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Life transitions and women's desired number of children: The impact of motherhood, relationships and employment

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Abstract

To better understand the gap between women's childbearing aspirations and actual levels of childbearing, this paper investigates the importance of employment, relationship and motherhood transitions for predicting women's desired number of children. Women born in 1973-78 participating in the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health were asked, at three time points over six years, how many children they would like to have by the age of 35 years. Women who delayed childbearing, did not marry or enter a cohabiting relationship aspired to fewer children, whilst those who married aspired to more children. Notably, the two-way interactions demonstrated that for women without children, and for women who had had their first child between waves, shifting from secure work to being out of the labour force was associated with desiring fewer children. This finding supports the argument that policies which promote women's attachment to the workforce enable women to more effectively pursue their aspirations for both motherhood and careers. The findings make a new contribution to the field by indicating that life transitions were more important predictors of desired number of children than background and demographic factors that have long been associated with, and used as explanations for, women's childbearing.

Keywords: aspirations, childbearing, motherhood, relationships, casual employment, women's workforce participation

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Most developed countries have had below replacement fertility for decades, and the implications of the associated ageing populations in terms of labor-force shortages, dissaving, increased expenditure on health and long-term care, and problems with old-age income security have been previously documented (Australian Treasury, 2010; Bloom, Canning & Lubert, 2015; Morgan, 2003). In parallel with other developed countries, the total fertility rate in Australia fell below replacement level during the 1970s [Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2007, 2009; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2014]. It reached an all-time low of 1.72 babies per woman in 2003. Government initiatives, such as the 'baby bonus' which was a lump sum payment paid to parents after the birth of a child, were introduced to support parents and increase fertility rates (Drago, Sawyer, Sheffler, Warren, & Wooden, 2009). The fertility rate rose slightly to 1.9 by 2007, but has since declined to 1.74 (ABS, 2017a).

There is evidence that many women do not have the number of children that they aspired to have when they were younger (Johnstone & Lee, 2009a; 2016; Berrington, 2004; Holton, Fisher, & Rowe, 2011; Quesnel-Vallée & Morgan, 2003; Smallwood & Jefferies, 2003). This raises questions about how women's achievement of their desired number of children is affected by contextual factors such as their work conditions, their background and demographic factors, and their experience of key life transitions. It may be that the gap between achieved and desired number of children is due to women changing their desired number of children over time and in response to these experiences. By developing our understanding of how contextual factors impact upon desired number of children, there is an opportunity to adjust such factors through policies to support women to achieve their aspirations. This is also important for women's choice and control in their reproductive decision-making.

In this paper, we extend existing research by investigating the role of relationships, motherhood and employment transitions, including transitions into casual employment, on women's desired number of children, after controlling for background factors typically associated with childbearing aspirations or actual childbearing. Casual employment is recognized as employment where there are no guaranteed hours and does not provide paid leave entitlements, such as holiday pay, paid sick leave or carers leave. This paper additionally contributes to the literature by investigating how employment transitions relate to women's desired number of children, depending on women's motherhood transition, whilst investigating the impact of these key life transitions over time. We focus on an Australian sample of women.

Work-family policies in Australia have historically been based upon the male breadwinner, female caregiver (or secondary) earner model (O'Connor, Orloff, & Shaver, 1999). Despite the increase in female labour force participation rates over past decades, including that of mothers, the traditional norm of a female caregiver contributed to the slow adoption of a paid parental leave program (Mahon et al., 2016). The Australian work-family policy context is encapsulated within a neo-liberal regime, with an emphasis on markets, deregulation and individual responsibility (Baird & O'Brien, 2015; Mahon, Bergqvist & Brennan, 2016; Moss, 2014). As a result, fundamental family policies and services, such as child care, have emphasised personal responsibility and supported the expansion of for-profit, rather than non-profit based providers (Mahon et al., 2016).

Desired number of children

Examining women's desired number of children can deepen understanding of how work contexts and life events impact upon childbearing. Aspirations are an indication of what people want or expect (Johnstone, Lucke, & Lee, 2011), and aspirations may be affected more immediately by changes in life events and environment, or interactions between life events, than final childbearing (Thevenon & Gauthier, 2011). Further, studying desired number of children can provide a baseline to

compare with actual childbearing in order to understand whether people are achieving the number of children they would like to have (Philipov, 2009). There is evidence that women have fewer children than desired (Berrington, 2004; Holton, Fisher, & Rowe, 2011). Our past findings from survey research have shown that 55% of Australian women aged 25-30 years aspired to have 2 children by the time they were 35 years of age and 8.5% aspired to no children at all at the same age (Johnstone & Lee, 2009a) yet actual childbearing rates of Australian women aged 35-39 years show that 34% had two children, while 21% had no children (ABS, 2016).

