Failing to achieve family size ideals and the reality of motherhood in regional New South Wales, Australia: evidence from a qualitative approach Donna MY Read¹, Judith Crockett² & Robyn Mason³ ¹ Faculty of Rural Management, University of Sydney, NSW, Australia

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INTRODUCTION

A gap between the number of children desired by young people and the fertility actually achieved has been identified in countries with below replacement fertility (for example: van Peer, 2000; Bongaarts, 2001). This situation includes Australia (Weston et al, 2004) where the total fertility rate in 2007 was 1.93 (ABS, 2008). McDonald (2002) concludes that such findings provide evidence of a 'latent demand' for children in most low fertility countries. Implicit in this assumption is that an understanding of the reason for the gap would suggest strategies for increasing fertility.

METHODOLOGY

- Research area: regional Australian city of Orange in the Central West of New South Wales, population approximately 38,000
- Participants: 26 women with at least one child of nine years of age or younger
- Data collection instruments: semi-structured interviews and focus groups
- > Thematic analysis: coding looking for common themes within the data



THE LIVED EXPERIENCE DOES NOT MATCH THE IDEALISED IMAGE

"I really struggled with the first twelve months with [first child] because I thought it wasn't what I expected. It was full-on. It never stopped."

"Being a first time mum, it was a rude shock to me, like I had no idea what to expect. I had just not been around kids since I was a kid, and I feel like I was lucky, I was just out of my depth and everything was a struggle."

IDEAL IMAGE OF FAMILY – PERSPECTIVE BEFORE

CHILDREN

IDEOLOGY

"only child, lonely child"

"I thought three's a bad number, one's always left out."

"I guess I got the message as I grew up about population" explosions and that kind of thing; that educated smart people don't have more than two children."

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE – PERSPECTIVE AS MOTHER

IDEOLOGY

"Part of the reason why women have less children perhaps these days might also be linked to the knowledge that once you have a child of how much input that you have to have with that child for the rest of its life...people are more aware that you have to be emotionally available and you have to cart them here, there and everywhere for all the different things they are expected to do"

"When I first had my daughter, who was my first child, I felt an enormous pressure to go back to work...I think that it's a really important job being a mum and I didn't feel I could do it and do another job as well."

PERCEPTION OF COPING

"I remember our decision on not going to have" a third child was very much, we thought, it's

IDEAL FAMILY SIZE

CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES:

"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."

"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."

going to affect our ability to parent our other two.'

""if you are making a conscious decision whether or not to have children it's down to whether you think you can afford it and whether you think you've got the time to devote to bringing up that child."

CIRCUMSTANCES

"if you are making a conscious decision" whether or not to have children it's down to whether you think you can afford it and whether you think you've got the time to devote to bringing up that child."



SUPPORT NETWORKS

"you can ring up at anytime, at a moment's notice, here can you have the kids"

"I feel like society doesn't support women to do the early mothering of babies properly"

Summary of findings showing that the influences that informed their ideal family size was not the same as the influences that lead the women to decide how many children they wanted once motherhood became a reality

DISCUSSION

Ideal family size was informed by each woman's perspective as a child and a particular set of

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

- ideologies. Once the women became mothers the number of children they wanted was influenced by their perspective as a parent and different ideology – therefore minds changed.
- Most of the women (22/26) commented on how different motherhood was from what they had been expecting.
- > The women's perception of their ability to cope was a major influence on how many children they wanted.
- > The importance of support networks to help women cope with their children was acknowledged by all the women, but support was not always available.

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- > The 'fertility gap' may not represent a 'latent demand for children'.
- > Family size ideals before having children are not necessarily more of a free choice than the number of children wanted after becoming a mother.
- > Narrowing the gap between family size ideals and achieved fertility may not result in higher fertility rates.
- > Narrowing the gap is likely to require the implementation of policies that promote better prior knowledge of the truth of motherhood and facilitate improved support networks for women with children.

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