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Absent, Recalcitrant (or is it oppressed?) Men: Getting to the root of Australia's fertility decline

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Abstract

A recent article in *Melbourne Age* pitted the theories of eminent demographers Professor Peter McDonald and Bob Birrell against one another in seeking an explanation for Australia's declining fertility. While McDonald's work emphasizes the constraints gender inequity in family-related social institutions place on women's capacity to have the number of children they want, Birrell's sees low marriage rates as key to explaining declining fertility. My own qualitative study of the reproductive decision-making of a handful of Australian and American women suggests that both factors – absent or recalcitrant men and family-unfriendly workplaces – are key to explaining rising rates of what I call circumstantial childlessness. In particular I focus on the a group of women who are either Childless by Relationship or Waiting and Watching. Unlike other women committed to either motherhood or childlessness, the ambivalence and indecision Waiters and Watchers have about motherhood makes them sensitive to both the presence of men in their lives, and those men's attitude to childbearing, and to the existence of social attitudes and structures that enable a work/life balance to be achieved. It is these women who, failing to partner or remain partnered with Mr (wants to have children) Right, or unable to see a way to balance his and her own work ambitions and realities in ways that would enable a reasonable work/family balance, who defer motherhood and in some cases, wind up permanently Childless by Circumstance.

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Background

A recent article in the *Melbourne Age* pitted the theories of eminent demographers Dr Peter McDonald and Bob Birrell against one another in seeking an explanation for Australia's declining fertility.¹ McDonald is well-known for his claim that gender inequity in family-related social institutions plays a critical role in declining Australian birth rates. There are similarly strong associations between Birrell and his claim that declines in marriage rates are a major contributor to partnering rates in Australia.

McDonald and Birrell's theories are rightly seen as differing in emphasis, rather than contradictory. Their argument, in other words, is about the relative, rather than the absolute importance of gender equity and marriage rates in accounting for declining fertility. As Birrell et al. put it:

[We claim that the] decline in partnering levels is a major contributor to the decline in fertility. This position is at odds with explanations with focus exclusively on the growing cost of children, particularly as manifested in loss of earning for women have to leave the labour force in order to fulfil the early motherhood role. Though not denying the disincentives to having children for women who find it difficult to combine paid work and motherhood, this study argues more attention should be placed on why men and women are not partnering and thus are not in a situation to begin contemplating having children.²

[PP] Four years ago, I conducted in-depth interviews with 35 women (aged 28 to 42) still in their fertile years but without children in an attempt to explore their desires and intentions regarding motherhood, their journey to the future they imagined regarding parenthood, and the "goodness of fit" of their description with everyday understandings of "choice". While the applicability of my findings are limited in the same way as all studies with small, self-selected samples, I believe some of the categories and themes that arose from the grounded theoretical analysis I did (with the assistance of Nudist) of the data throws some light on the dispute between McDonald and Birrell about the relative contributions of what might colloquially be described as work/family constraints and partnering difficulties are making to Australia's declining rates of fertility.

Thesis

My argument starts from a belief supported by a range of existing demographic data and findings from qualitative studies of those commonly (and in my view erroneously) referred to as the chosen childless. It is that growing rates of childlessness are the result of infertility, choice and circumstance, and that while rates of infertility and choice are stable or growing only slightly, it is growing rates of circumstantial childlessness that account for much of Australia's fertility decline. Thus, it is on the causes and solutions to Circumstantial Childlessness that we must focus to stabilize or increase fertility rates.³

[PP] My research suggests that both reluctant, recalcitrant men *and* the gender-based domestic inequity leads women to shoulder the bulk of costs and burdens of work/family imbalance, are the primary circumstances constraining the freedom of women who, all things being equal, would choose to have children. My findings suggest that these constraints on women's freedom to choose motherhood have different impacts on different women. Women I call the Thwarted Mothers and Women Childless by Relationship are most powerfully constrained by the absence of men in their lives, or by the unwillingness of their Mr Right or (if they are older) their Mr Approximate to become fathers. Similarly, women ambivalent and undecided about motherhood – those I call the Waiters and Watchers – won't even consider motherhood until they have their Mr Right to hand and, if he doesn't want children, they will (with greater or lesser degrees of difficulty) reconcile themselves to a childless life. However, while a stable partnership with Mr (wants to have children) Right is a *necessary* condition for these women to consider motherhood, it is not – in contrast to the Waiters and Watchers – *sufficient*. For women Waiting and Watching, their man also needs to make clear he's willing to shoulder a fair (in instances a majority) share of the costs and sacrifices required to bring up baby so that they can continue in paid work, for them give motherhood serious consideration.

