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WHAT'S BEHIND RECENT FERTILITY TRENDS—GOVERNMENT POLICY, ALARMS ON BIOLOGICAL CLOCKS OR LESSONS LEARNED FROM CHILDHOOD?

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Fertility in Australia has risen since 2001. Some have attributed this to the universal Maternity Payment introduced with the 2004 budget, or to Treasurer Peter Costello's call to parents to have three children, also made in 2004. But these interventions occurred after fertility had begun to rise. Moreover, qualitative interviews with 15 mothers in regional New South Wales show that they had had little effect on these women. Factors that did affect them included anxiety about beating the biological clock, the desire to have the number of children that their own childhood had taught them to prefer, and constraints such as lack of social support and fears about their inability to pay for the education of their children.

INTRODUCTION

In Australia, births and the total fertility rate (TFR) (an estimate of the total number of children the average woman will give birth to over the course of her reproductive life) have increased after reaching a low in 2001. This rise comes after a period of decline in the TFR that has lasted for over 30 years.¹ There is a large body of literature discussing the trends and the causes of declining TFRs in developed countries.² It is of equal interest why that trend in behaviour appears to be changing.

In this paper we discuss early findings from ongoing qualitative research about claims that government influence, and increased awareness of the implications of delayed motherhood, have been responsible for the increased number of births in Australia. We also explore the factors likely to contribute to family size decisions. The research so far suggests that the childhood experience of being in a small family may result in a subsequent preference for a larger family and that it may also predispose some mothers to have children at an earlier age than their own parents.

BACKGROUND

Between 1995 and 2005 the number of women of reproductive age in Australia (15 to 49 years) increased from 4.7 million to

5.1 million.³ This is a flow-on effect of the baby boom following World War II (1946 to 1965) since a large cohort of baby-boomer women simultaneously reached an age when they were most likely to have children. This resulted in a peak in births in the early 1970s.⁴ The children of many of the baby boomers are now in their 30s, the age group with the highest fertility rates:⁵ it is therefore unsurprising to see a rise in the number of births, although the peak was expected around the turn of the 21st century.⁶ It is, however, possible to surmise that women have delayed having their children for longer than expected given that the median age of mothers is still on an upward trend.⁷

The popular press, and most notably Virginia Haussegger,⁸ has given much coverage in recent years to the risk of being unable to have a child as a result of postponing motherhood. Commentators suggest that an increased awareness of the problem is now responsible for women not continuing to delay starting a family.⁹ However, the TFR rise is mainly due to births to women between 30 and 39 and the age specific fertility rate for women aged 25 to 29 was only slightly higher in 2005 compared with 2004.¹⁰ Therefore, the current increase in the number of births could be due in part to some women who have delayed motherhood now having their

children and possibly to some younger women not delaying childbirth as long as their predecessors. Delayed motherhood is associated with lower levels of overall fertility.¹¹

Childbearing behaviour in Australia does, however, appear to be changing. Australia's TFR has shown a modest increase since 2001 from 1.73 to 1.81.¹² However, the increased number of births cannot be explained solely by the increased number of women of reproductive age because the TFR controls for age. While it was also possible to predict some increase in the TFR due to delayed motherhood, the rate has increased more quickly than expected. Thus some of the increase must be due to changes in behaviour.¹³

The popular media has given much coverage to the role of Government in stimulating the recent increases in the number of births, with Federal Treasurer, Peter Costello, taking credit for the upward trend. He is now well known for asking couples to have 'one for the mother, one for the father and one for the country'. This was at the time of the 2004 budget when he introduced the universal Maternity Payment (popularly called the baby bonus).¹⁴ Just six months later, Costello was claiming '... a link between the pick-up in job opportunities, *some of the family assistance measures* and at least the bottoming of the fertility rate and hopefully the turning around of that fertility rate.' [authors' emphasis].¹⁵ More recently he has said he was delighted that families are taking up his challenge,¹⁶ announcing to Parliament that he believed that the government's policies, particularly the introduction of the Maternity Payment, the Childcare Rebate and increased numbers of childcare places had played a very important part in lifting the fertility rate.¹⁷ But whether the payment is responsible to any significant degree seems doubtful. The TFR has been rising for the last six years¹⁸

and the increase was therefore in place before the introduction of the Maternity Payment in 2004, as was the trend in rising numbers of births.

