

## **Asking the Actors: A Radical(?) Approach to Understanding Ongoing Fertility Decline in Australia**

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The project reported on here is in its early stages, and indeed for reasons unforeseen is less advanced than had been anticipated when the paper was offered. It seeks to enhance understanding of the contemporary low and declining level of fertility in Australia by grafting on to a national longitudinal survey that has gathered data on, among other things, family formation, a significant qualitative element. Surveys typically yield aggregate data on partnering and parenting trends and patterns, from which analysts stand back and speculate as to causes, interrelations and implications. But aggregates reflect the decisions of individuals and couples. What do they, individually, perceive to be, or to have been, the forces impinging on and constraining their family formation behaviour? Efforts to explore, in depth, individual family formation decisions, experiences, and perceptions as to influential personal and institutional forces and constraints have the potential to greatly enrich and contextualize understanding of the historically low levels of fertility that currently prevail in countries like Australia.

### **Australia's Recent Fertility Experience**

Following a fertility transition that saw marital fertility fall from 73.6 per cent of the Hutterite level in 1881 (Coale's  $I_g$  index) to 32.1 per cent in 1933 (Jones 1971) (TFR = 2.17), the post-war baby boom in Australia saw fertility peak at a TFR of 3.57 in 1961. The advent of oral contraception and the IUD then saw the TFR fall to 2.85 in 1967 as unwanted higher parity

births were averted and the potential for deferring first births after marriage began to be realised. After briefly plateauing, it declined further after 1971, passing below replacement level in 1977 to reach 1.90 in 1980. Central to this phase of decline were trends to later and less universal marriage that emphatically reversed those to earlier and more universal marriage that had underpinned the baby boom (Carmichael 1988). They were supported by improved access to induced abortion, more widespread consensual partnering, and more frequent resort to contraceptive sterilization. The former two developments facilitated a rapid reduction in the number of pregnancy-induced marriages (cohabitation was conducive to more effective premarital contraception), and the latter (Santow 1991) further enhanced couples' capacity to end childbearing at desired parities. There followed an extended period of apparent stability in the TFR, but this masked the cancelling of continued fertility decline among women aged in their twenties by rising fertility at ages 30-39, as cohorts that had initiated the former trend passed through the latter age group (Carmichael and McDonald 1999).

From 1992, however, a new phase of gentle, but persistent, decline in the TFR has set in. It was always well nigh inevitable that deferment of childbearing by women aged in their twenties would be followed by a period of compensatory increases in fertility at older reproductive ages. But compensation is not guaranteed; a birth deferred is a birth less likely to ever occur. Signs have begun to emerge that fertility increases among women aged in their thirties have run their course, while the declines at younger ages continue. Gentle decline in the TFR from 1.89 in 1992 to 1.75 in 1999 has been the result. Australian fertility is far from being as low as that of many European countries. But it is well below replacement level, lower than it has ever previously been, and likely to fall further.

### **Low Fertility: The Explanations**

As inspection of data published regularly in the INED journal *Population* (e.g., Monnier 1990, Sardon, 2000) quickly affirms, the story just sketched for Australia has broad parallels pretty much throughout European and other more developed countries. The timing and extent of declines have varied, but fertility has fallen from levels that were generally well above replacement in the early to mid-1960s to levels in the late 1990s that, with only the odd exception, were below, and frequently well below, that level. The wide prevalence of sub-replacement fertility among these populations, and the serious implications for several

European countries of *very* low fertility, have made low fertility a major topic of demographic debate.

At one level, as van de Kaa's (1996) useful discussion of 'anchored narratives' reflects, the literature generated by this debate represents a new chapter in the broader literature on fertility change whose dominant focus has been the (First) Demographic Transition. The new chapter itself has perhaps had two broad foci. First, there naturally has been concern to explain why fertility has declined to such unprecedentedly low levels, often in concert with significant rises in consensual partnering, non-marital childbearing and divorce, and sizeable falls in total first marriage rates (Carmichael 1995). The amalgam of these trends is now widely referred to, though not without dissenters, as the Second Demographic Transition (Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa 1986, van de Kaa 1987, 1994). Second, cross-national differences in the degree to which fertility has fallen below replacement level have attracted attention. As already intimated, declines that have occurred in some countries have dire implications for those countries' demographic futures should TFRs persist at present levels, and comparisons with countries that have managed to maintain fertility at levels closer to replacement could offer valuable clues to potentially effective remedial policy initiatives.

Studies of this second type inherently recognise geographic variability, and a need to embed understanding of the experiences of individual countries in their unique histories and cultures, and the 'path-dependent' institutional structures to which these give rise (McNicoll 1994). In a reproductive climate governed overwhelmingly by choice and offering women attractive alternatives to full-time motherhood, some institutional combinations have proved less conducive than others have to maintaining fertility reasonably close to replacement level. A key cross-national differentiator highlighted by several writers has been the degree to which fertility-relevant institutions and government policies reflect a 'breadwinner' ideology of the family, or one variously labelled 'individual' (Sainsbury 1994), 'individual and equal role sharing' (Wetzels 2000) and 'gender equity' (McDonald 2000a). The former ideology sees fathers going out to work while mothers care for children at home; the latter focuses on the individual, and sees family roles being shared, not assigned on the basis of gender. Sainsbury uses this dichotomy to introduce gender to a comparative analysis of welfare states (the Netherlands, the UK, the US and Sweden). Wetzels' title, *Squeezing Birth Into Working Life*, nicely captures a dilemma widely believed to be at the core of contemporary low fertility. She draws on both Sainsbury and Esping-Andersen's (1990) classification of welfare states as

