

A study of conviction: desires and doubts about having children

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Abstract

This paper investigates the strength of conviction with which women aged 27-32 years discussed their childbearing aspirations, bringing together both quantitative and qualitative responses to this question. Analyses found that although the participants tick box 'yes' or 'no' answers pointed overwhelmingly to aspirations *for* children, their interview narratives revealed a sliding scale of certainty. Many women expressed both *desires* for and *doubts* about having children, with their conviction usually shaped by a balance between maternal feeling, competing priorities, planned timing and perceptions of choice. The findings support the argument that women's reproductive decisions are predominantly the result of the circumstances in which they are made, as opposed to representing personal choice.

Keywords: Fertility, Reproduction, Decision-making, Aspirations, Preference, Women

Introduction

This paper explores the strength of conviction with which young childless women discuss their aspirations for children. The findings contribute to debates investigating the changing fertility patterns behind Australia's ageing population, such as the trends towards smaller families and delayed childbearing (ABS 2008; Costello 2002; Kippen 2006; McDonald 2000b).

A key question in the literature is whether these reproductive trends are predominantly the result of personal choice, or of the circumstances in which these choices are made (Cannold 2005; McDonald 2000a; Summers 2003). Preference theory argues for the former, stating that once certain societal transitions have occurred, namely the contraceptive and equal opportunities revolutions, women can have 'genuine' choices (Hakim 2003: 355). While the potential impact of varying

social and economic environments on these choices is acknowledged, preference is viewed as “the primary determinant of women’s behaviour” (Hakim 2003: 361). Conversely, Rational Choice theory, Risk Aversion theory, and Gender Equity theory, maintain that circumstance often outweighs personal choice in an individual’s decision of whether or not to have (more) children (Coleman 2000; McDonald 2000b). They state, respectively, that reproductive choices are overshadowed by: a rational assessment of the known costs and benefits of motherhood; a desire to avoid the unknown risks of motherhood; and a belief that gender equity, particularly in paid work, is challenged by motherhood. The majority of the literature supports those theories that emphasise the impact of circumstance over choice, and questions the use of the word ‘choice’ in describing reproductive decisions that have been limited in some way (Bryson 2001; Cannold 2005; Johnstone and Lee 2009a; 2009b; Maher and Saugeres 2007; Weston and Qu 2004).

Method

Fifty women’s aspirations for children were investigated from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective, with priority given to the qualitative approach. Data collection was conducted in 2005, and entailed multiple choice written surveys and semi-structured telephone interviews. The interviewees were a sub-sample of the 1973-78 cohort of the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health (ALSWH), a survey examining the health and wellbeing of a large national sample. ALSWH method is discussed in detail elsewhere (Lee et al. 2005).

Existing longitudinal data from the ALSWH enabled the recruitment of a purposive sample for this research, focussing the population under investigation to women of urban residence, who were living with a partner, and were in the middle of their

childbearing years, aged 27-32 years, but who had no children, and were not currently pregnant. Their childless status facilitated a close examination of reproductive decision-making, and potential delaying, in action. Statistical analyses suggest that, in general, the interviewees were more educated, better off, and more likely to be in paid employment, and to aspire to have fewer children than the 1973-78 cohort as a whole, which has previously been found to be broadly representative of the same age cohort in society (Brown et al. 1999). The project is part of a larger study. This paper concentrates on one aspect of the data and addresses a revealing contrast between survey responses and qualitative data.

‘Counting’ aspirations

The written survey asked women how many children they would like to have both by the age of 35 years old, and in their lifetime, with multiple choice options including: no children, one child, two children, or three or more children. The first question was also asked in the main ALSWH surveys allowing a comparison between the interviewees and the urban component of the 1973-78 cohort at Survey 3.

As Table 1 shows, the vast majority of women, 90% of the interviewees, and 91% of the longitudinal cohort (ALSWH 2005), aspired *to* have children by the age of 35 years old, with most wanting to have two. These figures reflect other Australian (Johnstone and Lee 2009b; Lee and Gramotnev 2006; Maher et al. 2004; Weston et al. 2004) and international research (Berrington 2004; Goldstein et al. 2003).

