Australia, like other OECD countries (d’Ad-dio & d’Ercole, 2005; Sleebos, 2003), has witnessed significant downward trends in fertility rates over the past few decades (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2008), sparking interest in the childbearing intentions and patterns of young Australians. Delays in the commencement of childbearing (ABS, 2007, 2008), followed by low levels of subsequent childbearing, have meant a decline in the total fertility rate (McDonald, 2001) to 1.81 babies per woman, below the replacement level of 2.1 (Lattimore & Pobke, 2008). While Australia’s fertility rate is at the higher end compared to other OECD countries (Gray, Qu, & Weston, 2008), the prospect of an ageing population and the associated economic and social consequences (Treasury, 2002) have drawn attention to policies that can help lift fertility rates in Australia (McDonald, 2006).

Further, significant social changes, including greater numbers of women in higher education (ABS, 2005) and an increased number of Australian women, including mothers, in paid employment (ABS, 2006, 2008) have meant a changing climate for Australian women. For instance, of women with children aged under 15 years, the proportion in
investigate the work, relationship and motherhood aspirations of young Australian women and their trends over three time points, using data collected as part of the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health.

**Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health**

The ALSWH (see Lee et al., 2005, for a full review) was established to track the health of three age cohorts of Australian women by examining the relationships between biological, physiological, social and lifestyle factors and women’s physical health, emotional wellbeing and use of health services. The age groups of the three cohorts, when the first surveys were mailed in 1996, were 18–23 years (the Younger cohort); 45–50 years (the Mid-age cohort) and 70–75 years (the Older cohort).

Women were selected from the Australian national health insurance database (Medicare). In total, over 40,000 women were recruited in 1996, and all cohorts are being followed approximately every three years. The sampling strategy was stratified random, with systematic over-sampling of women from rural and remote areas to capture the heterogeneity of health experiences of women living outside metropolitan areas. Accordingly, in analyses where area of residence is not a variable of interest, data is weighted by area of residence to account for over-sampling.

This analysis focuses on women who responded to the first three waves of the Younger cohort, that is, Wave 1 in 1996 (aged 18–23); Wave 2 in 2000 (aged 22–27) and Wave 3 in 2003 (aged 25–30). A total of 14,779 young women completed Wave 1 in 1996. Of these, 13,721 (93%) were contactable and were sent Wave 2 in 2000. Overall, 9,690 women (71%) responded to Wave 2. In 2003, 12,792 women were contactable and were sent Wave 3, and 9,081 (71%) responded. A total of 7,790 women responded to all three waves.

Of women who responded, 12.3% had university degrees at Wave 1, 44.8% at Wave 2, and 49.0% at Wave 3. Further, 33.6% were engaged in study at Wave 1, 29.7% at Wave 2, and 26.4% at Wave 3 (ALSWH, 1997, 2002, 2005).

While the majority of women—childless and with children—still aspired to having two children, those who already had children aspired to having larger families of three or more children.
Loss to follow-up was related to having less education, not being born in Australia and being a current smoker (Lee et al., 2005). The main reason for attrition was inability to contact the women (21%), despite using all possible methods of maintaining contact (Lee et al., 2005). Women in their 20s are characterised by high levels of mobility, may change their surnames on marriage, often do not list their telephone numbers, do not register to vote or do not update their addresses when they move, and may make extended trips outside Australia for work, education or recreation.

Materials and measures

Our measures of interest are the motherhood, employment and relationship aspiration items.

**Motherhood aspirations.** Women were asked, “When you are 35, would you like to have …”. Response options were: “no children”, “1 child”, “2 children” or “3 or more children”. At Wave 1, response options were “no children”, “1 or 2 children” or “more than 2 children”.

**Employment aspirations.** Women were asked, “When you are 35, would you like to be in …”. Response options were: “full-time paid employment”, “part-time paid employment”, “full-time unpaid work in the home” or “self-employed/own business”. At Wave 1, “self-employed/own business” was not a response option; however, there was an additional response option of “other”.

**Relationship aspirations.** Women were asked, “When you are 35, would you like to be …”. Response options were: “married”, “in a stable relationship but not married” or “single (not in a stable relationship)”. At Wave 1, there was an additional response option of “other”.

