



Effects of changing personal on decisions

The current decline in family size in Australia has sparked considerable debate. Having children is usually seen as a matter of choice, but external circumstances may place constraints on this choice. What is the impact of relationship status on men's and women's intentions about whether or not to have children? And how do changes in relationship status affect those intentions?

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The declining fertility rate in Australia and other developed countries has received a great deal of attention over the last few years. Although such declines are by no means restricted to recent times, the fertility rate has now reached an all-time low.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the fertility rate was approximately 3.5 babies per woman, representing a decline from early years and sparking a Royal Commission in New South

Wales to inquire into this trend (ABS 2000). The rate fell to 2.1 babies per woman in 1934 (during the Great Depression), but then began to increase, reaching its highest rate for the century in 1961 (3.6 babies per woman) before falling once more. By 1976, the rate fell to below replacement level (2.1) for the first time, but then stabilised in the late 1970s and 1980s to between 1.8 and 1.9. During the 1990s, the rate fell in small progressive steps, and was 1.75 in 1999, the most recent rate



*relationships
about having children*

recorded (ABS 2000). According to McDonald (1998), the fertility rate is likely to fall further unless radical changes in family-related policies are introduced.

The contemporary decline in the fertility rate stems from the fact that increasing proportions of women are restricting their family size to one or two children, or remaining permanently childless. Between 1986 and 1996, the proportions of women aged 45–49 years with various numbers of children changed as follows: the proportion with more than two children decreased from 54 per cent to 40 per cent, while the proportion with one child or two children increased from 8 to 10 per cent and from 29 to 39 per cent respectively. During this period, the proportion of women aged 45–49 years who had not given birth to any children increased from 9 per cent to nearly 11 per cent (ABS 1999).

The decline in the fertility rate since the 1960s can be explained by a number of interacting factors

including the introduction of the contraceptive pill and availability of abortion, improvements in the education levels of young women, and the increasing participation of women in paid employment. Allied to these trends, women are having children later in life and their total child-bearing period has shortened (Jain and McDonald 1997), thereby limiting their chances of having large families.

Although the projected prevalence of permanent childlessness in Australia varies, it seems likely that at least 20 per cent of women currently in their reproductive years will not have children (ABS 1999; Merlo and Rowland 2000). The increasing prevalence of childlessness is also apparent in other advanced countries, with recent predictions of permanent childlessness for the United Kingdom and the United States being 20 and 22 per cent respectively (Heaton et al. 1999; McAllister and Clarke 1998).

Low birth rates, when coupled with increasing life expectancies, have resulted in a progressively 'ageing' population profile in advanced countries, sparking concerns about future difficulties for the working population to support those who have retired, and concerns about implications of population decline in the longer term. Population decline will occur when there is no longer a youth-biased age structure that enables the number of births to exceed the number of deaths. While increasing immigration levels represents one commonly cited means of reducing the ageing of the population, the capacity for immigration to affect the age structure is quite limited (McDonald and Kippen 1999).

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The declining birth rate and rising level of childlessness have led to a number of investigations into reasons for childlessness. While for some people childlessness is involuntary, contemporary childlessness is typically seen as mostly voluntary. However, external circumstances may at times hinder chances of having children. Thus, the distinction between voluntary and involuntary childlessness is at times difficult to make (Rowland 1998; Merlo and Rowland 2000).

Some studies have sought explanations for childlessness by focusing on the characteristics that distinguish those with and without children. Others have asked people to indicate whether or not they intend to have children and to give reasons for their choice. Not surprisingly, childlessness is related to marital status, with the never married being the least likely to have children, and the married being the most likely to have children (Heaton et al. 1999; Schoen et al. 1999). Yet marriage rates have declined and relationships have become increasingly unstable over the last few decades (ABS 2000; Qu and Glezer 1998) – effects likely to contribute to the increasing prevalence of childlessness.

In addition, childless people appear to be better educated and more career oriented, and to hold more egalitarian views of gender roles (Cameron 1990; Rovi 1994). However, the gap in the education level between those with and without children has narrowed, with childlessness becoming more widespread across different educational levels and labour force status groups (ABS 1999; McDonald 1996).

Children are expensive to raise – an issue that is particularly likely to be important for those with limited financial resources. In addition, having a child often results in diminished income and career opportunities for women, along with curtailment of their freedom and possibly lowered self-esteem (see Barnes 2000). Other reasons for childlessness suggested in the literature include dislike of children, and concerns about the responsibilities associated with parenting (see Cameron 1990).