Table 1: ‘Counting aspirations’

	ALSWHⁱ 1973-78 cohort	Interviewees	
	Survey 3 (2003) 25-30 yrs n ⁱⁱ =5,330 (urban residents)	(2005) 27-32 yrs n=50 (urban residents, childless, married or de facto)	
	Aspired by age 35...	Aspired in lifetime...	
No children	9% (n=458)	10% (n=5)	6% (n=3)
One child	17% (n=906)	32% (n=16)	10% (n=5)
Two children	56% (n=2990)	54% (n=27)	70% (n=35)
Three or more children	18% (n=976)	4% (n=2)	14% (n=7)
Already mothers	25% (n=1306)	N/A	
Trying to conceive	6% (n=298)	24% (n=12)	

However, despite their aspirations for children, in 2003 at the age of 25-30 years only a quarter of the 1973-78 cohort had become mothers (n=1306), and 6% were currently trying to conceive (n=298). Furthermore, while the interviewees had been chosen specifically because they did not yet have children at the age of 27-32 years, only a quarter were currently trying to conceive (n=12) despite their expressed aspirations for children by aged 35.

ⁱ ALSWH: The Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health (ALSWH 2005).

ⁱⁱ n=Number of ALSWH or interview participants: denotes finding based on survey data, as opposed to the interview narratives.

The remainder of this paper considers how individual women's reproductive decision-making develops, and why women who, at face value, would like children are delaying having them.

Introducing uncertainty: a study of conviction

The interview narratives were examined to discover the extent to which participants' 'yes' or 'no' aspirations were supported by the strength of conviction with which they went on to discuss their childbearing plans. The qualitative analysis explored both the participants' desire for children, and their strength of feeling about fulfilling their childbearing plans, including those who aspired *not* to have children. This open response format provided an opportunity to go beneath the structured survey responses to explicate the apparent contradiction between the two types of data.

A set of 'conviction' categories were developed, as illustrated in Table 2 which shows that three-quarters of interviewees were defined as 'certain' about having children and a quarter were defined as 'uncertain'. Although only three interviewees stated in the survey that they wanted 'no children', many more expressed indecision about childbearing in their interview. The analyses revealed a sliding scale of conviction, and a number of subcategories were developed to accommodate this.

Table 2: A study of conviction

<div>↑</div> <div>STRENGTH OF CONVICTION</div> <div>↓</div>		WANTS KIDS (I ⁱⁱⁱ =47)			WANTS NO KIDS (I=3)		<div>↑</div> <div>STRENGTH OF CONVICTION</div> <div>↓</div>
	CERTAIN I=37	DEFINITE		I=11	I=2	CERTAIN	
		<ul style="list-style-type: none">Desires childrenHigh priorityInevitableIncomplete without	Conviction lessened by partner s lack of desire	I = 5			
			Problems conceiving: Could be happy without	I = 2			
			LIKELY				
		<ul style="list-style-type: none">Wants childrenConviction impacted by competing priorities	Conviction lessened by distance of plan	I = 4			
			Problems conceiving: Could be happy without	I=1			
	UNCERTAIN I=13	Trying but unsure		I = 1	I = 1	UNCERTAIN	
		UNCERTAIN	Indecisive	I = 5			
			<ul style="list-style-type: none">Uninterested but feels ‘should’ have kidsDoesn’t feel ‘maternal’Dislikes/ambivalent childrenLikes current lifestyleOther priorities	Lack of desire			

ⁱⁱⁱ I = Number of interviewees: denotes finding based on analyses of the interview narrative data, as opposed to the survey data.

For some interviewees categorisation was determined by literal statements they made about being ‘certain’ or ‘uncertain’ about having children and becoming a mother, such as those who spoke of *when* they had children, and those who spoke of *if* they had children. More often conviction was less clear cut, with many participants expressing both desire for and doubts about having children. Indeed it was rare for participants to be unwavering in their conviction. Consequently, analyses of conviction were based on the narratives as a whole and the overall sense of ‘feeling’ the participant generated. Factors found to shape the interviewee’s conviction included: their maternal desire for children; competing priorities; planned timing; and perceptions of choice.