Family background and demographic factors have been associated with aspirations for children. For instance, growing up with both parents, having more siblings, and being Catholic are all associated with aspiring to larger families (Heiland et al 2008; Renier-Loilier, 2006). In contrast, investment in higher education and careers has been associated with aspiring to fewer children (Johnstone & Lee, 2009b). However, there is evidence that the influence of these background factors on childbearing aspirations weakens over time and that subsequent life experiences, such as actual childbearing, career progression and health problems, become more important (Berrington & Pattaro, 2014; Heiland et al., 2008; Holton, Rowe & Fisher, 2011; Tropf & Mandemakers, 2017). For example, Liefbroer (2009), using 6 waves of data on family intentions from a Dutch panel survey, showed that changes in partner status, pursuing a career and delays in starting a family were associated with women's reduced family size intentions.

Relationship transitions

Relationship status has been identified as an important factor in fertility intentions and decision-making in past research (Holton, Fisher & Rowe., 2011; Mitchell & Gray, 2007; Pritchard et al., 2017). Modern-day trends of delaying the formation of a permanent relationship (Weston & Qu, 2013) also contribute to delays in childbearing and may influence changes in aspirations. Research from Scotland and Australia has shown relationship status is an important consideration for

childbearing (Hammarberg & Clarke, 2005; Proudfoot, Wellings, & Glasier, 2009). Additionally, a cross-sectional study of 10,045 participants from 79 countries as part of the International Fertility Decision-making study showed that relational readiness was also a precondition for readiness to conceive in all countries examined (Boivin, Buntin, Kalebic, & Harrison, 2018). Given the recent finding that there is greater volatility in relationships in Australia than in previous generations (Weston & Qu, 2013), this may have contributed to overall declines in childbearing.

Employment transitions

Whilst women's increased labour force participation over past decades has coincided with reduced fertility (ABS, 2003, 2013), there is growing consensus that supportive work-family policies can positively impact women's workforce participation and overall childbearing (OECD, 2011; Thévenon, 2011; Thévenon, & Gauthier, 2011). For instance, in their review of family policies of OECD countries on actual fertility rates, Luci-Greulich and Thévenon (2013) found that supportive work-family packages such as paid leave, childcare and financial transfers had a positive effect on fertility, and that those which supported women's attachment to the workforce, such as childcare services, had a greater benefit on fertility than cash benefits. Further, childcare packages such as free or subsidized childcare and support for childcare facilities serving low income families have coincided with increased maternal workforce participation rates, in countries such as Australia, the UK and Canada (Ferragina, 2019; Vuri, 2016). Historically, Australia's childcare fees and out-of-pocket costs have been among the highest of OECD countries, and may partly account for the large number of Australian women that exit the workforce when they have children (ABS, 2017, OECD, 2014). Policy responses have done little to reduce the out of pocket costs of child care for parents (Baxter et al., 2019).

The labour force participation rates of Australian mothers have been low by international standards (OECD, 2014). The proportion of Australian mothers with a child aged 14 years or younger

in the paid workforce is approximately 69%, compared with 73.5% of mothers in Canada and 83% of mothers with a child aged 18 years or younger in Sweden (OECD, 2014). When looking at Australian mothers with a child aged 5 years or under, labour force participation drops to 62%, compared with 70% of comparable mothers in Canada and 94% of Australian fathers (ABS, 2018; Battams, 2017). In Australia, many mothers exit the workforce during their children's preschool years; some 23% of women with a child under 2 years permanently leave the job they held during pregnancy (ABS, 2017). Lower workforce participation rates of mothers have implications for overall national productivity as well as women's financial independence (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2014).

In addition, of employees, Australian mothers are more likely than Australian fathers to be in casual employment (ABS, 2017b). Approximately, 20% of Australian working mothers of children under 5 years are casually employed (Baxter, 2013). Casual employment is less secure work, meaning there is no guarantee of work or hours of work, there is unpredictable pay and there are no paid leave or termination or redundancy entitlements as covered by the National Employment Standards (ABS, 2017b; Markey & Mcivor, 2018). This is different from the context in Europe where temporary employment includes a designated end point, minimum weekly hours and other entitlements (Tweedie, 2013). The overrepresentation of Australian mothers in casual employment represents one element of an unsupportive context for working parents, as there may be no guaranteed position to return to after having a baby, and the nature of their employment may not entitle them to job-protected family or other leave (Peutere, Vahtera, Kivimäki, Pentti, & Virtanen, 2015).

Research suggests that being in casual employment is associated with reduced labour market attachment, and reduced childbearing. For instance, women in Finland without a permanent job contract at the beginning of a period of maternity leave had weaker labour market attachment over an 11-year period, irrespective of their age, socioeconomic status, and number of births (Peutere et al., 2015). Further, with a sample of 663 Australian women born between 1973-1975, Steele, Giles,

Davies and Moore (2014) showed that the likelihood of women having a child by the age of 35 years was reduced for every year spent in casual employment, even after controlling for socioeconomic status, supporting the argument people desire economic security before starting a family.

