect that they would not have as many children as they wanted. Allied to this issue, the findings also varied according to relationship status, especially for men and women in their thirties: married respondents were the most likely to feel that they had or would achieve their aspirations; single respondents were the least likely to feel this way. Educational status was linked with men’s views but not those of women. Men who neither had nor were pursuing post-school qualifications were less likely than other men to believe that they would have as many children as they wanted.

To what extent do these data support the argument that people are achieving their fertility preferences? The short answer seems to be that most people feel they are doing so, but significant numbers believe they will not reach their ideal family size. Of note is that the proportion of respondents who think they will have children is higher than current population projections for Australia suggest. For example, the Australian Bureau of

Figure 4a Men: match between ideal number and expected number of children by relationship status and age

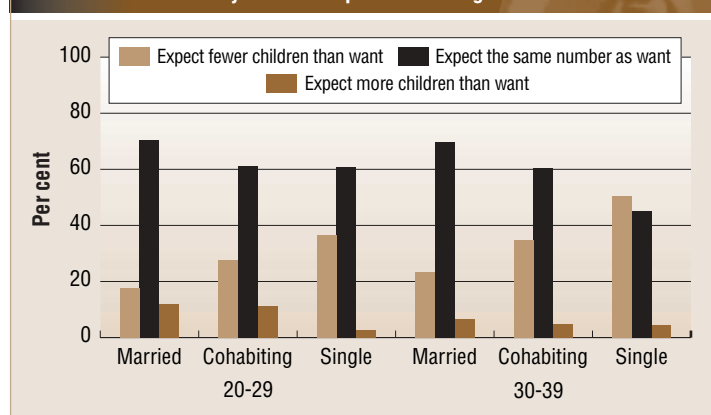
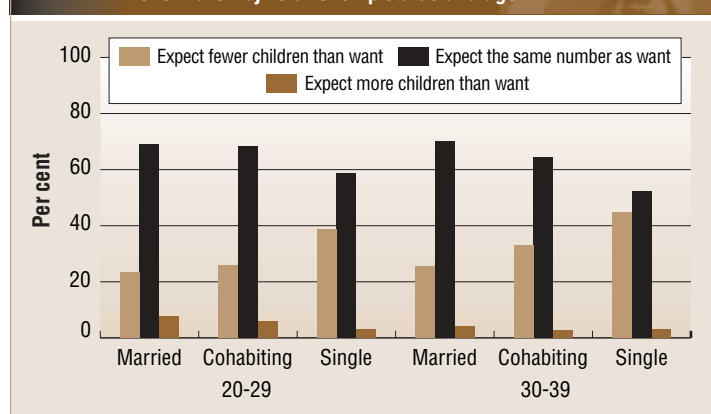


Figure 4b Women: match between ideal number and expected number of children by relationship status and age





Limited "family-friendly" work policies, high cost child care, and tax benefits that operate as disincentives for taking up part-time work combine to encourage women to have fewer children than they wish to have.

Statistics (ABS 2002) projects that one quarter of women in their childbearing years will remain childless.

It would seem that helping people to achieve their expectations is a thorny issue for policy. To begin with, a number of complex social forces appear to be affecting family formation and size (see overview article, p. 4). As McDonald (2002) points out, these forces include the need for young adults to invest in their education and establish themselves in their work before they can start a family. Finding a lifelong mate during this demanding time can be difficult. Maintaining relationships in the hustle and bustle of modern, work-oriented life can be equally if not more demanding – particularly in the context of mounting expectations that emotional needs must be met for the relationship to last (Giddens 1992). In addition, a fundamental problem for policy would seem to be that much of this terrain is in the realm of the private and governments are naturally reluctant to intrude into people's relationship issues – even where there may be serious long-lasting consequences when a population is unable to replace itself.

McDonald (2002) nonetheless maintains that much can still be done, particularly in relation to gender equity. According to McDonald, in countries where educational and work opportunities for women are similar to those for men but are seriously diminished for women if they have a child, then women

will have fewer children than otherwise. In McDonald's view, limited "family-friendly" work policies, high cost child care, and tax benefits that operate as disincentives for taking up part-time work combine to encourage women to have fewer children than they wish to have. It seems very likely that these various considerations would also help shape partnered men's views about having children, for fertility decisions are typically couple decisions (Thomson 1997a, 1997b).

Some countries are doing more to promote childbearing than others. Singapore is one example where pro-fertility initiatives are now extensive and highly supportive (see Weston and Hayes in this edition, p. 83). There is no doubt that Australia will be closely watching the initiatives of other countries in a bid to helping its own policy directions.

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