While much of the literature on fertility focuses on women's decisions, men's views will also influence the decision of whether or not to have children. They, too, can be concerned about financial and non-financial costs of raising children, and their views and those of their partners appear to have much the same weight in influencing outcomes (Thomson 1997).

A recent British study suggested that the decision to remain childless is a complex process which takes place in the context of one's work, life experiences, personal health and relationships (McAllister and Clarke 1998). Intentions about having children can change in the light of evolving circumstances, values and aspirations. For example, some couples who decide to delay childbearing

may eventually give up all ideas of having children.

McDonald (1998) has argued that, in countries where women's opportunities for participating in education and employment are severely curtailed through childbearing, women are inclined to have fewer children than they intended at the outset. On the other hand, Schoen et al. (1999) concluded that childbearing intentions are remarkably persistent, and are thus strong predictors of outcomes. However, these authors also acknowledged that the level of apparent stability diminishes as the interval between measured intentions and outcomes increases. According to Rovi (1994), the stability of intentions varies according to their nature: people who do not want children are less likely to change their minds than those who want children.

As Bracher and Santow (1991) have pointed out, assessment of fertility intentions or desires represents an appropriate starting point for examining the steps involved in making decisions about family formation, and may shed light on the causes of fertility decline. In particular, it may be possible to examine factors that lead fertility *outcomes* to match or differ from fertility desires or *intentions*. Nevertheless, few studies have examined factors linked with changes in intentions about whether or not to have children – a point noted by Heaton et al. (1999). These authors argued that examination of reversals in intentions is a necessary prerequisite for a proper understanding of voluntary childlessness.



While the financial and non-financial costs of having children may lead women and men to have few if any children, it seems very likely that intentions about having children are also linked to expectations about relationship status. Those men and women who are already in an apparently stable relationship are likely to hold intentions based on an expectation that their relationship will continue. Some people who do not have a partner may intend to have children after they have found a suitable partner with whom to live. However, some relationships end before children are born and some single people do not find partners. Yet, as Merlo and Rowland (2000) pointed out, the impact on fertility decisions of external constraints such as relationship breakdown and the inability to find a suitable partner has not been explored adequately.

The following analysis focuses on intentions and outcomes regarding having children, covering nearly a decade. Three issues are examined: the prevalence of intentions to have children or remain childless among men and women when they were first contacted; whether those who did not intend to have children were less likely to change their minds than those who intended to have children, as Rovi (1994) claimed; and the extent to which relationship status and changes in relationship status over the period influenced intentions and outcomes.

Australian Family Formation Project

The analysis is based on data from the *Australian Family Formation Project*, a national longitudinal study conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in 1981 (when respondents were 18–34 years old) and around 10 years later (late 1990 to early 1991). As noted above, fertility rates stabilised during this period, and began to decline once more in the 1990s. In addition, relationships have become increasingly unstable and the marriage rate has declined. Thus, it is likely that the impact of relationship status on decisions about having children will have an even more pronounced effect today.

Fifty-eight per cent of the original sample of 2500 respondents were traced and agreed to participate in the second survey. Those who remained in the study tended to be better educated than those who did not participate, but these two groups varied little in terms of age and gender.

In the following analysis, attention is directed to 783 respondents who did not have children in the initial survey (425 men and 358 women representing 52 per cent of the total sample who were re-interviewed in the second survey). Respondents were omitted from the analysis if they reported that they were homosexual or did not intend having any children for medical reasons (N=9). Throughout this analysis, the results for men and women were combined because their patterns were very similar.