Motherhood transitions

The challenges in negotiating shared parenting and transitioning back to work (Breunig, Weiss, Yamauchi, Gong, & Mercante, 2011; Craig & Brown, 2016; Whitehouse, Hosking, & Baird, 2008) may translate into mothers adjusting their aspirations for future children after having their first child. Within the context of inaccessible or expensive childcare, women may therefore reduce their desired number of children after having their first child and, as many people consider financial security a prerequisite for having a family (Weston, Qu, Parker, & Alexander, 2004), this may be most pronounced for women if they don't have employment to return to after having a baby, and/or if their partner is out of the workforce or has low earnings. Partner earnings have been shown to predict the likelihood of women's re-entry into the workforce (Damaske & Frech, 2016). Alternatively, the difficulties of returning to paid work after a baby (Breunig et al., 2011) may lead to a decision to focus on motherhood and to have a larger family.

Aim

In this paper, we aim to investigate the impact of key life changes including motherhood transitions, relationship transitions and employment transitions while taking into account women's education, occupation, age and parental background, on women's desired number of children. While contexts which support individuals to combine paid work and parenthood are considered important for overall fertility, how different work transitions – including transitions involving the nature of work – impact upon desired number of children amongst mothers and nonmothers, has not been investigated. Thus, we extend the literature by investigating how women's desired number of children may be differentially impacted by motherhood status, relationship transitions, employment transitions and the

interaction of employment transitions with motherhood status. This will provide a better understanding of the nexus between work and family, in relation to desired childbearing.

Method

Data

Our data come from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (ALSWH). ALSWH examines the relationships between biological, physiological, social and lifestyle factors and women's physical health, emotional well-being, and use of health services. It involves three cohorts of women who were aged 18-23 years (the 1973-1978 cohort), 45-50 years (the 1946-1951 cohort) and 70-75 years (the 1921-1926 cohort) when first surveyed in 1996. Women were selected from the Australian national health insurance database (Medicare), which includes all citizens and permanent residents. Participants completed comprehensive mailed questionnaires addressing physical health, emotional well-being, social and lifestyle factors, and use of health services. A detailed methodological overview of the entire project is available elsewhere (Lee, 2005). Ethical approval was given by the Human Research Ethics Committees of the Universities of Newcastle and Queensland.

Participants and analytic sample

For the current study we use longitudinal survey data from the 1973-1978 cohort, which captures women as they transition through their 20s and into their mid-30s, now the peak years for childbearing in Australia (ABS, 2017a). While women are not at the end of their reproductive childbearing years at age 35, this point enables us to focus on how life experiences are associated with stability or change in women's desired number of children, independently of the approaching end of reproductive life. A total of 14,779 young women (aged 18-23) completed Survey 1 in 1996. Of those, 9,690 (71% of those still contactable) responded to Survey 2 (aged 22-27) in 2000; 9,081 (71%) responded to Survey 3 (aged 25-30) in 2003; and 9,145 (71%) responded to Survey 4 (aged 28-33) in

2006. This paper examines changes in responses to desired number of children between Surveys 2, 3 and 4, now referred to as waves. Wave 1 was not included, because response options on several key variables (including the question on fertility aspirations) changed after Wave 1, making direct comparisons problematic. There were 11,529 women included in the analytic sample, with a total of 34,587 person-observations (with an average of 2.4 observations per person).

Dependent variable

Desired number of children

At each wave, 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 each of the three waves, over 90% of participants wanted children by the age of 35 (see Table 1). The most common aspiration was for two children, followed by three or more, one child, and then no children. Generally, over time there were more women aspiring to one child and fewer to two children, with the other categories relatively unchanged across the three waves. Table 2 shows that of participants who provided responses to all three waves (N = 6,557), the largest number of respondents consistently desired two children at each wave, with 11% consistently wanting three or more, and relatively small numbers consistently wanting one or none. More than half changed their aspirations at least once, with more women desiring fewer children over time than more children. The remainder showed inconsistent patterns of change, such as desiring fewer children from the first wave to the second wave but then more children from the second to the third wave, or vice versa.

Control variables

We control for a range of family background factors that previous research has identified as important for fertility intentions (see Table 3).

Parent occupation

At Wave 2, participants were asked to nominate, from a list of 10 options, the main occupation of both of their main caregivers while they were growing up. Response options were: manager/administrator; professional; associate professional; tradesperson or related worker; advanced clerical/service worker; intermediate clerical/sales/service worker, intermediate production/transport worker, elementary clerical/sales/service worker, labourer, no paid job. Two variables were obtained: a) mother/stepmother occupation and b) father/stepfather occupation, with the following categories created: *1 = managerial/administrator; 2 = professional (including associate); 3 = trade/labourer; 4 = sales/clerical; 5 = not in the paid labour force* and 6 =*unable to be coded.* The reference category was managerial/administrator.