Thus, while the strong independent orientation of Thwarted Mothers reduces what they demand of men to go forward with their plans to mother (these women are

largely in the market for a man willing to commit or marry and agree to have kids), it also means that some will decide to pursue motherhood on their own if they haven't found a man who meets their minimalist requirements by the time their biological clock starts to wind down. [a broader range of men are deemed acceptable by them, particularly as they get older, but some will go ahead without any man] In contrast, the ambivalent and undecided orientation of women Waiting and Watching to motherhood means their expectations of the men with whom they partner in gender-equity terms are far higher than women Waiting and Watching, and that if these are not met, they will not even consider going ahead with plans to have children. [none will go ahead without a man, but only one with gender-egalitarian attitudes and a clear desire to father will spur them to seriously consider motherhood].

Data

Circumstantially Childless Women: Three Baseline Orientations towards Motherhood

Following Gerson⁴ and based on answers they gave in interviews and questionnaires regarding the place, durability and stability motherhood played in their imagined future and identity, I sorted women into basic orientations towards motherhood. It may be helpful to think of a woman's baseline as the attitude and intentions a woman has towards and regarding motherhood at the start of her fertile years. The orientation will shape the impact the various circumstantial pushes and pulls will have on her attitudes and intentions, and the ultimate decision about parenting, she makes.

Thwarted Mothers:

[PP] They are maternal "independents", their commitment, usually formed early, is strong and internally-sourced. Their imagined future, and consequently their identity, is deeply and significantly entwined with becoming a mother.

Consequently, their desire to have kids rarely wavers, regardless of the desire of partners (if they have them) to parent at all, or to share the work and sacrifice entailed. These women attempt to attempt to screen prospective partners regarding their father-keenness and, if young enough, will dump procrastinating or wavering Mr Approximates in search of a surer bet. This is 31 year old Mary:

I would have loved to have had a child when I was 25 or 26. I talked about it with my husband...and he said, "Why don't we keep working, we'll just pay off [the house] first?" [But] I felt, "I'm old enough now [to have a child]". Then we got to the point where [he said], "You only have one more year and then you get long service leave. Why would you throw that away?" Troy was never really as keen to have children as I was...and all that time I'd been led to believe that he was...We started to argue all the time... [During one] he said to me, "There is no way I'd ever have children with a person like you"...I thought I could never trust that he would ever have them now...It really scared me.

Like all the women with whom I spoke, Mary thought a "good" mother was one who had children in the context of a stable relationship. But like other Thwarted Mothers, Mary's expectations for the man she needed were relatively low: they basically just need to be willing to commit, and follow through on their commitment, to have children. Indeed, for Thwarted Mothers, men – their absence or their attitudes - are the only thing that delays, and for some women ultimately impedes, their journey to motherhood.

This doesn't mean that career is not important to these women: several complained bitterly about the sexism and family-unfriendliness of the workplace, and its cost to their careers and independent earning power. Some already firmly hitched to Mr (wants to have children) Right (and so guaranteed they can start trying to get pregnant when they feel that age-wise, the time has come) may delay motherhood as they seek to work around such constraints. This was 31 year old Kylie's story who having left her first husband because he wouldn't agree to have kids, was refusing to her second husband's desire to get pregnant straight away, because of her worries about the negative impact of motherhood on her financial independence:

[When I have kids I'd like to] work from home...[because] you have your own area of interest, your own income source...But the kids are there, like, as a part of that thing. Or you know, at some stage if they get dropped or whatnot. But not where it's a regular thing that they're at childcare and they can't even talk yet....I don't think that that's a good thing. But I...would like to be independent and haven't really ever been in a situation where I've had somebody else pay for me, or for us. It's having to come to grips with that idea...[of motherhood as] a career...if you choose to stop work and have your husband pay for that. [But] I don't quite feel comfortable with it. Only because I've never actually turned around to somebody and said "Here, I need some money. Can you pay for bla de bla?" So maybe when it comes that I have kids I'll decide that I don't want to work. I don't know.

