

Ideal family size in a rural Tswana population

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Summary

It is a matter of concern that family-planning advice is often given without consideration of the cultural norms which influence the client. A questionnaire was used to discover what 350 rural Tswanas believed the ideal number of children to be; results were tabulated according to age and sex. It appears that older people tend to want more children and, more surprisingly, that men and women agree on the ideal number of children in a family; this is contrary to the traditional impression that Black men want more children than do Black women. Further research among other Black population groups is indicated.

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Family planning involves both child spacing and family limitation. Very often health workers give advice about these aspects without due consideration of the cultural norms influencing the patient or client. A full interview with the client may obviate this problem, but this is often too time-consuming to be practical. Knowledge of certain expectations within the subject's cultural group can help us to give more realistic, and therefore more acceptable, family-planning advice.

The purpose of this study was to establish what the members of the population (by age and sex) served by this hospital believed to be the ideal number of children in a family. The area includes mainly the Bafokeng and Mankwe districts of Bophuthatswana.

Methods

Over a period of 1 month 350 adult ward patients (173 men and 177 women) were interviewed in their own language by Black nurses who had been briefed on the use of the questionnaire. The patients were asked how many siblings they had (including those who had died), how many children they themselves had, and what they personally considered to be the ideal number of children in a family.

Data were processed according to the respondent's sex and age in the following groups: 17-24 years, 25-39 years, 40-59 years and 60 years and over.

The ideal number of children was specified as 'as many as you are given' or 'as many as God gives you' by 13 respondents (9 men and 4 women). This answer was difficult to quantify; it was decided to use the number of the respondents' siblings as well as

the number of their own children to represent the opinion of the nonspecific group on ideal family size.

The mean ideal number of children of the main group alone (that is, those who specified a particular number of children as ideal) was compared with the mean ideal number of children of the main group plus the number of children born to the members of the nonspecific group. The mean ideal number of children of the main group alone was also compared with the mean ideal number of children of the main group plus the number of the nonspecific group's members and siblings. These two comparisons were made for each of the four age and sex groups in which nonspecific responses (shown in parentheses) were given: men aged 25-39 (2), men aged 40-59 (2), men aged 60 and over (5) and women aged 60 and over (4). As the differences were not statistically significant, only the main groups were used in all further calculations.

Results

There is a trend with increasing age to consider a larger family to be ideal (Fig. 1). In each age group the range was wider for men than for women (Table I). No correlation could be found between the size of the family in which respondents grew up and the size they now consider to be ideal.

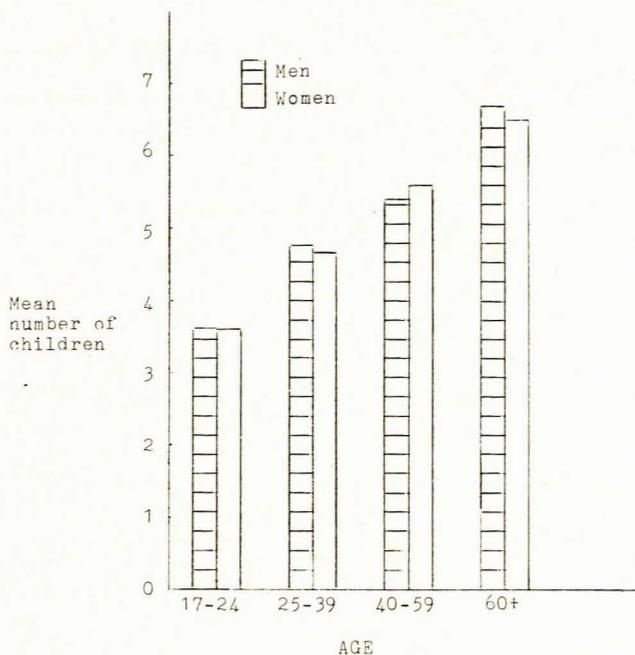


Fig. 1. Mean number of children considered as ideal by men and women in the different age groups.

For every age group the mean number of children considered as ideal by men and by women was compared. The results show that in no case was the difference statistically significant (Table II). This is also evident from Fig. 1.

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TABLE I. IDEAL NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN A FAMILY

Age group	No. of patients interviewed	Range	Mean	Median	SD
Men					
17 - 24	21	0 - 8	3,62	4	1,6270
25 - 39	64 (2)*	2 - 15	4,77	4	2,6155
40 - 59	55 (2)*	2 - 15	5,38	5	2,6299
≥60	24 (5)*	1 - 15	6,71	6	3,4323
Total	164 (9)*				
Women					
17 - 24	58	1 - 6	3,6	4	1,1653
25 - 39	63	2 - 10	4,66	4	1,6264
40 - 59	31	2 - 10	5,61	5,5	2,1550
≥60	21 (4)*	1 - 12	6,5	6	3,2957
Total	173 (4)*				

*The number in brackets shows the number of people who answered: 'As many as you are given', i.e. nonspecific respondents.

TABLE II. COMPARISON BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE GROUPS

Age	Z score	Significance	
17 - 24	0,038	$P = 0,9680$	} NS
25 - 39	0,285	$P = 0,7718$	
40 - 59	0,438	$P = 0,6600$	
60+	0,206	$P = 0,8336$	

Discussion and conclusion

This study was approached with the common preconceptions that older people would want more children than younger people and men would want more than women.

The findings of this study reflect that older people do indeed feel that an ideal family should have more children than are considered ideal by younger people. It would be interesting to know whether the younger groups will, with increasing age, consider larger families to be ideal, or whether their opinions will stay the same. At present one can only speculate that as the people grow older they may well regard a slightly bigger family as ideal, but it is unlikely that they will aspire to quite such large families as their elders do now.

The traditional impression among Blacks is that Black men want more children than do Black women. A surprising finding therefore, was that men and women of the same age groups consider the same family size as ideal. Although this study cannot be generalized to other races or to urban people, it casts

serious doubts on the validity of this commonly held opinion.

When child spacing or family limitation are discussed with mothers, it is very often found that they have not discussed these matters with their husbands, and it seems that this lack of communication may be responsible for their opinion that their husbands want more children than they do. The wife's opinion that the husband wants more children may therefore be an unwarranted assumption. Very often the health worker has the impression that this answer is a shield for the woman who wants more children, but is afraid of antagonizing the health worker by saying so; certainly, on the basis of this study, such statements can no longer be accepted at face value.

The following recommendations are now being issued to all in the health team who give family-planning advice. All women under the age of 40 who have 4 children and all women over the age of 40 who have 5 children should be offered tubal ligation. Any woman who says that her husband is opposed to any type of family planning should be asked whether the matter has been discussed between them. The possibility of a mistaken assumption should be pointed out politely, and the woman should be advised to discuss the matter with her husband and, if possible, to bring him to the clinic for a discussion with the health workers.

It is hoped that the findings of this study will stimulate further research in other Black populations.

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