‘liberal’, ‘corporatist’ or ‘social democratic’ in contrasting women’s success in combining motherhood and employment in Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands and Sweden. McDonald, too, cites Esping-Andersen (1996) as a major inspiration. He argues (2000a:1) that the *very* low levels of fertility now observed in some developed countries ‘can be explained in terms of incoherence between the levels of gender equity applying in different social institutions.’ In most developed countries the institutions of education and the labour force, which deal with people as individuals, feature high levels of gender equity. However, institutions that deal with people as members of families – the family itself, the taxation and income transfer systems, the provision of services to families, and industrial relations (the terms and conditions of employment) – are apt, to varying degrees, to reflect or assume a breadwinner model of the family. To the extent that they do, having children compromises women’s ability to take advantage of educational and employment opportunity, creating an incentive to restrict childbearing. The more pervasive the patriarchal breadwinner model is, especially within the family itself, the starker the choice, the greater this incentive, and the greater the possibility of fertility falling to a (p.1) ‘precariously low long-term level’. Conversely, the more pervasive the principle of gender equity, the better the prospect that aggregate fertility will approach a socially desirable replacement level (Chesnais 1996).

Turning to explanations for fertility decline and accompanying demographic trends, advances in contraceptive technology in the early 1960s clearly acted as a trigger in many instances. They are sometimes passed off as mere facilitators of change, but van de Kaa’s (1997:4) description of them as ‘the linchpin of it all’ is compelling, and studies such as Murphy’s (1993) for Britain support this view. The pill and the IUD gave women, and couples, unprecedented control over their fertility, and hence unprecedented choice over whether and when to have children. Moreover, in quest of ultimate control and choice they also, in many countries, stimulated moves to add abortion and sterilization to the mix of available options. If this fertility control revolution did not underpin the feminism that from the 1960s urged women to seek greater fulfilment and independence in education and employment, it very strongly buttressed it. And it clearly opened up opportunities for innovative demographic behaviour as successive ‘mental cohorts’ (van de Kaa 1997, Carmichael 1998) sought to exploit it. It was argued above, for example, that one initial response to oral contraception in Australia was the deferment of first births after marriage (Ruzicka and Choi 1982, Carmichael 1988). As the early years of marriage became typically childless, however, it was but a short step to couples

simply living together, which in turn made ending unfulfilling unions and putting off committing to marriage and parenthood easier. The associated potential for delayed and reduced childbearing is obvious. The importance of mental cohorts of behavioural innovators over recent decades is supported by findings such as that of Rindfuss *et al.* (1996) in respect of a marked 1960-91 US trend toward proportionately more mothers of pre-school children working. They conclude that behavioural change preceded, not followed, attitudinal change accepting of non-parental care of young children. Indeed behavioural change probably brought attitudinal change about.

The advent of modern methods of contraception aside, what explanations have been advanced for recent fertility decline in developed countries? Summaries of the literature include those by van de Kaa (1996) and Coleman (1999). The former is incorporated into a broader summary of research on the determinants of fertility that also covers the First Demographic Transition. It traverses economic explanations, and the roles of innovation and diffusion (which largely concern the impact of modern contraception), ideational and cultural change, and path-dependency and institutional change. Coleman's summary has been reduced by McDonald (2000b) to four 'theories': rational choice theory, risk aversion theory, post-materialist values theory and gender equity theory.

Economic explanations and rational choice theory are to a considerable extent common ground. The latter sees people carefully assessing whether the benefits of having another child (largely psychological and unquantifiable) outweigh the costs (which are more measurable). There exist psychological benefit thresholds that decline with increasing parity of the child, and probably also with increasing age of the parent. While these might have fallen over time and could vary geographically, the more likely determinants of fertility declines and differentials have been rising costs of children and cross-national cost differentials. The former are likely to have been associated, for example, with rising proportions of women in employment (for whom having a child entails a loss of earnings), and with the rolling back of welfare states. The latter could reflect, say, differential government provision of services for families, and differential capacities to combine work and family because of the ways societies are organised.

Risk aversion theory to some extent conflicts with rational choice theory in that it denies a good understanding of costs and benefits. It proposes that 'If there is a perception that economic, social, intimate or personal futures are uncertain, decision makers may err on the side of safety in order to avert risk' (McDonald 2000b:15). Thus, fertility decline and low

fertility may in part reflect increased uncertainty in any or all of these spheres. In the economic sphere, risk aversion implies investment in security (education, a career, savings) over the insecurity that having children brings (reduced income and labour force attachment, higher consumption expenditure, responsibility for dependents). The rolling back of welfare states has entailed transferring risk and cost from the state to individuals and families. In Australia, industrial relations policy similarly has sought to pare back employer obligations to employees. According to McDonald (2000b:16), ‘the direction of social policy in almost all industrialised countries is to increase the risks that people face’. Add concerns over whether relationships will endure, fears that children will disrupt dyadic relationships and lifestyles, and so on, and risk aversion is a highly plausible explanation for contemporary reluctance to have children.

What McDonald labels ‘post-materialist values theory’ is what van de Kaa (1996:425) describes as ‘the quintessential narrative of ideational and cultural change’. Promulgated by van de Kaa, Lesthaeghe and associates in advancing the idea of a Second Demographic Transition, it contends that the driving force behind declining fertility and accompanying trends in developed nations has been a major value shift towards greater individualism, secularism and post-materialism. Lesthaeghe’s (1991:4) core concept is ‘individual autonomy’; ‘individual freedom of choice and the non-acceptance of external authority or morality’. Asserted ‘very quiet[ly]’ in the privacy of matrimonial bedrooms during the First Demographic Transition, it has been asserted much more publicly since the 1960s, as self-fulfilment, and hence the quality of dyadic relations rather than of children, has become paramount. Institutional authority, especially religious authority, has been openly confronted, and post-material values (Inglehart 1977), which in a climate of rising affluence, welfare state protection and freedom from global conflict stress satisfaction and self-fulfilment over survival, increasingly have been subscribed to. Van de Kaa (1994:114) sees this value change having ‘changed the institutional context and mental model of the family’. Thus, Hall (1993:6) writes of the emergence of ‘reproductive individualism’, and Lesthaeghe and Meekers (1986:248) of parenthood being ‘cast in more egocentric terms’. Decisions to have children are made less out of religiously inspired social duty, and more on the basis of assessments that they will satisfy private needs, a model that allows them to be perceived as potential threats and not automatically as relational anchors. McDonald (2000b) is, however, unimpressed by post-materialist values theory. He lists two flaws: the fact that fertility is higher in more liberal developed societies; and evidence that

