

The Australian Family Formation Decisions Project

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The Australian Family Formation Decisions (AFFD) Project is an ARC-funded project that is seeking to enhance understanding of the historically low and still declining level of fertility in Australia. To complement the more conventional analysis of patterns of family formation that is possible using the Negotiating the Life Course Survey (NLCS) data, it is conducting in-depth interviews with selected NLCS respondents resident in the eastern States.

The purpose of these 1-1.5 hour interviews is to allow informants to identify what THEY perceive to have been, or to be likely in future to be, the significant influences on their family formation experience. Family formation is defined as 'the forming and sustaining of relationships, having children in relationships, and the timing of associated events'.

Interviews are being conducted with a mixture of partnered and unpartnered women aged 23-39, partnered men with partners aged 23-39, unpartnered men aged 23-44, and couples in which the female is aged 23-39. A few women aged 40-44 (some with their partners) who the NLCS data show to be childless or to have begun childbearing well into their thirties are also being targeted. Around 120 interviews are planned, consisting of about 50 partnered women, a dozen or so unpartnered women, 25 couples, 25 partnered men, and a dozen or so unpartnered men. These numbers are flexible, depending on field impressions of the return from interviews in different categories. It is possible, for example, that the number of couple interviews will be boosted at the expense of fewer individual interviews.

Informants have initially been randomly selected from among NLCS respondents who meet our residential criterion and fit the demographic profile we are interested in, subject to being excluded if (i) we have information that they do not wish to be involved in further research or (ii) they reside north of Harvey Bay in Queensland or in the far west of one of the mainland eastern States. This latter restriction has been imposed to contain data collection costs.

Interviewing has been under way in Victoria for some weeks and is about to commence in New South Wales. Potential informants are mailed an introductory letter together with an information sheet that explains the AFFD Project in more

detail, then are contacted by phone and asked to consent to a taped interview. Some difficulty contacting people two years after Wave 2 of the NLCS has been experienced, and there have been a few refusals, but these cases are being replaced by alternates from the same broad geographic areas.

It is early days to be discussing findings. However, Dr Andrea Whittaker, the AFFD Project's Melbourne collaborator and interviewer, reports interesting accounts of people's deferment of family formation, some fascinating couple interviews, and several cases of informants experiencing overt disapproval of their having had a third child.