

IMAGES AND IMPACTS OF PARENTHOOD

Explaining fertility and family size
in contemporary Australia

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ABSTRACT

This thesis was written against the backdrop of Australia's low fertility rate to investigate perceptions at the individual level, and within the social context, of influences on fertility and family size. The thesis aligns itself with cultural, ideational and institutional theories of fertility change. It seeks to augment contemporary debate and policy, which centre around work-family compatibility and the financial costs of children, by also investigating the influence of individuals' expectations and experiences of conception, pregnancy, birth and early parenthood. For several decades the geographical, medical and sociological literature has shown these reproductive events to heavily impact on the physical and mental well-being of parents in developed societies, but it is only recently that some demographers have suggested that they warrant renewed investigation in low fertility research. These aspects are all the more salient as postmodern values associated with concern about personal well-being have risen to prominence and have become associated with the transition to below-replacement fertility.

The primary research in the thesis comprises 62 in-depth interviews with parents from across metropolitan South Australia, and a small survey of 45 individuals intending to start a family within two years. The thesis intentionally includes the views of men and of parents with larger families. Analysis of 1996 Census data establishes fertility patterns at the macro level as a basis for exploring the qualitative data.

The thesis findings contribute new knowledge by showing that in South Australia cultural and family influences shape images of family life and family size despite the rhetoric of modern reproductive "choice". They also demonstrate how lower fertility can result from individuals with postmodern preferences finding their experiences of parenthood clashing with their preferences for autonomy, rationality, personal achievement and quality of life. The thesis argues that such experiences can diffuse socially to negatively influence the images and anticipated impacts of parenthood, and hence the fertility desires, of others. In identifying gender differences in the impacts, the thesis concludes that low fertility theory and policy must diversify to better reflect the concerns of women as mothers, and to consider the embodied and social aspects of reproductive behaviour.

DECLARATION

This thesis is my original work as a PhD scholar in the Department of Geographical & Environmental Studies and the Department of Gender Studies & Labour Studies at The University of Adelaide between February 2002 and January 2006.

The work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

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Lareen A Newman

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
ART	Assisted reproductive technology
ASCO	Australian Standard Classification of Occupations
ASCR	Australian Standard Classification of Religions
DFaCS	Department of Family and Community Services
DHS	Department of Human Services (South Australia)
LARC	Long-acting reversible contraception
TFR	Total fertility rate
WHO	World Health Organisation