CURRENT RESEARCH OUTLINE

Our qualitative study is being carried out in the spirit of Maher and Dever¹⁹ with the intention of giving mothers a voice about why they have the number of children that they do. Currently, variation in the fertility rates is mostly determined by the size of families that women have once they enter motherhood as childlessness rates are fairly constant.²⁰ We are using in-depth face-to-face interviews to collect data from mothers with at least one child nine years or younger from the Central West of New South Wales. So far the women have been recruited mainly through public schools, but also via the Orange University campus and through snowballing. A maximum variation recruitment strategy is being employed to achieve geographic, social and economic diversity.²¹ The interview has been designed to find out how women come to have the number of children that they do, whether choice or circumstances are important and what influences mothers' childbearing decisions.

To date we have interviewed 15 women who live mostly in the city of Orange with a few living in rural areas and small towns of the Central West within 80km of Orange. At the time of interview the women had between one and six children. Three of the mothers wanted to have more children, two were undecided and nine considered their family complete. The age of their youngest child ranged from 12 weeks to seven years and the age at first birth of these mothers ranged from 21 to 42 years. The majority of these women have post-school qualifications, work at least part-time and/or their families have a high or medium income. The sample, however, also includes women without post-school

qualifications, who are not working and/or have a low family income. The women who worked were employed in a variety of jobs and one was self-employed. Most were married, two were in second marriages, two in defacto relationships and two were separated from their partners. All of the women's partners were in work and also had a variety of jobs. The mothers had a range of religious beliefs (Anglican, Catholic, other Christian faith, other religion or no religion).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Motivation to have a child and government policy

All of the mothers in this study stated that they did not consider government payments to families when making active childbearing decisions. This was because they felt that the amounts being paid were not sufficient to have a real impact on their behaviour, because they weren't entitled to them or because, as one said: 'They can be taken away at a moment's notice'. One of the undecided mothers pointed out: '\$4000 that sounds a lot, it sounds good, but then in six months I pay that much in childcare'. Even so, there did appear to be a commonly held perception that the payment was likely to act as an incentive for others to have children. Although most of the mothers interviewed were in favour of the support given to families through the Maternity Payment, many were concerned about it being paid as a cash lump sum. Half of the mothers expressed concern that the payment was encouraging some women, particularly teenagers, to have babies just for the payout. Statistics do not, overall, support this view as births to teenage mothers (15 to 19 years) continued to decrease in Australia during 2005, although rises were recorded in South Australia, the Australian Capital Territory, the Northern Territory, Tasmania and Western Australia.²²

If women do not respond to specific policies with financial incentives attached then maybe they are taking notice of Costello's call to have children. Some public commentators would agree. Demographer Peter McDonald has associated higher birth numbers with the baby bonus but also with the social messages such policies send.²³ If the mothers in our current study are influenced by social messages then it is not part of their conscious decision making. In fact of the eleven mothers who expressed an opinion most objected to Peter Costello's 'one for the country' call with one mother going as far as saying that it was 'morally wrong'. A minority of mothers went on to say that they found the whole spectrum of government policies sent out contradictory messages about the importance of families and parenting. Policies that they considered as contradicting the Treasurer's message by these mothers included the requirement for single mothers to work once their youngest child turns seven to be eligible to be for the Parenting Payment and the lack of a national paid maternity leave scheme. Only two of the mothers we interviewed were in favour of Peter Costello asking women to have more children, whilst another mother just felt it was of no consequence. She said: '... the Government can say as much as it wants but if you, yeah, if you really want two, you're not going to have three just because he said so'.

Our inquiry suggests that it is unlikely that government policies are affecting birth rates to any significant degree. Our research to date has found that government policy was not a factor considered by the mothers when making childbearing decisions. If the gamut of government policies send out contradictory messages to mothers about the value of parenthood it is problematic to attribute increased births to particular policies and rhetoric. Further,

the strength of the negative reaction observed in our study to the Treasurer's procreation message makes it difficult to believe that his rallying cry has been heeded. Here a key question is: if, as Peter Costello claims, the increase in births is due to his encouragement and the government's policy initiatives, why was the TFR rising before the 2004 budget?