**Work and family aspirations**

**Motherhood aspirations**

Of women who responded to the aspiration items at Waves 1, 2 and 3, the majority aspired to having children. At Wave 2 and Wave 3, the most common response category was for two children, with 57% and 55% choosing this option at the two waves. At Wave 1, 64.5% of women chose “1 or 2 children”. The next most common response at each wave was “3 or more children” (or “more than 2 children” at Wave 1), although the proportion of women aspiring to three or more children declined from approximately 27% at Wave 1 to 21% at Wave 3. At any of the three waves, between 7% and 8.5% of women aspired to having no children and at Wave 2 and Wave 3, close to 12.5% and 16% of women respectively aspired to having one child.

One might expect that women who already had children might have different aspirations from those who did not. At each of the waves, women who had children did show different patterns of motherhood aspirations compared to childless women (see Table 1). While the majority of women—childless and with children—still aspired to having two children, those who already had children aspired to having larger families of three or more children. For all women, there were declines in aspirations for larger families with increasing age, but this decline was larger for women who were childless than for women who already had children by the time of that survey: the childless women became more likely to aspire to having one or no children with successive waves. These findings are consistent with the British Household Panel Study (BHPS; Berrington, 2004), which also showed that two-child families were the most popular, but that fertility intentions declined with age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Percentage of women aspiring to having no children, 1 child, 2 children or 3 or more children at Waves 1, 2 and 3, by motherhood status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>18–23 years (Wave 1)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childless women</td>
<td>12,612</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women with at least one child</td>
<td>1,405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>22–27 years (Wave 2)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childless women</td>
<td>7,872</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women with at least one child</td>
<td>1,816</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>25–30 years (Wave 3)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childless women</td>
<td>6,079</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women with at least one child</td>
<td>2,942</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: At Wave 1, response options were for “1 or 2 children”, or “more than 2 children”. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.
The majority of young Australian women aspired to be in a stable relationship and have children and some sort of paid work by the time they were 35 years of age.

Motherhood aspirations over time
Linking responses across waves allows an analysis of the degree of individual consistency in aspirations over time. Across waves, approximately 49% of women held consistent motherhood aspirations. It should be noted that the response options for motherhood aspirations changed from Wave 1 to Wave 2 and, to assess the consistency of aspirations, respondents who aspired to the category of “1 or 2 children” at Wave 1, and then “1 child” or “2 children” at Wave 2, were treated as having consistent aspirations across Waves 1 and 2.

The most common consistent response across the three waves was for two children. Approximately 31.8% of women consistently aspired to this category at all three waves; 10.0% of women consistently aspired to having three or more children; 4.4% to having one child and 2.4% to having no children.

The remaining 51.4% of women changed their motherhood aspirations at some point over the three waves. Approximately 24.6% downsized their aspirations across the waves to aspire to a fewer number of children; 16.9% revised their aspirations upwards to aspire to a greater number of children; 5.2% revised their aspirations upwards at Wave 2 but then revised them down again by Wave 3; while another 4.7% revised their aspirations downwards then upwards.

Employment aspirations
At all three waves, the most common employment aspiration was for full-time paid employment, followed by part-time paid employment. However, the proportion of women aspiring to full-time paid employment declined from nearly 60% at Wave 1 to close to 41% at Wave 3; while the percentage of women aspiring to part-time paid employment increased slightly from 31.5% at Wave 1 to 35.5% at Wave 3. The introduction of self-employment/own business as a response option at Wave 2 and Wave 3 was a popular option, with approximately 20% of women opting for this category at both waves. Only a small proportion of women aspired to working unpaid in the home, with approximately 5% of women aspiring to this category at each of the three waves.

Table 2 presents a comparison of employment aspirations held by women working full-time hours with employment aspirations held by women not working full-time. Not working full-time could include part-time paid employment, casual employment, studying, or working unpaid at home. While there was little difference in aspirations at Wave 2 when the women were aged 22–27 years, there were notable differences at Wave 1 and Wave 3. At Wave 1, when the women were aged 18–23 years, a greater percentage of the women not working full-time aspired to full-time paid work, compared to women already working full-time. The reverse trend was observed at Wave 3 when the women were aged 25–30 years. Of the women not working full-time, a smaller proportion aspired to full-time paid work, compared to the women working full-time. These differences can perhaps be explained by differences in life transitions among women planning professional careers and those not: in the earlier waves, those not working full-time were mostly studying, while increasingly across waves, those who were planning professional careers had completed their education and moved into full-time work, while those not in full-time work were more likely to be mothers, who were perhaps likely to change their employment patterns and aspirations.