fertility preferences in early adulthood considerably exceed achieved fertility, suggesting that life-course encounters, not values, reduce fertility.

McDonald's (2000b:17) firm belief is that 'low fertility is a societal phenomenon related to the structure of social institutions'. While the role of such institutions permeates both rational choice and risk aversion theory, it is most comprehensively embodied in gender equity theory. Since the 1960s women in developed countries have asserted their right to participate in education and market employment equally with men. As a result those individual-oriented institutions have become ever more gender-equal, but also increasingly differentiated from other, family-oriented institutions that are governed to varying degrees by breadwinner principles, and hence exhibit less gender equity. Fertility has fallen as this differentiation, or 'incoherence', has developed, and has fallen furthest in societies where the greatest incoherence exists – and especially where the institution of the family itself is steeped in patriarchy.

### **A Qualitative Approach**

In his 1998 Hofstee Lecture to the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute, Coleman (1999:5) wrote:

In [the industrial and post-industrial] countries, in the richest environment of demographic data that the world has ever seen, our explanations of the mechanisms of demographic behaviour, and hence our ability to predict its future, remain poverty-stricken. In this new demographic *terra incognita*, we can see what is happening but we do not know why and we cannot tell what will happen next.

While this assessment arguably is excessively pessimistic, it is remarkable that demographers in their attempts to understand falling and low fertility in developed countries have remained so anchored to aggregate data. Based on such data they have developed and debated theories and explanations such as have just been outlined, each of which may have something to offer. But how much weight should be placed on each? To what extent do individual decision-makers identify with them? Are there forces at work that the actors can identify, but demographers have overlooked?

It is now almost a truism to state the potential of the incorporation of qualitative approaches in demography for building more nuanced explanatory models of reproductive behaviours and decision-making (Greenhalgh 1995, Obermeyer 1997). A number of edited books now attest to the increasing interest, popularity and importance of 'anthropological

demography' (Greenhalgh 1995b, Kertzer and Fricke 1997a, Basu and Aaby 1998), as does the existence of IUSSP interest groups. Hence the question mark against the word 'radical' in the title of this paper. In this project, the combination of a demographer and an anthropologist as Chief Investigators promises to challenge both researchers in coming to grips with the need to merge epistemological approaches, philosophical traditions, concerns and techniques.

Demography traditionally has followed a 'positivist' tradition that regards neutral quantitative data as the only legitimate basis for 'scientific' knowledge. Presser (1997) argues that it usually has been supportive of a conservative agenda, unreflexive of the ideological underpinnings of its claims to be an 'objective science'. This philosophy of knowledge uses the natural world as a model in which the behaviour of people is seen as the outcome of internal or external variables to be investigated by the detached, neutral observer. Qualitative methods are derived from a separate philosophical tradition which approaches people as social beings who actively interpret the world and their experiences of it. Their behaviour is understood not simply as the outcome of variables, but as arising from their interpretations of events and experiences informed by their wider social context. As Obermeyer (1997) notes, traditional demography limits investigations to variables that can be reduced to quantitative values, diminishing the possibilities for interpretation and contextual insight.

Unlike demography, most anthropology uses qualitative techniques not to develop overarching generalisations of behaviour that can be used to predict outcomes, but rather to understand what makes actions intelligible and the ways in which people make sense of the world; that is, their culture (Steckler *et al.* 1992). Qualitative research methods emphasise rigorous description of the qualities of a phenomenon rather than enumeration. They aim to produce rich, detailed accounts that leave participants' perspectives intact. Qualitative methods work inductively, usually with a relatively open and unstructured research strategy, with the objectives being discovery of the frames of meanings and multiple perspectives of those being studied, and understanding the context in which behaviours take place. This also involves an attempt to avoid imposing preconceived schemes or frames of reference on those being studied. Analysis takes place in a recursive fashion, as new questions are generated in the course of the research. Finally, within qualitative research there is a conscious acknowledgement of the subjectivity of the researcher, and a recognition of ways in which the study is influenced by the researcher's social background, biases, status and presence.



Demographers have embraced qualitative techniques in a number of ways. These range from minimalist adoption of methodological tools to a more reflexive and problematic recognition of the intimate relationship between methods and theories in anthropology, and the ramifications this may have for models of behaviour within demography (Carter 1995, Kertzer and Fricke 1997b, Obermeyer 1997). For all the enthusiastic adoption of qualitative methods by some demographers, however, there remains a tension between the predominantly positivist, structural-functionalist and consensual theorising within demography, and the more reflexive, conflictual and postmodern perspectives within anthropology.

As Greenhalgh (1997:823) warns, there is a need to recognise that in the process of transferring methods from one discipline to another they will be 'shorn of some of their original meanings and endowed with new meanings that may be inconsistent with or even antithetical to anthropological meanings'. In short, the use of 'anthropological methods' in a different discipline has epistemological implications. Stripped of the theory and practice of anthropology, these methods come to 'mean different things to those using them' and so 'are in fact different methods'.