Awareness of the risk of delaying motherhood too long

When women in our study had made a decision to start a family, most seemed very aware of their biological clock ticking. The majority of the mothers interviewed, described their first pregnancies as planned or 'semi-planned'. Of these, two-thirds reported that their decision was based on their age because they believed that they might have trouble falling pregnant if they delayed further. For the remaining third the decision was still age related, since they talked instead about their partner or themselves not wanting to be an 'old parent'. In the majority of these cases they cited personal childhood experience of an 'old parent' as a reason for this concern. This attitude could therefore encourage earlier entry into parenthood than the previous generation and act as a brake on the tendency to delay. This attitude may be important in overall fertility rates because (as previously mentioned) of the strong association between delayed motherhood and lower fertility. However, it should also be noted that one of the mothers also mentioned the positive role model of her parents, who were in their late 20s when they had her, as a reason for her not wanting to have children too young.

Our study suggests that the alarm bells on several biological clocks had sounded well before the current public discussion. About a third of the mothers talked about having had long term plans for starting a family by a certain age and for these

women their eldest child could be up to 10 years of age. However, for one mother who was 42 at the birth of her first child, it was not a matter of her being unaware of the risks of delayed motherhood. Instead she had held a strong opinion that she didn't want to have children—until she changed her mind at the 'eleventh hour'.

As the mothers in our study had been aware of their biological clocks for quite some time, it seems inappropriate to suggest that women have only just woken up to the issue. Further, Kippen predicts that the fertility of older women will continue to rise and that of younger women will fall²⁴ which suggests that the media attention has changed nothing of substance. The age-specific fertility rates of women aged 30 to 34 and 35 to 39 have been increasing since the early 1980s and for women 40 to 44 and 45 to 49 they began increasing in the 1990s.²⁵ In contrast the age specific fertility rates of women younger than 30 have continued to decline since the early 1970s.²⁶ The only exception to this falling trend is the slight rise in the fertility rates for women 24 to 29 in 2005.²⁷ The figures do not yet support the assertion that significant numbers of women have responded to recent media coverage about the increased risk of potential fertility problems at older ages. Instead it is likely that the increased number of births is largely due to the increased number of women of childbearing age combined with a large cohort of women who cannot leave starting a family too much longer. This will not make a difference to Australia's TFR in the longer term.

Motivation to have a child and childhood experience

For the mothers interviewed, preference for family size appears to arise out of what the mother believes will provide the best quality of life for their children. All the mothers talked about using their own childhood

experience, or the childhood experience of their partners, as a reference for helping them make their decisions. Over half of the mothers reported childhood experience in a negative light and these parents aimed to provide something that they felt had been missing from their own childhood. A few talked about childhood experience having had a positive impact on their childbearing decisions, while the rest found both positive and negative lessons in their childhoods.

Nearly all the mothers who viewed their own or their partner's childhood experience negatively expressed a preference for a family size different from either the one they or their partner had come from. Two-thirds of these wanted a family larger than the one that they had grown up in (all of these had been brought up in a family of two and most commonly would like to have four children). These mothers emphasised the importance of relationships and connection within the family. One mother with one sibling talked about choice of playmates: 'My brother and I didn't get along very well. We just did different things'. About neighbours' children she said: 'I think that they just had more of a choice of doing something with each other or going off to do something by themselves as opposed to having it imposed on them, in that it was the only choice that they had'. Another mother talked about envying her cousins and their freedom:

There were two children in my family and I had cousins who had seven and I just really wanted more siblings, desperately wanted more siblings ... when there is just two of you, for your parents, there is so much riding on you. Whereas, I could see for my cousins I would go out there and my Aunty might not know where we were for half the day.

A third mother, who had two children and was aiming to have four, had been adopted and had been brought up with just

one brother. She had since found her birth family and now had a large extended family on which she placed a great deal of value. Furthermore, messages about the importance of family size can come down through the generations. For example, two mothers reported that their own mothers were only children who had impressed on them how lonely their own upbringings had been, saying 'only child, lonely child'.

Of all the mothers interviewed just three wanted to have more than two children because they or their partner came from large families themselves (we include the adopted woman mentioned above in this category because this applied to her partner). The reasons for these mothers wanting more than two children were the same as for those coming from a small family. For example one mother said:

I just kind of think that you just kind of need more than one to grow up with and I really enjoyed having two brothers and a sister and they were my friends. We moved around a lot so I had friends regardless.