Employment aspirations over time
Of women responding to all three waves, 34.2% held consistent employment aspirations across the three waves: 23.2% of women consistently aspired to full-time paid employment; 10.4% of women consistently aspired to part-time employment; while only 0.6% (46 women from the entire cohort) aspired to unpaid work at home at Waves 1, 2 and 3.
The remaining 65.8% of women changed their employment aspirations at some point across the three waves. Across the three waves, 27.8% of young women alternated between full-time paid and part-time paid employment. Of these, 14% of women trended downwards from full-time paid employment to part-time paid employment across the waves, while 7.5% of women trended upwards from part-time to full-time paid employment. Self-employment/own business as a response option at Waves 2 and 3 had an effect on the distribution of employment aspirations, with approximately 28.2% of women aspiring to self-employment at least once across Waves 2 and 3. Finally, 7.8% of women alternated between paid work (full- or part-time) and unpaid work at home. Other transitions involved women aspiring to the response option of “other” at Wave 1.

**Relationship aspirations**

The majority of women aspired to marriage at Waves 1, 2 and 3. At each wave, approximately 85% of the young women aspired to be married by the age of 35. Between 10% and 13% of women aspired to a stable relationship other than marriage, while only 1% aspired to be single at any of the three waves. At Wave 1, there was an additional response option of “other”, with approximately 3% of women aspiring to this category, although it is unclear what these women meant by “other”. Women who were married (see Table 3) were, unsurprisingly, very likely to aspire to be married at age 35. While the majority of women who were not married did aspire to marriage, the figure was lower, and this percentage decreased from Wave 1 to Wave 3.

**Relationship aspirations over time**

There was considerably less variation in the relationship aspirations of women across the waves, compared to their other aspirations. Approximately 78.5% of women held consistent relationship aspirations across the three waves, with 75.4% consistently aspiring to being married when they were 35. Only 3.1% of women consistently aspired to a stable relationship that didn’t include marriage, and a vanishingly small 0.1% (7 women) consistently aspired to single status.

Thus, 21.5% of women changed their relationship aspirations across the waves. Approximately 17.5% fluctuated between aspiring to marriage and to a stable relationship other than marriage. The remaining 4.7% included women who aspired to the response option of “other” at Wave 1, or to single status at one of the waves.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Percentage of women aspiring to full-time paid, part-time paid, unpaid work at home or self-employment/own business at Waves 1, 2 and 3, by employment status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total sample</td>
<td>Employment aspirations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–23 years (Wave 1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women working full-time</td>
<td>4,560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women not working full-time</td>
<td>9,687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22–27 years (Wave 2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women working full-time</td>
<td>4,975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women not working full-time</td>
<td>4,577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–30 years (Wave 3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women working full-time</td>
<td>4,778</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women not working full-time</td>
<td>4,228</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: At Wave 1, there was a response option of “other” and no option for “self-employment/own business”. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3</th>
<th>Percentage of women aspiring to marriage, stable relationship (but not marriage) or single status at Waves 1, 2 and 3, by relationship status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total sample</td>
<td>Relationship aspirations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–23 years (Wave 1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women married</td>
<td>1,265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women not married</td>
<td>12,912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22–27 years (Wave 2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women married</td>
<td>2,363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women not married</td>
<td>7,249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–30 years (Wave 3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women married</td>
<td>3,722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women not married</td>
<td>5,323</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: At Wave 1, there was an additional response option of “other”. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.
Discussion: Work and family aspirations

Across all three time points, the majority of young Australian women aspired to be in a stable relationship and have children and some sort of paid work by the time they were 35 years of age.

Consistent with other Australian findings (Weston et al., 2004) and UK data (Berrington, 2004), aspirations for two children were the most common, followed by three or more children. Very few women aspired to having one child or no children at any of the three waves, and very few consistently aspired to these options across waves. Overall, about half the women held consistent aspirations for family size, with the majority of these aspiring to have two children.

Fewer women were consistent in their employment aspirations. Half of this inconsistency was explained by fluctuations between full-time paid and part-time paid work—with changes from full-time to part-time being more likely than part-time to full-time—and by the provision of an option of self-employment/own business in Waves 2 and 3. This latter option was popular, but it is unclear exactly what this meant to any individual woman who made this selection, as it might encompass anything from a few hours of solo work a week to running a full-scale business. Overall, the majority of women aspired to full-time paid employment at each of the three waves, although this option became less popular over time, possibly because women were beginning to consider some of the real challenges involved in combining paid work and family.

For relationship aspirations, marriage remained the dominant aspiration across all waves, and there was much less variation across waves.