But for all the dangers and difficulties, research on fertility change and decisions has benefited greatly from the adoption of qualitative techniques and anthropological theory. As Kertzer and Hogan (1989) have noted, more recent studies suggest far greater complexities to fertility decline and behaviour than hitherto reflected in demographic studies. There is greater recognition that demography needs approaches that can grapple with the complexities of class and ethnic difference, the nuances of gender relations and power, the relationships between structure and agency, and can grasp the slippery vagaries of desire.

### **Anthropological Theory and Family Formation**

The most fruitful intersections of demography and anthropology so far include work that incorporates feminist perspectives, political economy approaches combined with a greater emphasis upon local meanings of reproduction, and perspectives on agency and the body. This section briefly identifies some theoretical concerns that will inform the present project.

A feminist approach focuses attention upon the ways in which power is organised around gender relations in a given society, and explores the intersections between individual behaviours and the broader socio-economic and ideological context, rather than including gender as a mere independent variable (Riley 1998). Presser (1997:296) argues that 'we lack

sufficient knowledge about how gender inequality - or other social inequalities - relate to demographic processes'. Greenhalgh (1990) advocates a political economy of fertility approach. Such an approach directs attention to the embeddedness of community institutions in structures and processes, especially political and economic ones, operating at regional, national and global levels, and to the historical roots of those macro-micro linkages (see also Ginsburg and Rapp 1995, Greenhalgh 1995a, Riley 1998). Although not always explicitly stated, such a perspective implicitly draws upon neo-Marxist theories and Foucauldian insights regarding 'biopower'; the ways in which social institutions are implicated in the disciplining of women's and men's bodies. Similarly, what Scheper-Hughes (1997) calls the 'critical interpretative approach' combines a political economy perspective with emphasis upon the meanings of reproductive events in the lives of the informants themselves. In such a way informants determine which are the pertinent influences upon their behaviour, rather than a pre-determined set of demographic variables doing so. Scheper-Hughes's approach is also sensitive to the politics of the research process, and calls for greater reflexivity.

A feminist commitment to the study of gender relations also points to the need for studies to include the perspectives of men and relational dynamics in family formation and fertility decisions. As Greene and Biddlecom (2000) note, there has been relatively little work done on male roles in decision-making, and even less on the cultural construction of fatherhood and meanings of parenthood for men and women. In her review of demographic work on women, Watkins (1993) also notes the general assumption in demography that childbearing and childcare are solely women's issues. Her critique suggests three questionable assumptions behind demographic work on fertility and family formation. First, she notes how demographic explanations often rest upon stereotyped conservative perceptions of male and female roles and responsibilities within the household. Next, she suggests that there has been a failure of household models of behaviour to explore power relations within the family. Finally, she notes the assumption of neoclassical understandings of the self as an autonomous being, impervious to social influence.

As noted earlier, demographic work on reproductive decision-making draws the researcher into the fundamental anthropological question of the problem and process of people's agency in daily life (Carter 1995, Ginsburg and Rapp 1995). Carter argues that two concepts of agency underlie most demographic research on fertility decisions. The first he terms the 'passive' concept of decision-making, which views people's conduct as directed by

cultural norms and institutions. The second concept, the 'active' concept, sees people making deliberate choices through some form of abstract rationality and maximisation (i.e., the rational action models). Neither model of decision-making is satisfactory before ethnographic fact. Carter calls for a more nuanced notion of agency that avoids (1995:57) the 'theoretical dead end' between ideas of active agency and passive culture. Using the work of Giddens and Lave, he argues for a view of human agency in reproduction not as a series of discrete acts of choice, calculation and planning, but as (1995:61) 'the reflexive monitoring and rationalisation of a continuous flow of conduct'. Carter's argument suggests that practice is constituted in dialectical relation between people acting and the setting of those actions. The cultural concepts informing values assigned to behaviours and the political economy are integral ingredients in action, not external to it. This argument suggests that decisions about family formation are intimately linked to, and negotiated and rationalised through, material conditions, gender relations and social values.

Such a view of agency has methodological implications. As Obermeyer (1997:815) notes, research will inevitably be influenced by and 'reflect the implicit models of social action that are brought to bear in explaining the connections between "actions, norms and representations"'. By its very nature, a survey questionnaire assumes a rational action model of agency and the decision-making process. Anthropologists are well aware of the epistemological difficulties of asking individuals introspective questions about their behaviour and motivations; of the gulf between what people say they do and what they do. In many cases their answers may be *post facto* rationalisations of a process characterised by conflicts, negotiations, ambivalence and contradictions. For example, Petchesky (1990:371) suggests that decisions about abortion are best described as 'a series of "negotiations" back and forth between ideology, social reality, and desire.' An advantage of a more open, exploratory, qualitative interview process is that it allows the researcher to carefully scrutinise the narratives produced by informants, and to probe for the meanings of their statements, looking for the dissonance, discontinuities and discourses used by them in discussing their actions. These narratives about the context of family formation will give more contextual insight into the meanings and motivations of starting a relationship and having a child in a society than is ever possible through questionnaires.

A final anthropological perspective brought to the question of family formation is a recognition of the body as not just a biological entity, but a social construction, and the means

through which cultural practices play a central role in constituting our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity. Csordas (1994) describes embodiment as 'being-in-the-world', a term from phenomenology that captures the sense of lived experience defined by our perceptions of and engagement with the world. The experience of sexual relations, pregnancy, birth and parenthood are embodied experiences that are culturally constructed and elaborated, and mediate women's and men's understandings of themselves and their places in wider Australian society. It is important to appreciate the phenomenology of family formation: the desires, anxieties and stresses experienced, and the influence these have upon decisions.

