Ideal Age at First Birth and Associated Factors: Results from the Qualitative SPAFF Study
Andrea J. Melnikas, Diana Romero

Abstract
There is limited research on the perceived ideal age at first birth among young men and women in the US. We sought to understand what young adults in the greater NYC area perceive as an ideal age at first birth and what factors influence this perception. We analyzed 200 in-depth interviews with heterosexual males and females from the Social Position and Family Formation (SPAFF) study. Our analysis revealed that early 30s were cited most often as ideal (32%), followed by late 20s (23%), mid 20s (15%) and mid-30s (15%). For the overall sample, factors associated with respondents' perception of ideal age fell into four categories: structural/social position-related (e.g., income/salary), individual/interpersonal (e.g., marriage), health/fertility-related (e.g., biological limitations), and aspirational (e.g., "having it all"). Ongoing sub-group analysis of potential differences by demographic characteristics (e.g, gender, age, relationship status) is underway with the goal of better informing how young adults conceptualize this milestone.

Background:
The mean age at first birth for women has steadily risen in the United States (US), from 21.4 years in 1970 to 25 years in 2006.(1) Overall, women are waiting longer to have children, with birth rates for women in their 20s and 30s falling in 2009 and rates for women in their 40s rising over the past four decades. Age at first birth varies by region, with women in the Northeast and mid-Atlantic regions delaying first birth longer. Massachusetts had the highest average age at first birth (27.7 years old) in 2006 while Mississippi had the lowest average age (22.6 years) at first birth.(1)

There is limited research to date on the perceived ideal age at first birth among women almost to the exclusion of men in the US. (9) Measurement of fertility intentions among women of reproductive age in the U.S. focuses on desired parity and ideal family size, not the timing of first birth. Fertility intentions are assessed in the National Survey on Family Growth (NSFG), with items including "How many babies do you intend to have?" and "What is the smallest number of babies you, yourself, expect to have?" focusing on ideal family size. (5) The NSFG does not further probe these items to ask about both social norms around starting childbearing ("ideal time") and personal preference/desires. Instead the NSFG probes pregnancy intendedness for each pregnancy reported, asking women about their feelings upon learning about their pregnancy, and the timing of the pregnancy (too soon or too late) (6). Moreover, nulliparous women are not further queried on the desired timing of *future* pregnancies. Two other national surveys address fertility intentions in terms of ideal family size and intended parity. In supplements to the Current Population Survey (CPS) women are asked about future expected births (25). In the General Social Survey (GSS) women are asked "What do you think is the ideal number of children for a family to have?". (26) Neither survey further examines questions about ideal age and associated factors.

A recent Gallup poll reported that Americans view 25 as the ideal age for a woman to have a child and 27 as ideal for men. The researchers found that increases in education were associated with reporting age 26 and older as the ideal age. College graduates and post-graduates more often cited 26-29 as the ideal age range, compared to before 25 among those with no college. This research explored some factors associated with having children by asking

respondents to identify reasons why couples do not have more children, but did not examine factors associated with identifying an ideal age at first birth. (14)

There have been some peer-reviewed studies that have looked at desired age at first birth. A study in the late 1990s that surveyed middle school girls in Southern California found that this varied by race/ethnicity with 'best' age at first birth reported as between 21.9 years (Hispanic) and 24.4 years (Southeast Asian) (7). Desired age at first birth also varied by race/ethnicity from 23.3 years (Hispanic) to 26.4 years (Southeast Asian). This study also included regression analyses showing that optimistic school and career aspirations were associated with a higher desired age at first birth (7). A 2004 study among university students in Sweden asked about "at what age would you like to/did you have your first child?" and found that 64% of female respondents felt that 25-29 years was the ideal time, while 30% chose 30-34 years. Among male respondents, 36% chose 25-29 years and 53% selected 30-34 years. Ten percent of males and 3% of females chose 35-39 as the desired age at first birth. Women overall reported wanting their first child at a lower mean age (28 years) than men (30 years) (8).