The definite

The ‘certain’ were first divided into two groups, labelling their degree of conviction as ‘definite’ or ‘likely’. Both groups of women generally described having children as a high priority but subtle differences between them further stratified their convictions. For the third (I=18) at the ‘top’ end of the spectrum, having children was a ‘desire’. They “definitely” wanted children, and often made statements that it had “always been important”, was “inevitable”, and that life would be “incomplete” without them. In this group, participants often linked their strength of feeling to a “maternal” desire for children.

Allison¹: *I just really want to have a baby and look after it...[It's] definitely something I'd want to do with my partner* (Certain: Definite but Problems conceiving: Could be happy without, Kids now, Age 31, Married, Higher degree).

Partner lacks desire

However, the conviction of five women within the ‘definite’ group was tempered somewhat by the *lack* of desire they reported their partner as having, in contrast to their own. A few stated the absence of a ‘willing’ partner as an impediment to childbearing choice.

Brooke: *In some respects I feel I have no choice about it because I can't just have a baby...my partner has to want one as well... it really depends on two people agreeing and at the moment we don't...* (Certain: Definite but partner lacks desire, Kids in 2-5yrs, Age 30, De facto, Year 12).

Others in this group appeared to be curbing their own desire, consciously or unconsciously, in their partners favour. For example, although Amy believed her partner's desire to delay childbearing had influenced her own aspirations; she also questioned why she had been in such a hurry to have children in the first place.

Fertility problems: Could be happy without

A third (‘definite’) and forth (‘likely’) subgroup were created based, paradoxically, on their openness *not* to have children, and the fact each described the possibility that they ‘could be happy without’ having children. Here, despite a strong desire for children, their strength of conviction was lessened by their experience of and reaction to fertility problems. As with the lack of a ‘willing’ partner the possibility of reduced choice, this time through a lack of biological means, appeared to dampen desire as they became resigned to the fact that motherhood may not be an option for them.

This reduced conviction was influenced by the participants’ openness to childlessness and the use of fertility treatment, including their beliefs about having their ‘own’ genetic children, as opposed to using donor gametes or adopting a child. Leah felt “the whole point of having children...is to pass on a little bit of yourself”, and the extent of her negative feelings towards needing sperm donation made her doubt her

conviction about having children, reflecting “maybe I don’t want kids that much then”.

In contrast, the other three women who were experiencing problems conceiving remained confident in their conviction. For example, Cindy who was undergoing *in vitro* fertilisation stated she would continue with fertility treatment, including sperm donation, until she had a child.

The ‘likely’

Moving down from the *most* certain, the ‘likely’, were less effusive but still upheld their survey responses by discussing positive aspirations for children. For them, although they felt motherhood was “on the cards” it was not a pressing concern, even for those who were already trying to conceive.

Frequently, other factors impacted a singular desire for children. They *wanted* children but they also wanted other things in their lives. Competing priorities included their career, travel, and economic security, among many others. These were both personal aspirations and achievements which participants’ perceived necessary prior to motherhood. Samantha described her goal to be financially secure *before* having children, a circumstance she felt would be difficult to achieve after she became a mother.

Samantha: *I don’t want to put ourselves in any difficult financial situation by having children because I know it is a great expense and I also wouldn’t want to bring up children in a situation where they would be without things* (Certain: Likely, Kids in <2 years, Age 28, De facto, Undergraduate degree).

While Yvette’s belief that motherhood was incompatible with her planned overseas holiday postponed her childbearing intentions by a further two years.

A comparison between strength of conviction & the timing of childbearing

Samantha and Yvette are examples of competing priorities resulting in delayed childbearing and reduced conviction. The findings in Table 3 support this, illustrating a pattern between the timing of when participants planned to start having children and their strength of conviction. As you might expect, the more certain participants were, the sooner they wanted children. Interestingly, while participant age was found to be linked to the planned timing of childbearing, there were no clear connections with conviction.