What, then, are the implications of these theoretical approaches to questions of family formation? Firstly, they suggest that the current theories of recent fertility decline within demography outlined earlier tend to reduce complexity to broad narratives. These narratives take a number of forms or ideal types, either suggesting that people's agency is subsumed wholly by reified social structures, with little room for negotiation, or parading an ideal, atomised, rational individual who is free to act unconstrained according to her or his choices. In part the form of social theory produced within demography is an outcome of the methods used (as well as the history of the discipline itself - see Greenhalgh 1996). The positivist quantitative social survey methods upon which demography is based are well suited to determining broad patterns, but tend to produce consensual explanations for these patterns, reifying and personifying populations as organic wholes, with little account of social difference, conflict or inequality. In short, if it can't be quantified, demography tends to dismiss it.

The perspectives and methods of anthropology bring some sophisticated means to appreciating diversity and complexity in the processes of family formation. They suggest that a multiplicity of, sometimes contradictory, dynamics is likely to be reflected in people's practices and accounts of their practice. Indeed, anthropology would problematise the very notion of 'decision-making' as presently taken-for-granted within demography. As noted above, anthropological approaches bring with them accounts of power and gender relations, a recognition of the dialectic between structure and agency, and an appreciation of the broad political, economic and historical context that influences embodied practice. These analytical categories bring with them a form of questioning, and types of questions, that may be unfamiliar to demographers.

Finally, anthropological approaches also bring a sensitivity to the politics of the research process itself. These include difficulties in bridging the disciplinary divide between anthropology and demography as outlined in this paper. But more important is an awareness of the danger that research on family formation has inherent political and policy overtones. The very language of ‘family formation’ conjures up particular values when used in popular parlance. Demography may see the term as ‘neutral, objective, scientific’ language, but few could deny that the term ‘family’ implies a certain neoliberal agenda when used in policy debates. Already the press has heralded the funding of the present study as ‘a bid to boost the birth rate’, with barely disguised blame for low fertility attached to women who work and the high rate of divorce (*Herald Sun*, December 14, 2000:11). As researchers in this project it is important that we remain reflexive about the representations of our research, and the politics of how we present our data.

### **The ‘Australian Family Formation Decisions’ Project**

The ‘Australian Family Formation Decisions’ (AFFD) project is linked to the Negotiating the Life Course Survey (NLCS), a nationally representative longitudinal survey of over 2,200 18-54 year-olds of both sexes being conducted by the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University. The NLCS thus far has interviewed its respondents twice, in 1996-97 and 2000. The AFFD will graft onto it a qualitative element that, through analysis of the lived experience of individual young women, men and couples, will seek to move understanding of contemporary low and declining fertility in Australia beyond interpretation of aggregate trends and patterns.

It will do this by examining, through in-depth interviews and focus groups, young adults’ subjective recognition of encounters with institutional and other constraints to family formation. Family formation is defined as embracing the forming and sustaining of relationships, having children within relationships, and the timing of associated events. The qualitative techniques employed will focus attention on the meanings, interpretations and diverse subjective experiences of individuals, couples and families (Daly 1992). The intention is that they will yield a holistic study in which the complexity of interactions, negotiations, values, contexts, dynamics and lived experience will be highlighted, rather than suppressed in pursuit of simplified survey variables.

The focus on relationship formation and the perceived nature and quality of relationships, as well as on fertility decision-making *per se*, will be an important one. One finding from the first round of the NLCS has been a strong suggestion that achieved fertility lags well behind what women anticipate in early adulthood. Thus, while 38 per cent of Australian women aged around 33 in the late 1990s were projected to have either no child or one child (McDonald 1998), only 9.5 and 4.8 per cent of first-round female NLCS respondents aged 20-24 anticipated ending up in those categories (Carmichael and McDonald 1999). Mean expected family size of these women was 2.3 children, well above what the current TFR suggests is likely. There is a need, first, to probe more carefully the meanings of fertility ‘preferences’ or ‘expectations’ expressed in response to a survey question asking ‘How many (more) children do you think you will have in the future?’ How considered are responses to such a question, asked over the telephone with little forewarning? Do respondents necessarily even *have* clear preferences or expectations to express? Is there a tendency to assume a ‘best-case’ scenario – that everything will fall into place and ‘Mr Right’ will appear at the optimal time? Clearly, though, life courses do not always follow anticipated or hoped for paths, and to the extent that women’s expressed fertility expectations as young adults are meaningful, somewhere along the line circumstances are being encountered that inhibit their realisation. Those circumstances may often have to do with relationships: failure to be in suitable ones at ‘appropriate’ stages of the life course; doubt over their quality; their failure sometimes to endure; the reality that within them the family formation views of *two* people need to be reconciled. All are considerations that might impede the translation of early expectations into achieved fertility. It is sometimes suggested, for example, that a significant factor in low fertility in modern developed countries is a reluctance of men to commit to fatherhood (e.g., Ehrenreich 1983). What evidence can be mustered for Australia?

#### *Methodological Mechanics*

The plan is to select for tape recorded in-depth interview from among NLCS respondents indicating a willingness to participate in further research in mid-2000 approximately 100 who are of an age that family formation is a current or imminent issue, or a recent experience. Following completion and preliminary analysis of these interviews, up to five focus groups independent of the NLCS sample will be recruited with a view to validating conclusions drawn from the interview data. Random subsampling is not envisaged, and strict ‘representativeness’

is not a goal; informants will be purposively selected to give reasonable coverage of what are judged to be significant subgroups among the population currently making family formation decisions. To contain cost, interviews will be restricted to persons resident in eastern Australia between Melbourne and Brisbane, but within that area a mix of metropolitan and regional informants will be recruited.