Participant occupation

At each wave participants were asked their main occupation using the same list of 10 options as their main caregivers. If participants were currently studying, they were asked to provide the occupation for which they were studying. The following categories were again created: *1 = managerial/administrator (reference category); 2 = professional (including associate); 3 = trade/labourer; 4 = sales/clerical;* and *5 = not in the paid labour force.*

Educational qualification

Participants were asked their highest educational qualification at each wave. Five categories were created: *1= year 10 certificate or less; 2 = year 12 certificate; 3 = trade or certificate; 4 = bachelor degree,* and *5 = higher degree (reference category).*

Lagged variables

Motherhood transitions

Based on information provided about live births women were coded as either mothers or childless at each wave. Three lagged effect categories were created to assess the effects of changes in motherhood status from the previous wave on current aspirations for family size. Categories were: 1 = *remained*

childless (at both waves); 2 = *new mothers (transitioned from childless to motherhood between waves)*; 3 = *existing mothers (were mothers at the earlier wave and remained so)*. The reference group was existing mothers.

Relationship transitions

At each wave women were asked about their current relationship status. To assess changes in relationship status, seven lagged effects categories were created, including: 1 = *married (at both waves; reference category); 2= cohabiting - married; 3 = single/not married - married; 4 = cohabiting (at both waves); 5 = married/cohabiting - separated*; 6 = *never married (single/not married at both waves)*; and 7 = *single/not married – cohabiting.* This enabled us to estimate changes in desired number of children depending on the timing of the relationship transition.

Employment transitions

At each of the three waves, women were asked about their employment status, and whether this employment consisted of casual employment (as a job which doesn't provide holiday pay or sick leave). Participants were categorised initially as either: employed (non-casual); casually employed, or not in the paid labour force. In order to assess the effects of changes in employment status from the previous wave on current aspirations for family size six lagged effects categories were created, including: 1 = *non-casual employment to casual employment*; 2 = *non-casual employment to not in labour force;* 3 = *casual employment to non-casual employment*; 4 = *remained in casual employment*; *5 = not in labour force (at both waves)*, and 6 = *remained in non-casual employment (reference category)*. We were unable to include some transitions that may have been of interest, such as between casual and not in the labour force or from being not in the labour force into employment, due to insufficient numbers in those transition groups for reliable analysis and conclusions.

Analytic strategy

To assess how women's desired number of children changes over time as they experience various life events, a multilevel modelling approach was taken. The dependent variable – desired number of children –was assessed at three time points. A multilevel (or mixed) modelling approach was used to account for clustering of observations by individual. Further, we include a random intercept to model and control for between-individual variation, again consistent with other research investigating life course changes with longitudinal data (e.g., Baxter, Haynes, & Hewitt, 2010; Baxter, Hewitt, & Haynes, 2008).

We estimated three models. In the first model, we included the control or baseline variables of father/stepfather's occupation, mother/stepmother's occupation, participant occupation, participant educational qualification, age and transition period. In the second model, we added the lagged variables for the transitions of interest: motherhood transition, relationship transition and employment transition. This procedure (Baxter et al., 2010; Kalmijn & Monden, 2006) allowed us to estimate the effects of status changes from the previous time period on desired number of children. The lagged effects were divided into categories for each independent variable, according to the pathways of interest, as detailed above. In the third model, we added interactions between transition period and the key transition variables. This gave an indication of the extent of change in aspirations over time periods, according to key life transitions. In addition, to assess the impact of employment changes during the transition to motherhood, we also added an interaction between employment transitions and motherhood transitions. Analyses were performed using SPSS Version 22.

Results

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for women on the key variables of interest, as well as the control variables. Most participants had fathers or stepfathers working in a trade or labour field when they were growing up, followed by managerial or administrative positions. The majority of women's mothers or stepmothers worked in sales/clerical positions when women were growing up,

followed by professional/associate professional positions, or were not in the paid labour force. The main occupation categories for participants were professional/associate professional, followed by trade/clerical and then not in the paid labour force. One third of the participants held a bachelor degree, with the next highest category being a diploma/trade certificate, then year 12 certificate. Most women were consistently in non-casual employment between waves, just over half did not have any children, about a third were consistently married, and another third reported being never married.

Model 1

Results are presented in Table 4. In the first model examining the family background factors, father/stepfather occupation, participant occupation, education and age were significantly associated with desired number of children, while mother/stepmother's occupation was not. Specifically, women with fathers or stepfathers in professional occupations or whose occupational type was unable to be coded, aspired to fewer children than women whose fathers or stepfathers were in managerial/administrator positions. Women across all other levels of educational qualification aspired to more children than women who had a higher degree. The magnitude of the coefficients was larger for those with a Year 12 certificate or diploma/trade certificate, indicating they wanted more children, compared with those with a bachelor degree. Women across all occupational categories, and women who were not in the paid labour force, desired more children than women who were in managerial/administrator positions. In addition, women desired fewer children with increasing age.