Intentions and outcomes

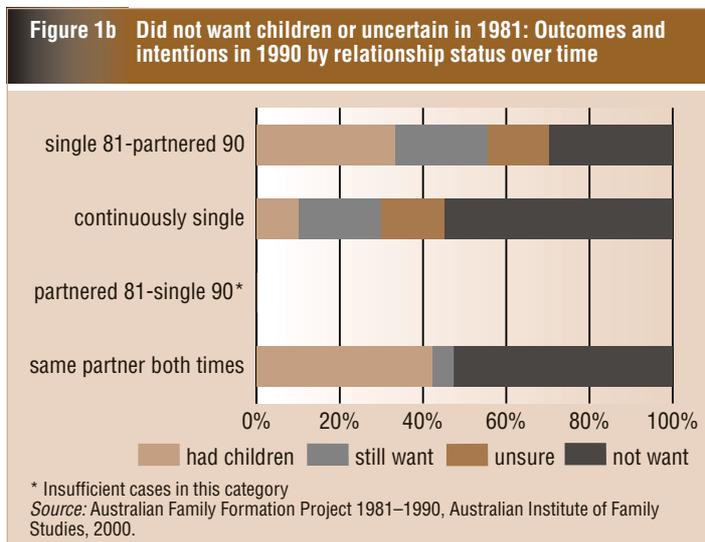
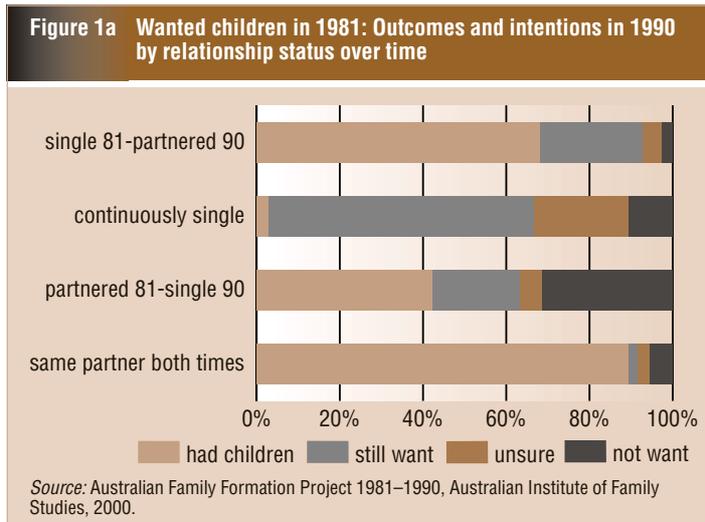
Table 1 shows respondents' intentions in wave 1 (1981) and outcomes and intentions in wave 2 (1990). In wave 1, most respondents said they

intended having children (89 per cent), while 6 per cent said that they would not have children, and 5 per cent indicated uncertainty.

Not surprisingly, first wave respondents who said that they intended to have children were more likely than other respondents to have done so by the second wave. Fifty-seven per cent of those who wanted to have children had fulfilled their ambitions by this time. On the other hand, only a quarter of those who did not want any children or

1990 Outcomes and intentions	1981 Intentions		
	Want	Not want	Unsure
Had children	57.2	25.0	25.6
No children			
~ want	28.7	16.7	28.2
~unsure	7.8	6.3	12.8
~not want	6.3	52.1	33.3
Total	100	100	100
N	696	48	39

Source: Australian Family Formation Project 1981–1990, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2000.



who were unsure about these matters in wave 1 reported having children by wave 2.

Only 6 per cent of those who had earlier intended to become parents subsequently changed their minds and about 8 per cent became unsure, while just over half (52 per cent) of those who intended to remain childless indicated the same intention almost a decade later. It is worth noting, however, that by wave 2, 42 per cent in this group had either had children or intended to have children.

These results suggest that intentions to have children were fairly reliable or persistent over nearly ten years, with the vast majority either having had, or still intending to have,

Higher relationship break-up coupled with shorter duration of relationships are likely to increase the rate of childlessness.



children. However, this study would not have detected situations involving several changes in decision making during this interval.

As might be expected, uncertainty appeared to be the least stable of the three options: of those who felt unsure about having any children in 1981, only 13 per cent remained unsure, while 33 per cent had decided not to have children by wave 2. More than half the respondents who indicated uncertainty about having children either had children by the second wave or said they intended to do so in the future.

Although, as noted above, Rovi (1994) argued that those who do not intend to have children (called 'negative intentions') are less likely to change their minds than those who intend to have children (called 'positive intentions'), the results in Table 1 suggest an opposite trend. Positive intentions appear to be more stable over time and more consistent with outcomes, compared with negative intentions.

Intentions and relationship status

As noted earlier, little attention has been paid to the impact on fertility decisions of relationship break-up or failure to find a partner. To examine this issue, the sample was divided into four basic groups. Two groups had experienced no change in relationship status, with one group remaining single over the entire period ($N=131$), and the other group living with the same partner continuously (either married or in a de facto relationship) ($N = 160$). The other two groups experienced

change in relationship status, with one group being single in wave 1 and living with a partner in wave 2 ($N = 356$), and the other group living with a partner in wave 1 only ($N = 22$). For simplicity, those who followed other pathways were omitted from this analysis (for example, the 33 respondents who had different partners in wave 1 and wave 2, and the 64 respondents who were single in both waves but had partnered at least once between waves).

