

Failing to achieve family size ideals and the reality of motherhood in regional New South Wales, Australia: evidence from a qualitative approach

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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

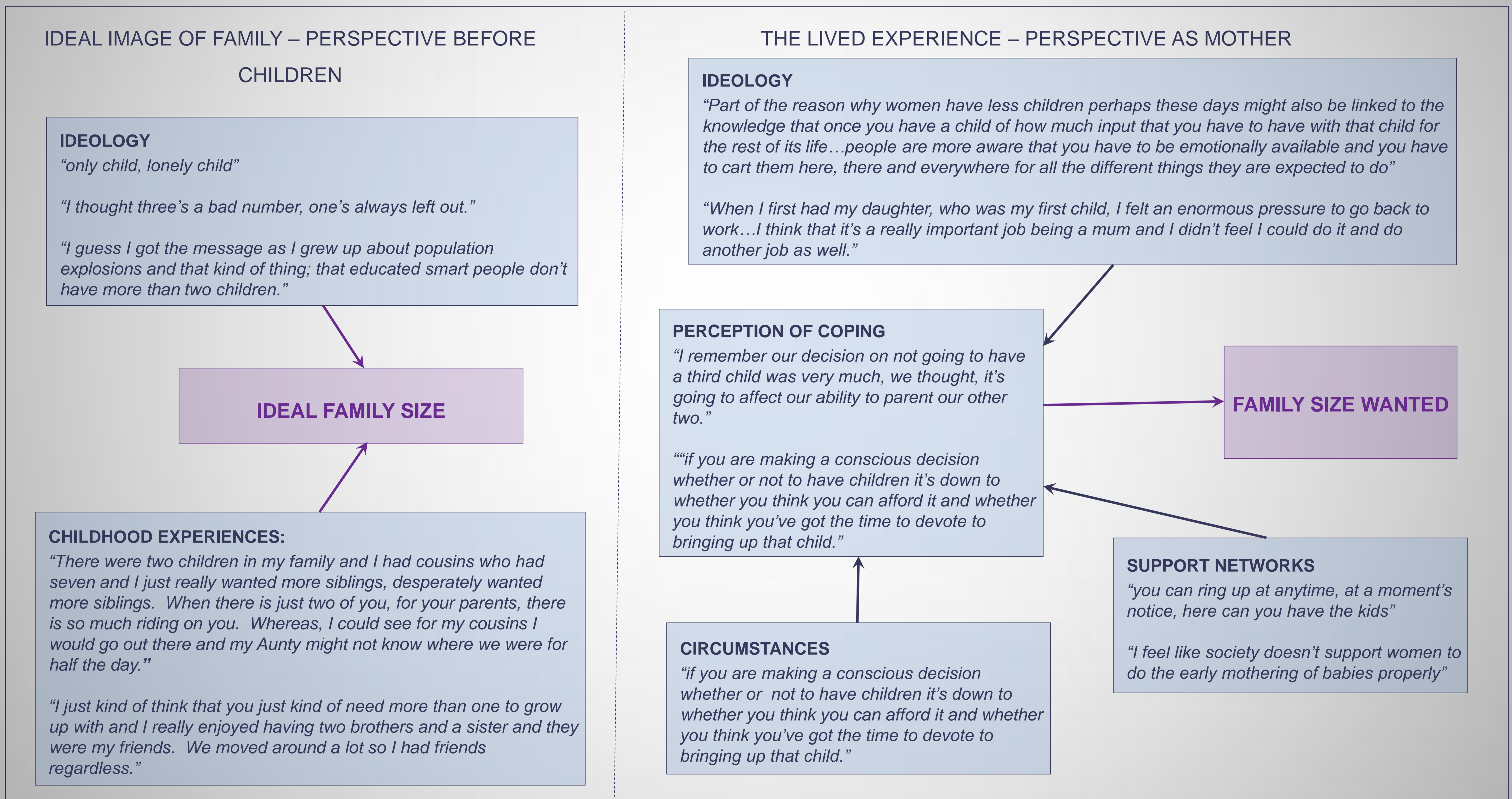
- Research area: regional Australian city of Orange in the Central West of New South Wales, population approximately 38,000
- Participants: 26 women with at least one child of nine years of age or younger
- Data collection instruments: semi-structured interviews and focus groups
- Thematic analysis: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

FINDINGS

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."



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 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.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

- 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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