Overall, the majority of young women aspired to a combination of paid work and family. The most common combination of aspirations was marriage, one or two children, and full-time paid work, although the proportion of women aspiring to this category did decline across waves as women became more likely to consider part-time paid work or self-employment. The inconsistency of some response items across Wave 1 and Wave 2 is a limi-
Differences between women

Research has suggested that there is a divide in Australia, between one group of young women who delay motherhood, obtain further educational qualifications and pursue careers, and another group who become mothers at an early age and do not aspire to further education or to a career in the traditional sense, although they may be quite likely to have paid work of some kind (Probert & McDonald, 1999; Warner-Smith & Imbruglia, 2001). This divergence has been attributed to a social and economic divide. In support of this argument, past research has identified urban–rural and social class divides between women living these different lifestyles of work and family (Warner-Smith & Lee, 2001; Wicks, Mishra, & Milne, 2002). Yet it has also been argued (Hakim, 2000, 2003) that all women have equal choices available to them, and an equal distribution of work and family preferences should be found across all social and education groups. We sought to investigate these differences by exploring the degree to which this divide is by choice or influenced by circumstances, by investigating whether women’s aspirations for work and family varied according to a number of socio-demographic factors.

We aimed to investigate whether area of residence, marital and motherhood status, educational qualifications, occupational category, income stress (as measured by self-rated ability to manage on income) and age predicted differences in subsequent aspirations, as defined by Lifestyle Preference Theory (Hakim, 2002, 2006). If women’s aspirations are indeed unaffected by context and all women do perceive the same choices as being available to them, as predicted by Lifestyle Preference Theory (Hakim, 2002, 2006), we would expect these socio-demographic variables to have no bearing on women’s aspirations. If, on the other hand, aspirations are constrained by circumstance, we would expect these variables to predict aspirations to at least some degree.

The socio-demographic variables from Wave 1 were entered into multinomial logistic regression analyses (with simultaneous adjustment for all variables) in order to predict aspirations according to lifestyle preference categorisation at Wave 2. Women at Wave 2 were classified as belonging to a group characterised by one of three types of aspirations: “home-centred”, “work-centred” or “adaptive”. Women were categorised according to their aspirations for work and motherhood, and according to the definitions of Lifestyle Preference groups. Because there was so little variability in relationship aspirations, we did not use this variable to categorise women.

Hakim (2000, 2003) defines work-centred women as women who are focused on work rather than family, although she concedes they may have children, with a trend to reduce fertility to one-child families (Hakim, 2006); so women who aspired to full-time paid work, with no children or one child, were categorised as work-centred. In contrast, according to Hakim, home-centred women focus on family rather than paid work; so women who aspired to work unpaid at home and to have a larger family of two or more children were categorised as home-centred. Women who aspired to a combination of motherhood, of two or more children, and to some form of paid work—including part-time paid, full-time paid or self-employment/own business (but not to being full-time unpaid at home)—were categorised as adaptive.
At Wave 2, 8,517 women could be classified into one of the three Lifestyle Preference groups: 6,936 women were classified as adaptive; 1,121 as work-centred; and 460 as home-centred.

**Socio-demographic variables**

**Area of residence.** The variable was based on the 1994 Department of Primary Industries and Energy (DPIE) and then Department of Human Services and Health (DHSH) classification for rural, remote and metropolitan areas of Australia (DPIE & DHSH, 1994). Women's postcodes at the time of completing the survey were used to classify their area as “Urban”, “Rural” or “Remote”.

**Highest educational qualifications.** Self-reported level of education was aggregated into four categories: “10 years or fewer of education”, “11 or 12 years of education (completed high school)”, “Diploma or trade certificate”, “University degree or higher”.

**Occupational category.** Questions about women's main current employment status were used to create three occupational categories: “Study”, “Paid work” and “Neither”.

**Ability to manage on income.** Women were asked, “How do you manage on the income you have available?” Response options were: “It is impossible”, “It is difficult all the time”, “It is difficult some of the time”, “It is not too bad” and “It is easy”. Because of small numbers, the first two response options were combined for analysis, producing four categories. This variable was used as a proxy for income stress.

**Marital status.** Marital status was categorised as “Never married”, “Cohabiting”, “Married” and “Other (separated, divorced or widowed)”. Due to small numbers, “Other” was removed from analysis.

**Motherhood status.** Women were asked, “How many times have you given birth to a child?” Women were categorised as either mothers or non-mothers. As there was more than 1% of missing data for this variable, a “Missing data” category was created.

**Age.** Age in years was calculated from the respondent’s date of birth. This was categorised into 18–19, 20–21 and 22–23 years.