Table 3: A comparison between strength of conviction & the timing of childbearing

	Plans to start having children...				
		Now	<2 years	2-5years	>5 years
<div> <div>Strength of conviction</div> <div> </div> </div>	Definite	I ^{iv} =4	I=4	I=3	
		Partner lacks desire	I=1	I=4	
		Fertility problems: Could be happy without	I=2		
	Likely	I=4	I=4	I=4	
		Distance of plan		I=1	I=3
		Fertility problems: Could be happy without	I=1		
	Uncertain	Trying but unsure	I=1		
		Indecisive		I=1	I=4
		Lack of desire		I=3	I=3

^{iv} I = Number of interviewees: denotes finding based on analyses of the interview

narrative data, as opposed to the survey data.

Over two-thirds (I=8) of those who were ‘definite’ about having children wanted to have them now or within the next two years, while most of those whose were impacted by their partner’s lack of desire reflected this by planning to have children in 2-5 years (I=4). The ‘likely’ were evenly divided across the soonest three timing categories. Those who were experiencing problems conceiving were clearly all trying at the time of the interview.

The women who were planning to wait a further five or more years before starting to have children were found to be either ‘uncertain’ in their conviction or formed a subgroup within the ‘likely’ category. For these women, the distance from their childbearing plan appeared to reduce their desire. Jennifer explained that having children was in the “background” but was not and had never been a particular focus of hers.

The Uncertain

Jennifer’s way of thinking was experienced more acutely by those women at the ‘uncertain’ end of the spectrum, who were characterised by their level of ‘indecision’ about whether and when to have children and their ‘lack of desire’ to do so; factors which created the labels loosely dividing this group. Louise described having an ongoing debate within herself:

Louise: I actually found the [multiple choice question in the] survey quite difficult to answer because...literally I'm making decisions almost week by week because this week I just can't imagine having them [children] so I answered 'yes' just because I guess that's the predominant thing....
(Uncertain: indecision, Kids in 5+yrs, Age 31, Married, Undergraduate degree).

Others were simply disinterested in the prospect of having children. They described a lack of “maternal” feeling or desire, and sometimes a dislike of children.

For both the ‘indecisive’ and those ‘lacking the desire’, their doubts were often pronounced versions of those mentioned by more certain participants: They enjoyed their current lifestyle and had other priorities, which they usually felt would be incompatible with and potentially threatened by motherhood.

This belief was shared by Olivia, who, despite currently trying to conceive, expressed significant misgivings about wanting to have children: “The older I get, the less I want to have kids”. Olivia’s conviction also appeared to be lessened by doubts about whether she would be a “good mum”, a concern raised by a number of uncertain participants.

Want versus should

Given the extent of the uncertainty held by these participants, why did they state in the survey, and again in the interview narratives that they wanted to have children?

At this point, the distinction between the ‘certain’ and the ‘uncertain’ seems to be based on *want* versus *should*. Those who were ‘certain’, often simply *wanted* to have children, while many of those who were unsure spoke of feeling they *should* have children, often in spite of a lack of interest in having them or even a dislike of children. This was commonly explained in relation to a fear of regret; including the concern that waiting until they felt “maternal” might result in being unable to have children due to age-related infertility.

Tara: *I need to do this [have children]. Not because I really want to but because I do believe I will regret it in the future if I don't* (Uncertain: indecisive, Kids in 5+yrs, Age 32, De facto, Undergraduate Degree).

No kids

Conviction was also important among the three women who had stated in their survey, and again in the interview, that they did not want to have children. Two were

adamant about their plan, stating they had always felt that way: “I didn’t have to think about answering the question. I knew that we didn’t want children”. The third, Fiona, expressed uncertainty, explaining that childlessness was her current plan and therefore open to change: “At the moment, I don’t want to”.

One of Fiona’s reasons for not wanting children was the difficulty she foresaw in trying to combine a career with motherhood, believing that women either “run themselves ragged” doing both or are unable to “gain back” time spent out of the workforce. This was a key competing priority for other women who described the need to “establish” a career prior to having children.