A key issue is whether to interview individuals or couples. Interviewing couples might inhibit some participants from frank assessment of their own or their partners' inputs into family formation decisions. On the other hand, having couples jointly assess a negotiated experience and able to feed off one another's comments promises to add richness to the data. In pursuit of the best of both worlds it is proposed to interview 60 women, 20 couples and 20 men. Eighty women aged 20-39 will be recruited, of which 20 will be interviewed jointly with spouses or partners. The more tightly age-related nature of women's reproductive lives makes it appropriate that female age be the primary sampling variable in recruiting couple informants. The comparative quality of interviews with couples and partnered individuals will be carefully assessed. Informants interviewed individually will include a mixture of partnered and unpartnered persons, with partnered males among them being selected on the basis of their partners being aged 20-39. Unpartnered males will be aged perhaps 25-44, and recruited to counterbalance the unpartnered component of the female subsample.

Within the age ranges nominated, spreads of informants by age will be sought, covering a range of family formation experiences to mid-2000 as recorded by the NLCS. The advantages of linkage to the NLCS are the capacity of the two data sources to buttress one another, the potential the design offers for probing fertility preferences/expectations expressed in NLCS interviews, and the relative ease with which informants with characteristics of purposive interest can be identified and located. In the case of female, couple and partnered male interviewees (recalling that female partners' ages will guide recruitment of the latter two subgroups), coverage of three broad groups is envisaged. First, younger informants who are mostly yet to commence childbearing, whose fertility aspirations and early experience, and *anticipation*, of constraints on their reproductive behaviour will be of interest. They are likely to mainly be in their early to mid-twenties, will be a mixture of unpartnered informants and informants in unions of relatively short duration, and will cover a range of expressed lifetime fertility aspirations, including a desire to remain childless. Second, informants currently passing through the peak reproductive ages (25-34), who are, or have been, actively grappling

with the personal and institutional context of deciding whether and when to have children, and how many to have. They will have a range of current parities, including being still childless. Third, those of an age where childbearing is for many over or tapering off, but for women (and their spouses/partners) who remain childless is becoming a 'now-or-never' proposition. The former will be able to reflect on full, recent family formation histories. The latter will be able to talk about the process of women remaining childless well into their thirties, about any associated pressures to have a child and modifications of earlier fertility aspirations, and in some cases about processes by which firm decisions to remain permanently childless were made.

Clearly there will be subgroups within or straddling these broad groups that will also hold special interest, and for which it will be important to ensure that more than the odd informant is recruited. For example, women/couples committed to childlessness at a relatively young age; childless women/couples in their mid- to late thirties; women with a history of marital/relationship disruption that might have significantly affected their fertility. As a rough guide it is envisaged that perhaps 20, 50 and 30 per cent of informants, respectively, would be recruited in the three broad groups. However, recruitment will be flexible, so that decisions can be made to redirect resources during fieldwork should that seem desirable. It might be, for example, that field experience suggests that further interviews with the younger, childless group are likely to yield relatively little, and that reallocating some to one of the other groups to pick up a distinctive subgroup identified during interviewing would be a wiser investment of resources. There is also scope for limited increase in the total number of interviews (to, say, 120) if that seems desirable.

Gender matching of informants and interviewers is an issue. With the male and female Chief Investigators contributing demographic (Carmichael) and anthropological (Whittaker) expertise, there is a desire for both to be present at interviews where possible. This should not pose a problem with couple interviews, but may be less practicable when interviewing individuals. Again, a flexible approach will be adopted, allowing both Chief Investigators to participate in interviewing as fully as is possible consistent with not compromising informant cooperation or the assessed quality of interviews. Informed consent will be sought before any informant is subjected to the presence of dual interviewers.

The small number of interviews (perhaps 10) planned with unpartnered men have been largely ignored in the foregoing discussion. They are intended to be a counterpoint to



interviews with unpartnered women. In both cases the intention is to interview informants whose unpartnered status has been more or less ongoing, and who cover a range of ages from just before to just after the peak reproductive ages. That is, the interest is in those whose unpartnered status is likely to attest a lack of involvement in, and perhaps also a lack of interest in, family formation, as distinct from being a status reacquired following the breakdown of a marital or consensual union of some duration.

### *Issues to be Addressed*

Interviews will begin with a broad question such as ‘Tell me how you met ...’, ‘Tell me about when you started your family.’, or ‘Have you ever thought about having a family?’ to elicit broad narratives from informants that place their family formation decisions in the context of other aspects of their lives. It is expected that in this way informants will spontaneously discuss many of the issues of interest, and provide a basis for further probing. This probing will be guided by a semi-structured interview schedule. Interviews will be thematically analysed using *The Ethnograph v 5.0* qualitative software to assist with the coding and management of the data. It is expected that interviews will yield information on the following sorts of issues:

1. To what extent is family formation perceived as a planned or play-it-by-ear, evolving process? What recollections do informants have of when, in their lives, serious thought first was given to whether they would have children, how many they might have, when they might begin having them, and any prerequisites that would need to be satisfied? What recollections do they have of later modifications to these ‘plans’ and reasons for them? Did they have clear plans/expectations in early adulthood (their early 20s) – of being in relationships suited to parenthood by certain stages in their lives; of the numbers of children they would have; that they would, perhaps, avoid parenthood, or avoid it until other goals had been achieved? If so, how closely have life courses matched up? If not, did plans begin to crystallise later? Or was the process rather evolutionary – at some point a serious relationship developed; questions of whether and when to have a child then eventually arose; thereafter the addition of other children was contemplated; or perhaps an unintended pregnancy initiated the process? This issue is bound up, of course, with evaluating fertility expectations expressed in a survey at ages 20-24. How definite or vague are they, and how qualified? What credence do female informants attach to them (those aged 20-24 at first

NLCS interview will be asked about the specific expectations they expressed)? Are they conscious of having had, or being likely to have, fewer (or more) children than they once thought likely? How do they explain discrepancies?