Model 2

The addition of the lagged effects improved the model fit. The values of the AIC and the BIC (see Table 4) reduced with the addition of the lagged effects, indicating an improved model fit.

Interestingly, with the addition of the lagged effects, many of the control variables were no longer significant. For instance, once motherhood, relationship and employment transitions were entered into the model, there were fewer significant associations between educational qualification

and participant occupation with desired number of children. The one association that remained significant was for education; women with Year 10 or less as their highest educational qualification (i.e., the lowest occupational grade) desired more children than women with a higher degree. Similarly, after the lagged variables were added women who were not in the paid labour force remained significantly more likely to aspire to more children than women who were employed in a managerial position. The only significant relationship for father or stepfather occupation was women desired fewer children with fathers/stepfathers who were occupied in a trade or labour grade, compared with women whose fathers were in managerial/administrative positions. Age remained significant; with women aspiring to fewer children with increasing age.

The results for motherhood transitions suggest that some transitions are important for desired number of children. Women who remained childless between waves desired fewer children than women who were already mothers. In addition, new mothers desired fewer children than women who already had children.

Several relationship states and transitions were significantly associated with desired number of children. Not being in a relationship, or leaving a relationship, was associated with desiring fewer children. Compared with women who were consistently married, women who never married desired fewer children, as did women who transitioned from being married to separated or divorced. Interestingly, women who remained in a cohabiting relationship, or transitioned into a cohabiting relationship aspired to have fewer children than women who were married. However, transitioning from never married to married was associated with desiring more children, in comparison with women who were already married.

There was one significant association for employment transitions. Women transitioning from non-casual employment to casual employment aspired to more children than women who remained non-casually employed between waves.

Model 3

The addition of the interactions between transition period and each transition measure in Model 3 only slightly improved the overall model fit in comparison to the second model. The associations for family background factors stayed the same, with the exception of education, which was no longer statistically significant. Transition period became significant, with desired number of children increasing over transition periods.

Of the lagged effects, the only transition that remained significant was being never married; with never married women desiring fewer children than married women. Once the interactions were added into the model, motherhood transitions and employment transitions were no longer significant.

However, there were significant interactions with transition period: over time, desired number of children decreased for childless women and increased for women casually employed. There were also significant interactions between employment transitions and motherhood transitions. Women who remained childless and who remained not in the labour force or who transitioned from non-casual employment to unpaid work at home desired fewer children. Similarly, women who transitioned to being a new mother and went from non-casual employment to not in the labour force, desired fewer children, compared with women who already had children and those staying in non-casual employment.

Discussion

This paper investigated the impact of motherhood transitions, relationship transitions and employment transitions on women's desired number of children, controlling for parental and participant occupation, education and age, whilst also investigating the interactive effects of employment transitions and motherhood transitions, and the key life transitions over time. Consistent with earlier Australian studies (Weston et al., 2004), and research from the United Kingdom (Berrington, 2004), this study showed that the majority of Australian women in their 20s and early 30s

aspired to have two or more children. Less than 3% of women consistently stated an aspiration to remain childless, considerably lower than actual levels of childlessness in Australia, where 21% of women aged 35-39 are childless (ABS, 2017a). It is also interesting to note that many women did not change their aspirations for number of children over time, and many consistently desired two children. Of those that did change their desired number of children, the majority changed them downwards, rather than upwards, which is also consistent with past research (Berrington, 2004; Liefbroer, 2009; Weston et al., 2004).

With regard to the importance of family background for childbearing aspirations, the findings suggest that parental occupation, participant occupation, and educational qualification are significantly associated with desired number of children. Our findings align with past research on actual childbearing which shows that women with higher educational qualifications and in more skilled occupational grades tend to have fewer children (Balbo, Billari, & Mills, 2013). This finding can be explained by acknowledging that women who spend more time investing in education and their careers are more likely to delay childbearing and have smaller families. We also found that women whose parents were in more skilled occupational grades desired fewer children – perhaps because these women were more likely to obtain post-secondary education and invest in their careers.

However, importantly we find that many of these background factors were no longer significant once key life transitions were entered into the model (i.e., Model 2). This suggests that life transitions may be more important for desired number of children than background and demographic factors that have long been used as explanations for, women's childbearing patterns. This new finding makes an important contribution to the field, because it challenges thinking as to what is important for women's decision-making around childbearing (Singer, 2005; Shaw & Giles, 2009).

Specifically, we found remaining childless was associated with desiring fewer children. This is consistent with general trends showing that women who delay childbearing to later years tend to have

smaller families than those who commence childbearing earlier (Kippen, 2004, 2006). As these women were at an age considered to be their peak childbearing years, having not had any children during these years may see them contemplating a childfree life or a smaller family size, as it may be perceived as more achievable. Alternatively, it may be that these women have delayed childbearing because it has not been a priority, and this is reflected in their aspirations.