However, at the end of the day Thwarted Mothers like Kylie will – whether they sort their work/family issues out to their satisfaction or not – implement their decision to have kids. And while some Thwarted Mothers will eventually, regretfully, say “no” to motherhood if Mr Right is never found, my data suggest that it is from amongst this group that the determined women willing to go it alone with anonymous donor sperm – women like Leesa Meldrum – come. One example is 37 year old Shaney who having failed at her attempts to keep her relationship with her very Mr Approximate off the rocks, and to find another Mr (wants to have kids) Approximate through a dating agency, reluctantly took herself off to the fertility clinic to have herself inseminate with donor sperm:

When I [went to the clinic]...I felt, “What a shame I'm having to do it this way. But it's the only avenue I have to have a child at this point in time.”...But the fact that I was going to get pregnant and have a child helped me there. That was a glimmer of hope for a future for me...I was doing something about my life and making my life what I wanted it to be, and hopefully bringing a lovely child...into this world.

Thus for Thwarted Mothers it is absent or recalcitrant (paternity-delaying or paternity-refusing) men – not work/family obstacles – that impede their journey to parenthood. However, while the presence of a man willing to father is a sufficient condition for Thwarted Mothers to go ahead with their plans to have children, it is not in all cases a necessary one. My data suggests that however reluctantly and at the last biological minute, a handful of these women will go it alone.

Waiters and Watchers

On the opposite side of the spectrum of maternal longing lies women ambivalent and undecided about parenting: the woman Waiting and Watching. For these women, neither maternity nor childlessness are a fixed part of their imagined future and identity and, consistent with this, their criteria for an acceptable partner does not include a man's capacity or willingness to father. In contrast to the maternally independent Thwarted Mothers, the parenting plans of women Waiting and Watching are highly influenced by the views of their partners, the experiences of their friends, and social chat and policies around parenting. If they marry a man who doesn't want children, they may have some grief and regrets about missing out on parenthood, but will ultimately go along. As Sandy explains, not so much because they feel they have no other options, but because motherhood doesn't mean so much to them that they can't give it up:

I've never had a strong maternal drive...I'm not the person who melts with delight at the sight of a pram. Like for some women, it's everything. [For me,] it's not such an overwhelming need that I'd just say, "Bugger it, I'll just [have a baby by] myself". And I would do that if I felt the need, because I've always made my own way. But I don't feel that need.

As the moniker I've given them suggests, these women are the worriers and planners. When it comes to motherhood, they do not (like many Thwarted Mothers) leap first and look later, but rather question their mothering sisters and friends on matter of concern, and even draw up a careful pros and cons list. They are concerned not just about what motherhood will do to their careers and identities in a world in which they know (from careful observation) that women do most of the work, but its impact on the quality of their leisure time and romantic relationships.

This is ambivalent and undecided Martine, who always had clear and ambitions career plans, but always doubted how they could be paired with marriage and motherhood:

The people I grew up with who got married and had children...[remind me] of my Mum and Dad...the house in the suburbs and...they behave like them in some ways...That's my expectation of it actually. That the woman ends up bearing the brunt of the physical and the emotional work and whether she does it because he foists it on her or whether she does it because she pulls it away from him - it just happens and there's no escape from it.

Jacinta's describes herself as "neither here nor there" about motherhood, but her partner is keen to have kids. However, now 33, she continues to delay parenthood for fear of what it will do to her personality, her relationship with Ron and her financial independence:

Personality:

I worry about...losing touch with the big wide world out there...I worry about losing perspective...and becoming a dumpy mum...There's a lady up the street who is a dumpy mum...She never reads a paper, she never sees a film. You can never talk to her about anything other than her kids

Relationship:

Ron and I have such a fantastic relationship, and I don't want a baby to come in and spoil what we've got...If we want to take off on a weekend, if we want to sleep in until eleven o'clock, we can do that. I hear people say that having a baby changes that. And I'[d be] nervous about how it might upset the dynamics [between us]...Because we've only got each other to be concerned about and to care about, and I've wondered how another little body might effect that.

Financial independence:

I'd like to keep working...Not because I love work so much but because...money's an issue for me and I'd like to still know that I can earn...

When the then first secretary of the Office of the Status of Women Pru Goward noted that if you force women to choose between a job and a dirty nappy, many will prefer the job⁵, my data suggest that the women to whom she was referring were those Waiting and Watching.