2. Why do parents say they had children, and why did they have them when they did? Why didn't they have them earlier in life? Do they recall any conscious decisions to *put off* having a child? How did they find parenthood, and how, if at all, did the initial parental experience affect (or is it likely to affect) later family formation? How do currently childless informants explain their childlessness? If not committed to lifetime childlessness, (i) has serious consideration ever yet been given to having a child, and (ii) what developments in their lives do they see as necessary for them to become parents? What do informants, both parents and non-parents, perceive to be the major disincentives to having children in contemporary Australia? How do they regard those who elect not to become parents? What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of such a decision?
3. How are vagaries of the partnering process perceived to have affected, or be likely to affect, the transition to parenthood? What has been the informant's experience with relationships? Has it included periods when conflicting views were held of a relationship's suitability as a setting for family formation? Was difficulty experienced forming a relationship sufficiently mutually committed to contemplate parenthood? Is a general reluctance by the opposite sex, or one's own sex, to commit to family life perceived, and has the former been personally encountered? Are husbands/male partners perceived to have delayed when female informants had children? Is/was the informant herself/himself reluctant to enter a serious relationship, and for how long did/might this reluctance persist? Has concern over the stability of a relationship, or of relationships in general, affected any childbearing decision, or the informant's general attitude to having children? Do informants perceive themselves to have deliberately tested the durability of relationships before committing to parenthood, or to be currently doing so?
4. Are informants conscious of having exercised particular caution in considering whether to enter relationships, allow them to become more committed (e.g., by moving in together, or marrying), or have a child (or another child) because they perceived there to be risks (i.e., potential undesirable consequences) involved? What sorts of uncertainties (risks) do they recall having factored into their decisions? What effects did those uncertainties ultimately

have on their decision-making (i.e., did events not take place, were they deferred (for how long), or is the outcome still unresolved)?

5. To what extent are personal ideologies according priority to education, establishing careers, and perhaps travelling, experiencing a range of relationships, ‘discovering oneself’ (including one’s sexuality), and ‘having fun’ through one’s twenties and beyond, perceived as having delayed or restricted family formation, or caused it to be eschewed? Was any overt action ever taken to preserve such an ideology – e.g., a relationship ended for ‘becoming too serious’; or a pregnancy terminated because ‘I wasn’t ready for parenthood’? Has such an ideology been shared/held by spouses/partners? Has it been a source of tension between them? Was it adhered to with religious fervour from adolescence or early adulthood, or did it develop more gradually out of accumulated personal experience and interaction with peers? What about personal, female, ideologies demanding greater gender equity within relationships, parenting, families and women’s lives in general? To what extent are *they* perceived to have delayed, restricted or prevented family formation?
6. How do informants recollect negotiating family formation with spouses/partners (including past ones, with whom they may or may not have had children) – whether and when to cohabit or get married; whether and when to have children? Is it correct that modern men tend to defer to their wives/partners in decisions about having children; are they widely perceived as reluctant fathers? Were negotiations concentrated in time, so that both parties knew where they stood early in a relationship, or did they take place progressively over time? How overt or subtle were they? What are recalled as having been the major considerations in making decisions, especially to have or not have a first child? Were there any points of disagreement on family formation goals or strategy, and if so, how were they resolved – who gave ground (did women revise their goals because spouses/partners had different goals)? What, if any, consideration was given in negotiations to social roles within the family after becoming parents? Was this issue openly addressed, or was it rather addressed by women *assuming* they would bear the brunt of childcare responsibility and career sacrifice, and perhaps responding by putting off becoming mothers?
7. What roles are perceived to have been played in personal family formation philosophies, negotiations and decisions by:
  - *Family considerations.* These overlap substantially with the negotiation process just dealt with under item 6. The major consideration is the domestic division of

labour that arises in couple and family households, and is apt to be especially onerous for women in the latter. To what extent was it a matter of serious negotiation when considering whether to cohabit, marry or have children? To what extent, because of the marked gender inequity it typically embodies, has it simply made women *automatically* wary of entering serious relationships or having children, and thus delayed and reduced their childbearing? Is there evidence of women modifying family formation plans because husbands or male partners failed to meet domestic expectations? A second family consideration is relationship discord and disruption, and subsequent repartnering. Where these experiences have occurred, what are assessed to have been the effects on the number and timing of births; did instability delay or dampen fertility, or promote it in an effort to induce stability; did disruption curtail partly completed family formation; did repartnering lead to unexpected additional births? Finally, to what extent do women see their childbearing careers as having been (or being) (i) wholly planned by themselves, (ii) at least partly determined by chance factors (e.g., unintended pregnancies), or (iii) significantly influenced by the views of others – most notably spouses/partners, but also extended family.

- *Employment considerations.* Considerations at three levels can be identified. First, concern, at an ideological level, to establish, build and safeguard careers. Second, concern over the work environment, broadly conceived – perceptions, perhaps, that it affords limited, and diminishing, security (high risks of unemployment and job insecurity; low remuneration), can require unwelcome geographic mobility, and lacks flexibility for those seeking to combine family and labour market roles (i.e., is family-unfriendly). Have such perceptions discouraged partnering or parenting, or perhaps led some women to opt to make ‘careers’ of motherhood? Third, concerns arising from personal conditions and experience of employment, or those of a spouse/partner. These embrace matters like erratic employment histories, family-unfriendly conditions of employment, perceived inadequacy of income relative to housing and lifestyle aspirations, experience of job-linked geographic mobility or separation from spouse/partner, and being preoccupied with employment to a degree felt to be inconsistent with responsible parenthood.