These sentiments seem to sum up what most of the mothers, who came from a small family and wanted a large family, hoped for for their children.

However, coming from a large family could also make parents wish for something different for their own children resulting in them preferring a smaller family. One of the mothers said of the father of her children, who was the youngest of seven: 'Well coming from a big family, especially being the youngest, he never had anything new so everything was hand-me-downs, so that was a lot of background there which I think affected him too'. Being the youngest of a family of six didn't guard against loneliness; this mother had a preference for two children close together in age to ensure companionship. The importance of sibling friendship is further illustrated by around one third of the

mothers expressing a preference not to have three children because they felt that one was frequently left out, for example: 'I thought three's a bad number, one's always left out'. Only one mother expressed a preference for one child.

Our evidence suggests that the previously identified positive association between size of family of orientation and family size preference,²⁸ may now be breaking down. In stark contrast to our findings, Kohler et al.²⁹ found this association was especially strong when fertility could be controlled and childbearing behaviour was therefore the result of choice. This agrees with the findings of Murphy,³⁰ who in a historical review of studies, found the relationship between intergenerational fertility was strengthening. It may be that we are seeing a new situation, where children coming from intentionally small families are choosing to have more children as a backlash or reaction against the upbringing their parents choose for them. Prior to this, people who came from small families possibly didn't feel cheated in the same way because their family size may have been perceived as a result of circumstance rather than choice. One could also theorise that families, in the affluent society of contemporary Australia, have the luxury of placing value on familial relationships, with their possibilities of friendship, because the resources are available to feed, clothe and educate the number of children of their choice to a reasonable level. If familial relationships are valued highly enough then larger family size may result. It is hoped that the validity of these proposals will become clearer as the research progresses.

Family size preference did not always convert to actual behaviour for these mothers. The realities they faced in their lives affected the actual number of children they ended up with. These realities

included individual circumstances such as ease of falling pregnant, age of mother at first birth, and the mother's perception of her ability to cope with being pregnant, giving birth and caring for young children, or having a support network nearby that would enable her to cope. This was also recognised by mothers planning to have more children. Interestingly, for about two thirds of the mothers interviewed, short term financial considerations were not important. Many felt that they could afford the day-to-day costs of a young child by making some minor budgeting changes. However, for one mother with a low to middle family income, childbearing choices had been very much financially driven; with her partner she decided to terminate a pregnancy, in large part because they could not afford to have another child, despite wanting the child. For most however, long term financial considerations were important for curtailing their total number of children. They were mainly concerned with the costs of education both at school and tertiary levels.

CONCLUSION

The women in our study were not influenced by the government's payments to families and most appeared to be unconvinced by the government's social messages. There was also a high level of awareness amongst these women, before the issue's recent media attention, that they could not delay motherhood too long into the future. Further, recent data on fertility rates and births do appear not to support the claims that government influence and increased awareness of the implications of delayed motherhood have been responsible for the increased number of births in Australia. In the light of this combined evidence we suggest that these claims appear to be unsubstantiated, at least for the mothers in this project.

Our research to date suggests that childhood experience strongly influences family size preference and this may help to explain why fertility rates have not continued to decline. Additionally, childhood experience may influence the age at which people choose to have their first child and therefore keep the average age of parenthood away from the possible extremes. As delaying motherhood is associated with lower fertility this may be important for the overall TFR. However, if the responses of women in this study are any indication, it seems likely that a number of factors are behind the recent increase in the number of births in Australia; not all have been canvassed here. Further research is needed to explore whether the sentiments of this sample of women are comparable to those expressed by their metropolitan counterparts.

Our findings suggest that childbearing preferences are more likely to come to fruition if circumstances allow this. For

parents to choose to have larger families they need to feel that they are able to cope with the number of children they desire and that they are able to provide them with a good quality of life. In this context a wider range of government policies are likely to be as important, if not more important, in determining fertility rates than the one-off incentive of the Maternity Payment. For example, increased funding for public schools and university education may be a more effective fertility policy than the Maternity Payment. Not only would such funding address a major financial concern for parents considering having more children, it might also help to send out more consistent social messages about the value of family and children.

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