**Discussion: Differences between women**

Contrary to Hakim’s predictions, the groups defined according to Lifestyle Preference Groups did show statistically significant differences in area of residence, highest educational qualification, occupational category, marital and motherhood status, and age. A larger proportion of work-centred women lived in urban areas compared to adaptive and home-centred women, who were more likely to live in rural areas. Considering the age range of the participants at Wave 1 (18–23 years) it is likely that...
many women were still completing their education, and this was particularly the case for those with work-centred aspirations. However, differences between groups on highest educational qualification were already apparent. Work-centred women were more likely to have Year 12 as their highest educational qualification, but were also more likely to be studying for a higher qualification and to be out of the paid workforce. By contrast, the home-centred women were less likely to have a university degree, were least likely to be studying and most likely to be in paid work at this stage of their lives. Reflecting these patterns of study and work, the home-centred women were least likely to report difficulty managing on their income. Adaptive women were in the middle of work-centred and home-centred women on this group of variables.

However, adaptive women clustered with home-centred women in being equally likely to be married, while the work-centred women were most likely to be never married. Surprisingly, it was the adaptive women, and not the home-centred women, who were most likely to be mothers at this age. Perhaps this association between motherhood and aspirations for part-time work or self-employment is the result of these women experiencing some work–family conflict and subsequently adjusting their aspirations. However, further research is needed to test this interpretation.

The findings from the regression analyses suggest that work-centred women were already living a more “modern” lifestyle than others. They were less likely to reside in rural areas compared to urban areas. They weren’t married or living in cohabiting relationships, and they were not mothers. They were more likely to have higher levels of education and to be studying to attain higher levels of education.

In contrast, women classified as home-centred tended to be living more “traditional” lifestyles. Although less likely than adaptive women to be mothers and as likely as adaptive women to be married, they were more likely than work-centred women to be married. There were also differences in educational qualifications and occupational category. Home-centred women were the most likely to be in paid work, despite being those who aspired to work unpaid at home, and least likely to be engaged in any study or have tertiary qualifications.

The findings are congruent with research that has suggested that there is a social and economic divide between the group of young women who delay motherhood, obtain further educational qualifications and pursue careers, and another group who become mothers at an early age and do not aspire to further education (Probert & McDonald, 1999; Warner-Smith & Imbruglia, 2001). Further, despite Hakim’s claims that women of all social and educational groups have equal choices available to them and that differences in lifestyles arise from women’s preferences, it is found that area of residence, educational qualification and attaining further education were strong predictors of difference between aspirations. Further, socio-demographic differences predicted aspirations at a subsequent wave, supporting the argument that aspirations, or preferences, are shaped by circumstances and the context in which they are formed.

The findings also suggested that the group of women termed “adaptive” by Hakim were not merely in the middle of the other extreme groups. This conceptualisation of adaptive women—as being a “safe” but effectively meaningless category, including any woman who doesn’t fit the other two categories—has also been criticised in other literature (McRae, 2003a, 2003b). On some variables, such as area of residence and marital status, they were like the home-centred women. They did seem to be “in the middle” on the variables of educational attainment and likelihood of being engaged in further study, but they were the most likely to be mothers. Johnstone and Lee (2009) have presented a fuller
account of the individual and socio-demographic differences between women categorised according to Hakim’s Lifestyle Preference groups, and have demonstrated that the group of women aspiring to a combination of work and family is more complex and heterogeneous than what is implied by their being “in the middle” of two extreme groups. Considering that the majority of women (over 80%) aspired to a combination of work and family, this group of women continues to warrant further research and attention.

Conclusion

The findings have shown that the majority of the cohort of Australian women, aged 18 to 23 years in 1996, aspired to a combination of paid work and family over three time periods. Socio-demographic variables were significant markers of difference between women with varying aspirations, supporting past findings suggesting that urban–rural and class social divides distinguish women living more “traditional” lifestyles and those living more “modern” lifestyles. Our findings investigated women’s aspirations, not actual patterns of behaviour, yet these differences were still emerging, suggesting that context and circumstances shape the plans and choices made by young women. Still, while we did identify some “traditional” and “modern” women, the majority of women aspired to a combination of paid work and family, reinforcing the importance of continuing to develop supportive work–family policies for Australian families. Future research will continue to look at what this cohort achieves for work and family, and will look further at what might influence women to change their plans.

References


Melissa Johnstone is a PhD candidate and Dr Christina Lee is Professor and Head of Psychology, School of Psychology, The University of Queensland. The research on which this paper was based was conducted as part of the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health, University of Newcastle and University of Queensland. We are grateful to the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing for funding and to the women who provided the survey data.