In 2006, the special Eurobarometer survey (number 253) of adults 15 and older in 25 member states asked respondents about ideal age to become a mother or father. Results from this survey found that women gave about 25 as the ideal age to become a mother and about 28 as the ideal age to become a father. Men also gave about 25 as the ideal age for a woman to become a mother, but 27 as the ideal age to become a father. This survey also examined circumstances relevant to the decision to have children, with the health of the mother and presence of a supportive partner being most important. The health of the father, working situation of the father, financial and housing conditions were also highly ranked. (20) Interestingly, an analysis of the 2006 Eurobarometer survey found that the ideal age for becoming a parent was higher than the actual age of the respondents when they became parents themselves (21).

Methods:
This research is a part of a larger qualitative study called the Social Position and Family Formation (SPAFF) project. The SPAFF study examined family formation decision-making among adults 18-35 years in New York City and Northern New Jersey. The SPAFF study sought to examine three primary questions: (1) How are family-formation decisions made and prioritized ("valued") in relation to other life experiences among individuals of different social position?; (2) How do individuals' assessment of their current and future economic status influence their family-formation attitudes and behaviors?; and (3) How might individuals' own characterization of their cultural background (e.g., ethnic identity, religion) factor into family-formation attitudes and behaviors? The participant recruitment and data collection activities are briefly summarized below. (Information regarding the field component of the SPAFF study has been described in greater detail elsewhere (11).)

This analysis focuses on individuals' reports of the ideal age at first birth, seeking to understand what factors contribute to a particular "ideal" age, such as biological limitations, social position (i.e., combination of educational, occupational and income-related characteristics), and/or relationship factors. We are particularly interested in individuals' understanding of biological limitations associated with an increased age at first birth.

Data Collection
A total of 261 individuals were screened, of which 200 (76%) completed in-depth interviews. The interviewed sample included 96 males and 104 females. The majority of the interviews were completed in public venues (63.5%) or in the interviewee's home (35.5%), with two

interviews being completed using Skype™ web-based video. Interview length averaged 52 minutes.

Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and uploaded to the web-based Dedoose software for analysis. The majority of the data collected were qualitative; hence, our data analytic approach was guided by inductive grounded theory methodology (12, 27). We used a coding procedure with three levels that evolved as we read through the interview transcripts (13). These levels included, first, identifying text-based primary categories and subcategories, second, grouping of the text-based categories into larger themes, and third, organizing themes into more abstract theoretical constructs. For the current study, we will report on the coding and analysis of only those categories, themes, and constructs relevant to our research focus on factors related to ideal childbearing age.

Ideal age at first birth was discussed among respondents in response to the open-ended question "What is the ideal age to have a child?". Our analysis of the transcripts identified several factors that were associated with the "ideal age" or age range for having a child. The codes that were created to capture these factors fall into four larger themes: (1) Structural/Social Position-related, (2) Individual/Interpersonal, (3) Fertility-related, and (4) Aspirational.

Results

Sample Demographics: The overall study sample includes 200 males and females aged 18-35, with a mean age of 29.4 years. Over two thirds of participants were between 25-29 (35.5%) and 30-34 (34%) years of age. Household income was reported categorically, with about half of participants (50.5%) reporting a household income between $20,000 and $59,999 with 25.5% reporting income above $60,000 and 23.5% below $19,999. Relationship status varied among the sample with 40% reporting being single, 20.5% married, 18% living together, 15% in a committed relationship, 4.5% divorced/separated and 2% in an open relationship. Overall, 36% of participants reporting having at least one child. Participant demographics are presented in Table 1.

Ideal Age: Respondents were asked about the ideal age at which to have a child. Responses varied with some individuals giving a specific number (e.g., 28) as the ideal age, while others gave a range ("25 to 30") or time period ("mid to late 20s"). These responses (n=113) were grouped and are presented in Table 2. Our analysis revealed that the early 30s (30-33) were cited most often (32% of respondents giving an ideal age or age range), with late 20s (23%), mid 20s (15%) and mid 30s (15%) also given.. Among those who gave a specific age for childbearing, the mean was 29.3 years.

We were particularly interested in *how* individuals talk about ideal age at first birth and the *factors that contribute* to an ideal situation to have a child. In terms of important factors contributing to an ideal age for the overall sample, we found that they clustered into four categories: Structural/social position related (salary/income, housing, education), individual/interpersonal (relationship/marriage, maturity), "age pressure"/fertility or health related (biological limitations, energy), and aspirational (having it all, me time).