Women who became new mothers between waves were commencing childbearing in their peak childbearing years, and we saw that they also aspired to fewer children. One possible explanation for this finding is that the women who had not had children at the earlier wave commenced childbearing at a later age than other mothers. Women who start childbearing later may have fewer children due to considerations of age. Alternatively, it could be seen that women who were mothers before the first wave may have always aspired to larger families, compared with other women.

Relationship transitions were associated with desired number of children. Consistent with past research demonstrating the association between relationship status and childbearing (Hammarberg & Clarke, 2005; Holton, Fisher & Rowe, 2011) this study showed that young women who are not in a stable relationship aspired to fewer children. Women transitioning into marital relationships desired more children; whilst those who separated or divorced, or women who were never married, desired fewer children. Interestingly, women who remained in a cohabiting relationship, or transitioned from single into a cohabiting relationship, were not the same as women in marital relationships. These transitions were associated with desiring fewer children. Despite the many births occurring outside of marital relationships in Australia (ABS, 2017a), many women may still regard marriage as an appropriate level of commitment for family formation and/or provide the required financial security for childbearing.

Women transitioning from non-casual employment to casual employment aspired to have more children than women who remained non-casually employed between waves. This association was

contrary to what was expected. It may be that women who had transitioned into casual employment were already mothers, so were more likely to aspire to more children. Indeed, the interactions between employment transitions by motherhood transition shed further light on this.

There were several findings from the interactions between employment transitions and motherhood transition that suggest that the association between employment transitions and desired number of children was dependent on motherhood status. Firstly, new mothers aspired to fewer children when they transitioned from non-casual employment to not being in the labour force, in comparison to women who consistently remained in non-casual employment. This finding suggests that policies which encourage women to stay at home after childbearing (such as lump-sum cash payments, or policies which support a primary breadwinner model) may reduce the likelihood of those women having further children. Thus, this finding supports arguments that policies which support mothers to stay attached to the paid workforce will enhance workforce participation, along with fertility rates (Wesolowski & Ferrarini, 2018). This is salient for Australian policies as women have historically been more likely than women in other developed, comparable nations, such as the US, Canada, the UK and New Zealand to drop out of the workforce following childbearing (Jaumotte, 2004; OECD, 2014). While qualitative research would help to clarify this finding, it may be shifting away from non-casual employment to being unpaid at home leads to women revising their desired number of children in response to the lack of financial security to support a family. Indeed, there is evidence of increasing financial pressures in Australia (Thomas & Hall, 2016), which have been previously identified as a consideration before having a family (Weston et al., 2004).

For women remaining childless, not being in the labour force or transitioning from non-secure employment to being not in the labour force, was associated with desiring fewer children. Further research is recommended to understand this finding, particularly the reasons for not being employed and desiring fewer children. It may be that if women had lost their jobs or were finding it difficult to

work due to ill health or other reasons they may also be in a situation that made it less likely for them to have children.

The two-way interactions showed the association between relationship transitions and desired number of children remained stable over time. Past research indicates that relationship status is important for childbearing aspirations (Hammarberg & Clarke, 2005; Proudfoot et al., 2009), and the current findings indicated that relationship status and transitions were significantly associated with desired number of children. Our results also showed that the association between relationship transitions and desired number of children was not influenced by time. This suggests, for example, that women who remain never married were no more likely to aspire to fewer children in a later transition period than an earlier transition period.

The interactions showed that remaining childless across transition periods was strongly associated with declines in desired number of children. Specifically, having not had children by the later transition period was associated desiring fewer children, compared with the earlier transition period.

The findings from the interactions between transition period and employment transitions demonstrated a positive association between casual employment and desired number of children over time. Specifically, being consistently in casual employment across transition periods was associated with women aspiring to more children over time, in comparison to women in non-casual employment. However, this also needs to be interpreted in relation to the lagged effects. Being consistently in casual employment was associated with desiring fewer children in comparison to being consistently in non-casual employment (although not significant as a main effect), and aspirations increased for transition period overall in Model 3. Thus, women in casual employment may have initially desired fewer children, and increased their aspirations across transition periods more so than for women in the other employment transitions. The reasons behind this also need further research to investigate more fully.

Perhaps this was due to a selection effect: these women may not have wanted a large family and were initially attracted to the kind of roles offered in casual employment. Alternatively, the findings may suggest that those who were already in casual employment may have initially seen themselves as being in a difficult position to financially support a large family or found having a family incompatible with their current lifestyle, and initially had lower childbearing aspirations which they later revised.