Transitions of certainty

Fiona’s comments highlight the importance of recognising the fluidity of the conviction categories. While some women remained fixed on early goals of motherhood or childlessness; the majority found their desire for children changed throughout their lives.

Although Olivia described experiencing a decrease in her desire for children as she got older despite her continuing to try and conceive, it was more common for participants to report an increase in their desire and certainty over time.

Sonya: I can feel a mother being created in me... When I was in my young 20s... I couldn’t imagine feeling like that... Then it just came on slowly over probably the last 2 years... I think that the more stable and loving I feel in my relationship, the more clucky I feel (Certain: definite, Kids in 2-5yrs, Age 27, De facto, Undergraduate degree).

A summary of conviction: a balance of desire, choice, priority and time

In conclusion, the analysis found that while the ‘tick box’ data pointed overwhelmingly to aspirations *for* children, the interview narratives revealed a sliding scale of certainty. Participants often expressed both desires *and* doubts about having

children, and their conviction was usually shaped by a complex interplay between maternal feeling, competing priorities, planned timing, and available choices, all of which had the potential to change over time.

This highlights the transitional nature of women's reproductive aspirations, a fluidity frequently determined by the circumstances in which they find themselves. Consequently, individual circumstance was often found to outweigh individual choice in establishing the strength of conviction women apply to their childbearing goals.

On a basic level, choice was impacted by factors such as a willing partner and the ability to conceive. A more elaborate relationship existed between choice and the priority women attributed to motherhood. Indeed, the importance of circumstance was emphasised by the rational assessment many women described making of the costs and benefits of having children. Already having children was perceived to compromise the potential achievement of other life goals, such as economic stability, career establishment and overseas travel, which were all viewed as necessary to provide a robust basis for the mother role in terms of fulfilling the material and emotional needs of both child and mother. This assessment usually resulted in these 'other' aspirations being prioritised over motherhood in order to assure their completion, thus contributing to delayed childbearing. This was particularly the case for career establishment as many women expressed the belief that combining paid work with motherhood would be difficult.

A desire to avoid unknown risks created two opposing responses. The lack of confidence some women had in their, as yet untested, ability to be a "good" mother had the potential to reduce their aspirations for children. Conversely, and sometimes simultaneously, the chance of age-related infertility resulted in a number of women feeling that they "should" have children before it was "too late" despite their

uncertainty. This cautious calculating approach to childbearing aligns the research with the theories of Rational Choice, Risk Aversion and Gender Equity, over Preference theory.

On the other hand, the existence, or lack of, maternal desire *was* found to be central to the reproductive aspirations expressed by the quarter of the sample whose desire for, or against, children was matched by a strong conviction: the ‘definite’. This suggests that personal choice was the primary influencer of their motherhood plans, supporting Preference theory. However, in keeping with the main conclusions of the research, it could also be argued that the circumstances in which the ‘definite’ group live may be more conducive to their aspirations.

Overall, therefore, although the qualitative findings largely upheld the quantitative in terms of positive aspirations for children, they also emphasized the complexity of unpacking reproductive decision-making. The potential for delayed childbearing was highlighted, along with the number of participants open to the possibility of *not* having children. Of particular note are those women, a quarter of the sample, who spoke with uncertainty about their *positive* aspirations for children. The interview narratives, therefore, work in combination with the multiple choice data to present a more complete picture of women’s childbearing aspirations, emphasising the worth of being able to ask the same or similar questions from both a quantitative and qualitative approach.

Acknowledgements:

The research on which this paper is based was conducted as part of the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health, The University of Newcastle and The University of Queensland. I am grateful to the Research Centre for Gender Health and

Ageing, The University of Newcastle, and the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing for funding and to the women who generously provided the interview and survey data. I also thank Dr Ann Taylor, Dr Penny Warner-Smith, and the reviewers for their helpful comments.

Notes:

- 1 The participants have been given pseudonyms.

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