



Forming Relationships in Australia: Qualitative Insights into a process Important to Human Wellbeing

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Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted during 2002-03 for the Australian Family Formation Decisions (AFFD) Project, this paper probes the relationship formation experiences of 115 women, men and couples of family forming age living in eastern Australia. Contemporary relationship formation is characterized by a mixture of ambivalence and resignation to having limited control over the process on the one hand ('if it happens it happens'), and urgency on the other, especially among women seeking to fulfil maternal ambitions in their 30s after prioritizing other things earlier in their adult lives. For most the process of partnering involves trial and error, with timing – finding someone whose expectations of a relationship match one's own - posing a major challenge. It gives rise to a common phenomenon, the 'too soon syndrome', where relationships with many positive attributes are abandoned because one party perceives the other too keen to 'settle down', and/or themselves not ready to do so. The paper also examines impediments to partnering, including traditional ones like shyness, negative trial and error experiences, the demands of study and career establishment, pursuit of agendas emphasizing travel and enjoyment, sole parenthood and parental marriage breakdown.