These findings suggest that the nature of employment available and utilized by women of childbearing age, and the rights and protections associated with these jobs while women take time out for childbearing may be important for women's family decision-making. Low maternal employment may negatively affect women's childbearing aspirations and limit women's childbearing, and new mothers seem most impacted by a lack of non-casual employment. These findings align with the argument that more secure employment would likely enable women to fulfil their childbearing aspirations, as well as recognize and support women's attachment to the paid workforce (Wesolowski & Ferrarini, 2018). For instance, the evaluation of the Australian paid parental leave scheme found that when women had access to the universal paid parental leave they were more likely to return to work and to return to work with the same employer (Martin et al., 2014). The findings that motherhood transitions and employment transition are interlinked in impacting future childbearing aspirations, even after controlling for background factors and relationship status typically associated with fertility, supports arguments that policies that enable women to combine motherhood and careers more easily might enable women to have more genuine choices and control in work, family and their combination.

There are several limitations to this research, and directions for future research. Firstly, responses to the questions on desired number of children from Wave 1 were not included in analysis, limiting the scope of observable change over time. In addition, we did not examine transitions into higher order births amongst existing mothers, and future research could look at higher order births and

employment transitions on desired number of children. Whilst we did include measures of women's socioeconomic status, including their educational qualification, field of occupation, and family socioeconomic background, we did not investigate level of partner pay on desired number of children. Future research could investigate this and conduct a more in-depth investigation of the availability and type of childcare utilised by mothers, to provide a greater context of the consequences of childcare-related policies on desired number of children. Future work on actual childbearing as well as desired number of children, could build up a more comprehensive picture of the role of policies and contexts on overall childbearing. We also had small numbers for some transition groups, increasing the likelihood of having larger standard errors and type 2 errors. There were some transitions that we did not include in our analysis because of the small numbers.

In comparison with Australian census data and national health surveys ALSWH respondents in the 1973 to 1978 cohort in 1996 were generally representative of the Australian population, although the cohort underrepresents minority groups such as Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander women, women with poor English literacy, and those with poorer health (Lee, et al., 2005). Analyses of attrition in the 1973 to 1978 cohort have shown that women in poorer health were less likely to continue in the study, but despite these differences, there seems to be no serious bias, owing to attrition, in estimates of associations (Powers & Loxton, 2010).

In conclusion, our findings, which are from one of the largest Australian studies measuring women's desired number of children, found that contextual factors and transitions are more important for childbearing aspirations than background factors, such as educational qualification and family background. The findings support the argument that supportive work and family policies, and economic security, are important for women in their family decision-making.

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Tables

Table 1

Desired number of children by wave

	Wave 2		Wave 3		Wave 4	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
No children	710	7.5	722	8.1	739	8.2
One child	1092	11.5	1337	14.9	1785	19.8
Two children	5355	56.6	4871	54.4	4416	49.1
Three or more children	2301	24.3	2021	22.6	2053	22.8
Total	9458	100	8951	100.0	8993	100.0

Table 2

Summary of transitions in desired number of children, N = 6557

Transitions in Desired Number of Children	%
No change	
No children	2.8
One child	3.2
Two children	29.7
Three or more children	11.0
Aspired to fewer children over time	24.1
Aspired to more children over time	16.7
Desired more children between first two waves, then subsequently desired fewer children between latter waves	5.3
Desired fewer children between first two waves, then then subsequently desired more children between latter waves	7.2
Total	100.0

Table 3

Distribution of Participants (pooled sample n = 34,587)

Variable	N	%
Father or stepfather occupation		
Managerial/Administration(REF)	6210	23.2%
Professional (including associate)	6855	25.7%
Trade/labourer	10188	38.1%
Sales/clerical	1614	6.0%
Not in the paid labour force	585	2.2%
Unable to be coded	1266	4.7%
Mother or stepmother occupation		
Managerial/Administration(REF)	1791	6.7%
Professional (including associate)	5901	22.0%
Trade/labourer	4011	15.0%
Sales/clerical	8931	33.3%
Not in the paid labour force	5370	20.0%
Unable to be coded	819	3.1%
Participant occupation		
Managerial/Administration(REF)	1759	6.5%
Professional (including associate)	10725	39.7%
Trade/labourer	1900	7.0%
Sales/clerical	8218	30.4%
Not in the paid labour force	4410	16.3%
Educational qualification		
Higher Degree(REF)	2893	10.6%
Year 10 Certificate or less	2784	10.2%

Year 12 Certificate	5481	20.1%
Trade or Certificate	7057	25.8%
Bachelor Degree	9101	33.3%
Motherhood transitions		
Already had children(REF)	3860	24.9%
No children	9148	58.9%
First birth	2524	16.3%
Relationship transitions		
Married(REF)	4929	34.0%
Cohabiting – married	1304	9.0%
Single/not married – married	1118	7.7%
Cohabiting	1388	9.6%
Married/cohabiting – separated/divorced	379	2.6
Never married	4004	27.7%
Single/not married – cohabiting	1358	9.4%
Employment transitions		
Non-casual employment(REF)	6385	56.0%
Non-casual employment - casual employment	1141	10.0%
Non-casual employment – not in paid labour force	1071	9.4%
Casual employment - non-casual employment	1318	11.6%
Not in paid labour force	641	5.6%
Casual employment	854	7.5%
	M	SD
Age	27.07	2.87