Women Childless by Relationship

These are women whose baseline attitudes to motherhood range from Thwarted Mother to Waiting and Watching, but who wind up childless because of their unwillingness or perceived inability or to leave a relationship with a partner who refuses to have kids. Kelly is passionately in love with her partner Ivan, and while she fought for a chance to motherhood, she refused to leave him to obtain it:

I actually structured all of my work so that I could work from home if I needed to...I could just pick up the kid, put it in the car, drive off, deliver. You know, it could mainly be at home...[but} Ivan...didn't really ever show much interest...So, the subject would come up every now and again...[And I'd think] "Oh well, another year, it'll be OK"...But then suddenly go, "Oh, gosh, well I suppose if I'm going to do it I'd better start thinking about it again." ...[But] He'd be sort of like, "I don't know if I really want to do it."...So I think I got through to about 33 and then, just all of a sudden, I'd see a woman with a baby. And I'd find myself wanting to cry. Or I'd see something, like an ad on telly, read something in a magazine, and tears would come...

Childless by Relationship Sharon also loves paternity-averse Michael, but puts down her reluctance to leave him to her strong aversion to single motherhood and the social difficulty, given her age, of finding someone else at this point with whom to have kids:

I can't really imagine wanting to have kids enough to bring up a child on my own. I mean, I think that'd be really hard on the child and on me...[So] if [my boyfriend becomes] absolutely convinced he doesn't want to have kids, do I go and find someone else?...I don't really relish the idea of going out there trying to find a partner to have kids with. That's a bit of an ordinary scene.

The Role of Men

[PP] What all this suggests is that there is much to Birrell's claim about the role partnering plays in women's fertility decision. My data suggest that he is right to suggest that women want and believe they should pursue motherhood in the context of stable relationship, and that the absence of such a relationship – for some Thwarted Mothers and all women Waiting and Watching – constrains their freedom to choose motherhood.

However, insofar as he argues that that partnering is a *necessary* precondition for *all* childless women to act on their intentions to have children, or to further consider parenthood, may be mistaken. My data suggest a small group of Thwarted Mother types will go ahead anyway. As well, for women Waiting and Watching, men have to do more than just commit for “a situation to begin contemplating children”⁶ to exist. To put it another way, for women Waiting and Watching, partnering successfully is not a sufficient condition for them to seriously contemplate motherhood, little less make a decision to parent. Further, married (or stably partnered men) aren't just part of the solution, they can also be part of the problem. My data suggest that if a women's commitment to a paternity-averse man can derail even her most carefully-laid plans to mother, either because she judges the man to be too Right to risk abandoning (Kelly), or herself too old to take the risk of abandoning Mr (doesn't want children) Right to pursue a Mr (wants to have children) Right (Sandra).

[PP] My data may also help refine McDonald's gender equity thesis as an explanation for rising rates of Circumstantial Childlessness. On the one hand, it bears out his claim that gender inequity in on the domestic front and (relatedly) in societal institutions leads some women – in particular, those Waiting and Watching - to delay or defer children. However, it also shows that in cases where women's is strongly oriented towards motherhood TM, her work/family balance concerns will not be enough for her to decide against motherhood, though it may

lead her to delay it (a decision that could, should age-related infertility kick-in, reduce her odds of becoming a parent).

However, it may be argued that gender inequity accounts for an even larger proportion of Circumstantial Childlessness and fertility decline. If it can be shown that some men's reluctance to partner or, once partnered, to have children, is grounded in gender-inequity concerns, than the relative contribution that gender inequity makes to declining fertility will increase. That is, if some men are delaying partnering, or once partnered, fatherhood, because they want or believe they should do a fair share of the parenting work, and make their fair share of the parenting sacrifices, but are either unwilling or believe they are or will be unable to do so, than it is mistaken to measure the contribution gender inequity makes to declining birth rates only by reference to its negative impacts on women. Instead, gender inequity can be seen to constrain the freedom of men to choose motherhood and, with it's relative impact measured in this more expansive way, McDonald's gender equity theory for gains ground.

Unfortunately, my data does not speak directly to this question. I neither spoke directly to men, nor quizzed women extensively about their understanding of the reasons the men in their lives gave for refusing to commit to stable partnerships or to have kids once in them. We know from the first wave of HILDA data that Australian men are increasingly reluctant to parent (and more reluctant than women)⁷, and from a study by the Netherlands Family Council that their reluctance has a decisive impact on the nature and timing of decisions couples make about children.⁸ Indeed, both Gerson's work, and that of Baber and Dryer suggest that for one quarter of childless couples, the man's opposition to kids was decisive.⁹ Thus, while my data and that of others suggests that men's desires regarding children can impact on actual fertility outcomes, it does not give us insight into the reason for men's increasing reluctance to father.