Each of the four basic groups was then subdivided further according to whether or not members indicated in wave 1 that they definitely intended having children. Because of the small numbers in some sub-groups, the 'undecided' were combined with those who did not intend having children for this analysis. As indicated above, these two groups were similar in terms of the proportion who, by wave 2, had children or did not intend having children.

Figures 1 and 2 respectively refer to those with and without definite intentions to have children at the time of the first survey. It is noteworthy that the general pattern in Table 1 regarding the stability of 'positive intentions' held for each relationship status group represented in Figure 1.

That is, regardless of stability or change in relationship status, the majority of respondents who in wave 1 said they would have children had, by the second wave, either achieved their ambition or still intended doing so.

Those who intended having children

Despite the general consistency between intentions and outcomes for those who, in wave 1, intended having children, Figure 1 suggests that relationship status contributes to outcomes. The most likely to have had children were those with the same partner in both waves (89 per cent), followed by those who had found a partner by wave 2 (68 per cent), then those who had separated (42 per cent). Not surprisingly, very few who were continuously single reported having children by wave 2 (3 per cent).

Those who had separated from their partner were the most likely to have changed their minds about having children (32 per cent), followed by the continuously single (11 per cent). Of all the four groups who intended having children, the most likely to express uncertainty about this matter were the continuously single (23 per cent). Only 3 to 5 per cent in the other three groups indicated that they were uncertain about having children.

Such trends highlight the importance of relationship stability for having children. Early intervention strategies that promote the quality of relationships may often have the flow-on effect of enabling couples who want children to achieve their aims.

By wave 2, respondents aged 35 or more years who were continuously single were more likely than their younger counterparts to have decided against having children (27 per cent compared with 3 per cent), while around 22 per cent in each age group had become uncertain about this matter. Such trends suggest that changes in fertility intentions often reflect the process of adjustment to circumstances. Their apparent childlessness may not be as 'voluntary' as might appear on the basis of their expressed intentions. By contrast, age did not appear to affect intentions of those with new or continuous partners. The majority either had children or still intended to become parents.

Those with no clear intentions to have children

As noted above, a number of respondents who in wave 1 either did not intend having children or felt unsure about this matter had already had children by wave 2 or intended doing so. Those who had found a partner by wave 2 were the most likely to have changed their minds, with 56 per cent either having had a child or intending to have a child.

The extent to which their changed status or pressure from their new partners had led to a change in intentions is not known. However, the most likely to have had a child were those in a continuous relationship (42 per cent). Just over half in this group and in the continuously single group, and less than one third who had found a partner, indicated in wave 2 that they did not intend having children.

Conclusions

Studies on childlessness are often based on identification of characteristics that distinguish between those with and without children or on reasons for not having children solicited from respondents. Changes in intentions are often overlooked, as are changes in relationship status that can have a profound impact on decisions about having children. Nevertheless, consistent with previous research, this analysis suggests that intentions to have children tend to be strong predictors of outcomes. Most respondents intended having children in wave 1, and regardless of their relationship status, most who held these intentions either had children by wave 2 or still intended to do so.

However, some people changed their intentions and such changes were often linked with personal relationships. Those who had separated from their partners were the most likely to change their minds and decide against having children, followed by those who were continuously single. Nonetheless, this change of mind for the continuously single appeared to become more entrenched with age. Such trends may well reflect respondents' adjustment to the fact that time was running out. In this case, there appears to be a blurring of 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' childlessness.

Intentions not to have children were less stable than intentions to have children, and were more likely to be reversed by single respondents who subsequently partnered than by respondents who remained with the same partner over the decade.

The extent to which such changes arose from enhanced opportunities to have children or home pressures from the new partner is unclear.

In summary, childlessness applies to a heterogeneous group and its reasons are complex. Those who intend remaining childless may change their minds, while those who intend having children may lose virtually all opportunities of doing so if they separate from their current partner. Furthermore, relationships have become less stable over the last few decades. Higher relationship break-up coupled with shorter duration of relationships are likely to increase the rate of childlessness. Thus, intervention strategies that successfully enhance the quality of relationships, thereby preventing separation, may have the added advantage of helping couples who want a child or who want to have more children to achieve their aims.

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