- *Economic considerations.* Did informants have economic goals (e.g., to acquire their own homes, or achieve a certain level of income) that they wanted to attain before having children? How easy had these goals been to achieve, and what, if any, effect had this experience had (or was it having) on decisions about having children? Was concern over ‘my/our ability to support a family’ ever a factor in deciding not to have children, or to delay having them? What about concern over the loss of, or a substantial reduction in, the second family income (had it perhaps led to serial postponement of childbearing)? Was the sheer cost of children, and the economic sacrifice having them would entail (Middleton *et al.* 1998), ever a factor? Where relevant, what, if any, role had indebtedness acquired in undertaking tertiary study (through the Australian Government’s Higher Education Contribution Scheme – HECS) played in family formation decision-making?
- *Childcare considerations.* How appropriate is non-parental childcare considered to be? To what extent, among those strongly in favour of parental care, has this attitude led to (i) acceptance of the reduced labour force attachment and income entailed, and relatively early childbearing, or (ii) deferment or rejection of childbearing because of reluctance to make the required sacrifice? How adequate, accessible and affordable are non-parental care options considered to be, and what, if any, impact is this assessment of the situation perceived to have had, or to be having, on personal fertility decision-making? Knowledge of, and opinions concerning, government policy regarding childcare. Are any policy settings, or changes, in this area perceived to have directly affected personal family formation decisions? Can informants articulate any changes in policy that, if introduced, might have altered their own past fertility behaviour, or might alter future behaviour (number and timing of births)?
- *Government policy considerations.* Those concerning childcare apart, what, if any, government policy settings or initiatives are perceived to have affected, or to be affecting, personal family formation aspirations or decisions? What about perceived effects on the population of family forming age in general? Particular policy areas that might be probed include taxation (Australia has recently introduced a 10 per cent consumption tax), industrial relations (where changes

have decisively favoured employers over employees), higher education (which has become more ‘user pays’), and income support. Aside from specific policy areas, how family-friendly is government policy *in general* assessed to be; how supportive of stability in dyadic relations and families’ economic circumstances, and of effective and enjoyable parenting? Has it become more or less family-friendly in recent times, or has there been little change? What specific policy initiatives can informants identify that they think could lead to significant proportions of couples having more children, thereby increasing Australia’s fertility rate?

- *Lifestyle considerations.* How strong a deterrent to family formation (entry into serious relationships, having a first child, and having children beyond the first) have perceived negative effects on lifestyle been, or are they currently proving? To what extent are lifestyle considerations perceived to have made informants and/or actual/potential spouses/partners (i) loathe to enter serious relationships, (ii) reluctant to have children, (iii) constantly put off having a first child, or (iv) reluctant to have subsequent children? How do lifestyle considerations rate in importance alongside career considerations as deterrents to family formation? Is there a gender difference in this rating?
  - *Generational considerations.* To what extent do informants perceive their family formation plans, attitudes and decisions to have been influenced by observation of their parents’, or their parents’ generation’s, experience? For example, have experience of parental marital discord or breakdown, maternal exploitation within the household, or parental economic sacrifice had a major influence on personal plans, attitudes and behaviour?
8. For childless female informants who expect to remain childless, has childlessness been a consistent goal, or was it ‘drifted’ into through circumstances? How do those in the former category rationalise their position? Is their sexuality not geared to motherhood? Are they rejecting traditional gender roles and a model deemed inconsistent with feminist principles? Do they just not like children, or consider themselves poor parent material? Do they simply have other priorities in life? Etcetera. (Also, do these sorts of issues become pressing for other women after first having a child, curtailing rather than preventing childbearing?) For those in the latter category, what have been the ‘circumstances’, and at what point was it

decided motherhood had been left too late? To what extent were their decisions affected by having husbands or partners who were reluctant to become parents? It is appropriate to set alongside this group women who delayed having children until well into their thirties, to ask why they eventually became mothers when others did not, and also whether, having delayed first births for so long, they were inclined to be satisfied with just *one* child.

## **Conclusion**

Unfortunately the AFFD project is less advanced than was anticipated when this paper was offered, so that the paper is very much a statement of intent. But it really verges on arrogant for demographers to pronounce upon the reasons for contemporary low fertility in developed countries without first stopping to ask the decision-makers why *they* think they are behaving as they are. As an anonymous reviewer of the funding application for the project commented:

The investigators are absolutely right in pointing out that it is vital to move away from aggregate trends and patterns, the preferred terrain of demographers, and one that leads some in other fields to see demographers as very good at describing, but less able to explain, social phenomena. It is also exciting to see a team with two demographers [Professor Peter McDonald is a Partner Investigator] attempting to assess subjective factors in fertility decline, as these can only be guessed at in quantitative studies. It is often all too easy to agree with the quote used by the investigators [from Coleman (1999) – see page 7 of this paper] that demographic explanations remain ‘poverty-stricken’. ... One wonders why demography appears so closed to cross-disciplinary approaches to its major questions, and to borrowings from other fields.

It is hoped that conference delegates will agree that the study described here has the potential to considerably enhance understanding of the forces underpinning low (though not *very* low) fertility in contemporary Australia, and their comparative importance. It is hoped, too, that they will feel free, either at the conference or after returning home, to offer suggestions for improving the study’s design, and that some might even be motivated to seek funding for similar projects in other developed countries. It is, of course, in the nature of anthropological investigations to highlight what is unique about particular field settings. But it is equally true that the cumulative value to theory of replicated studies of this type in discrete field settings can be considerable. Demography has benefited immensely from a range of standardised cross-national survey programs, including the series of Fertility and Family

Surveys undertaken in recent years in a range of European and other developed countries (regrettably not including Australia) under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe. Why not also a cross-national program of qualitative studies focused upon this important phenomenon of low fertility and the decision-making that is producing it?

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