Table 4 *Mixed Effects Models with Random Intercept for Desired Number of Children*

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error
Intercept	2.28***	0.12	5.08	0.53	4.39	0.54
Father/stepfather occupation (ref: managerial/admin)						
Professional (including associate)	-0.07**	0.02	-0.01	0.02	-0.01	0.02
Trade/labourer	-0.03	0.02	-0.07***	0.02	-0.07**	0.02
Sales or clerical	0.02	0.04	-0.01	0.04	-0.01	0.03
Not in the paid labour force	-0.11	0.06	-0.03	0.06	-0.02	0.06
Unable to be coded	-0.10*	0.04	-0.01	0.05	0.00	0.05
Mother/stepmother occupation (ref: managerial/admin)						
Professional (including associate)	-0.02	0.04	0.05	0.03	0.05	0.03
Trade/labourer	0.06	0.04	0.06	0.04	0.06	0.04
Sales or clerical	-0.02	0.03	0.00	0.03	0.00	0.03
Not in the paid labour force	-0.03	0.04	0.00	0.03	0.00	0.03
Unable to be coded	-0.02	0.06	0.02	0.06	0.03	0.06

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error
Participant occupation (ref: managerial/admin)						
Professional (including associate)	0.07***	0.02	0.06	0.03	0.05	0.03
Trade/labourer	0.06*	0.03	-0.04	0.04	-0.04	0.04
Sales or clerical	0.09***	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.03
Not in the paid labour force	0.27***	0.02	0.13*	0.05	0.13**	0.05
Educational qualification (ref: higher degree)						
Year 10 certificate or less	0.13***	0.03	-0.09*	0.04	-0.07	0.04
Year 12 certificate	0.10***	0.02	-0.03	0.03	-0.02	0.03
Trade or certificate	0.11***	0.02	-0.01	0.03	-0.01	0.03
Bachelor degree	0.04*	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.00	0.02
Age	-0.02***	0.01	-0.09***	0.01	-0.09***	0.01
Transition period	-0.01	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.24***	0.05
Motherhood transition (ref: mothers)						
Childless/no children			-0.68***	0.03	0.12	0.15
New mothers			-0.20***	0.03	0.10	0.17
Relationship Transitions (Ref: Married)						

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error
Cohabiting to married			0.01	0.03	-0.21	0.15
Not married/single - married			0.07*	0.03	0.03	0.16
Cohabiting			-0.26***	0.03	-0.18	0.16
Married or cohabiting - separated			-0.33***	0.05	-0.30	0.28
Not married			-0.51***	0.02	-0.34**	0.12
Not married/single - cohabiting			-0.29***	0.03	-0.19	0.15
Employment transitions (ref: non-casual employment)						
Non-casual - casual			0.09**	0.03	0.01	0.16
Non-casual - not in paid labour force			-0.01	0.04	0.09	0.18
Casual - non-casual			0.02	0.02	0.10	0.15
Casual			-0.02	0.03	-0.32	0.18
Not in paid labour force			0.09	0.06	0.10	0.34
Transition period*motherhood transitions						
Transition period*childless women					-0.28***	0.06
Transition period*new mothers					-0.09	0.06

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error
Transition period*relationship transitions						
Transition period*cohabiting - married					0.09	0.06
Transition period*not married/single - married					0.02	0.06
Transition period*cohabiting					-0.03	0.06
Transition period*married or cohabiting - separated					0.00	0.11
Transition period*never married					-0.07	0.05
Transition period*single/not married - cohabiting					-0.04	0.06
Transition period*employment transitions						
Transition period*non-casual - casual					0.04	0.05
Transition period*non-casual - unpaid at home					0.03	0.06
Transition period*casual - non-casual					-0.03	0.05
Transition period*casual					0.13*	0.06
Transition period*not in paid labour force					0.01	0.12
Motherhood transition*employment transitions						
Childless/no children*non-casual - casual					-0.03	0.08

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error	Estimate	Std. Error
Childless/no children*non-casual - not in paid labour force					-0.26**	0.09
Childless/no children*casual - non-casual					0.00	0.07
Childless/no children*casual					-0.04	0.07
Childless/no children*not in paid labour force					-0.47***	0.12
New mothers*non-casual - casual					-0.04	0.09
New mothers*non-casual - not in paid labour force					-0.17*	0.08
New mothers*casual - non-casual					-0.02	0.11
New mothers*casual					0.11	0.11
New mothers*not in paid labour force					0.04	0.14
N	21595		9031		9031	
Akaike Corrected		46659.63		19741.85		19714.27
Bayesian		46691.55		19763.16		19735.52

****p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05*