From her interviews 11 years ago with 138 American men, Gerson theorised that roughly one third (36%) defined their family and work commitments as breadwinners, another third (30%) refused to have children or were estranged from those they had, while the final third (33%) intended or were more involved.¹⁰

This “one-third” is consistent with Hochschild’s discovery that in one corporation, one third of male executives responded to their wives working status by doing more around the house; one-third didn’t change their behaviour at all and the remainder– in a stellar display of passive aggression – did even less than before.¹¹

[PP] But does the one-third analysis apply to Australian men? What do Australian men think a good husband/partner and a good father does these days, and what kind of partner/husband and father do they want and intend to be? In their late teens and early twenties, what do they intend and expect regarding children, and what circumstances shape their ultimate decisions about fatherhood? There is anecdotal and some research-based evidence suggesting there are significant work-based constraints on the capacity of men to commit to relationships and fatherhood: job insecurity, long hours, managerial hostility to men even knowing about what few family-friendly perks they may be entitled to, little less supporting their male employees taking advantage of them.¹² And the rise in paternal complaints to the Equal Opportunity Commission on grounds of parental status, from 1% in 2002 to 16% in 2003 suggests men are starting to fight back.

But we need to know more about what men want and intend when it comes to fatherhood, how and why their intentions may change over time, and the social forces that shape their ultimate fertility decisions and outcomes before we can rule on the relative explanatory power of McDonald’s gender equity thesis and Birrell’s marriage one when it comes to declining fertility in Australia. The data we need would be much like Gerson collected on American men, in which men’s baseline orientations to fathering (and how they define and quantify ideas about “involvement”) are assessed prior to an examination of the forces, including gender inequity in social institutions, that contributed to their ultimate decisions regarding parenthood: perhaps with a longitudinal element thrown in.

The tantalising possibility is that if a proportion of male reluctance to partner and father is down to gender inequity in social institutions, it will only be through seeing both explanations as interrelated and interactive, that an adequate understanding of the causes of Australia’s declining fertility rate will be achieved.

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¹ Farah Farouque, *So, What Will You Do for Your Country* [Web-based newspaper] (*The Age*, 2004 [cited 8 September 2004]); available from <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/05/14/1084289883805.html?oneclick=true>.

² Bob Birrell, Virginia Rapson, and Clare Hourigan, "Men + Women Apart: Partnering in Australia," (Melbourne, 2004).

³ Among the data I have found persuasive are surveys of young women's intentions to mother, and to have enough children to stabilize fertility above replacement rates (92% of young Australian women say they want children by the time they are 35, and to have an average 2.33 children). As well, data showing that despite the reduction in educated women's fertility aspirations as they age, they still fail to achieve their childbearing goals. Peter McDonald, "Contemporary Fertility Patterns in Australia: First Data from the 1996 Census," *People and Places* 66 (1998), D Wicks and G Mishra, "Young Australian Women and Their Aspirations for

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⁴ Kathleen Gerson, *Hard Choices: How women decide about work, career, and motherhood*, ed. Brian Barry and Samuel L. Popkin, California Series on Social Choice and Political Economy (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1985), Kathleen Gerson, *No Man's Land: Men's changing commitments to family and work* (New York, 1993).

⁵ Pru Goward, "Women in the Post-Industrial Society" (paper presented at the Speech by Pru Goward, First Assistant Secretary, Office of the Status of Women to the Sydney Institute, 5 April 1998 1998).

⁶ Birrell, Rapson, and Hourigan, "Men + Women Apart: Partnering in Australia."

⁷ Kathleen Fisher and David Charnock, "Partnering and Fertility Patterns: Analysis of the HILDA survey, wave 1" (paper presented at the HILDA Conference, Melbourne University, 2003).

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⁹ Kristine Baber and Albert Dreyer, "Delayed Childbearing: Men's Thinking about the Fertility Decision," in *Men in Families*, ed. Robert Lewis and Rober Salt (Beverly Hills, London, New Delhi, 1986), Gerson, *No Man's Land: Men's changing commitments to family and work*.

¹⁰ Gerson, *No Man's Land: Men's changing commitments to family and work*.

¹¹ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Second Shift: Working parents and the revolution at home* (New York, 1989).

¹² Sushi Das, "It's All Too Hard," *The Age*, 2 March 2004, Daniel Petre, *Father Time* (Sydney, 1998).