Structural/social position related

We found that many participants mentioned a number of things that needed to be "in place," and coordinated to a certain extent, to have a child, such as steady employment and acceptable housing. There was often a desired order of events that would lead to being ready to have

children. An ideal age and situation to have a child would occur only after certain things (marriage, education, housing) were secured.

Appropriate housing and savings are important pieces for being ready to have a child, as summarized by [Anonymous-158], a single 19-year-old female in college :

> *So I think probably someone between like 27 and 31 so it's not like too late to where it's like risky, but not too early to where I feel like I didn't get to do a lot of things. And to have a stable income and a job that I'm happy with and a good sized apartment or whatever. And savings and everything and at a good point in my marriage, if that's the case, if I'm married – this is ideal, so let's say I'm married. (#158)*

Income and employment are a large part of having things "lined up," with 40% of respondents mentioning this as important to determining an ideal time to have a child. For these respondents ideal age is associated with a time when they believe they will be financially ready to have children.

Individual/Interpersonal
Respondents also spoke of the importance of being married or being in a stable long-term relationship prior to having children, Marriage is seen by many as part of the ideal sequence prior to having children: One female respondent – Keisha, a single female aged 32 with a household income between $20,000 and $59,999 -- described the particulars of the timing of having thing "lined up", noting the order of events and the importance of marriage occurring before the others:
> *Of course, marriage first, then once we…figure if I'm married, let's just say between two and three years, because I want to get to at least enjoy it with no kids. After that, go to school and from there get a degree and then kids come along. Even while I'm in school, I wouldn't mind being pregnant then. I would definitely want to at least be married first. From then on, of course the house. First and foremost I think I would want to be married first.*

Age Pressure
The desire to have children at or by a certain age was expressed by many participants in response to the question of the ideal age to have a child.   This "age pressure" includes wanting to have children at a certain age due to 1) biological limitations surrounding fecundity, 2) health concerns with increasing age, 3) "energy" or concerns about keeping up the demands of parenthood at a later age, and 4) societal pressure about being an appropriate age to be a parent.

Biological limitations related to fecundity increase with maternal age (2) and there are some risks associated with bearing children at a later age (1). Many female participants mentioned the need to have children before a certain age to mitigate these limitations and risks. One respondent, a single 19 year old working in retail wasn't able to articulate the risks in detail, but she was aware that risk increases with age:
> *You know that makes you think like after 30, you know they check you more, because you got pregnant and like because there's more risk and stuff. So like I guess another reason why I wouldn't wait until that age would be like the risks. The younger, the safer it is I guess, like the complications are less minimized. (#184)*

Another respondent mentioned biological limitations in thinking about reproductive technologies that she would potentially need to use if she chose to wait to have children.   For this

respondent, age 35 was perceived as a threshold that once crossed made it more difficult to have children:

> *I've thought about this many times, I like 35. Let's face it, women have a certain span that it's ideal for them to have children; once you go past that it gets harder. I'm not really a fan of all the artificial and fertility treatments. It causes a lot of problems with that as well. I think it's like that for a certain reason. As I'm getting closer to that age, I'm like, well before long my time is up, so it kind of makes you hurry up and go "Okay, the clock is ticking." For me personally, now to 35, 36. (Female, Lily, age 26, in a committed relationship) (#304)*

Aspirational

In addition to having things lined up in order to have a child, some respondents also noted a number of things they wanted to accomplish personally before 'settling down' to have a child. Travel was frequently mentioned as something to do before baby. Jennifer, a 24 year old currently in a relationship expressed a need to experience other things before having children.

> *I think for me, I still want to travel. I still want to, you know, experience other things. So I mean if I have an age on it, probably early 30s, late 20s even, because you never know what's going to happen between now and five years. You know I could be settled by tomorrow and who knows, you know.   (Female, Jennifer, age 24, in a relationship) (#134)*

Joe, a married 27 year old, wants he and his wife to finish school, focus on their careers, and travel before having children:

> *The other thing is, we're just going to finish school. Well by the time we're done, 29, and then that will be a year where we're really just focusing on career, really narrowing in on what we want to do in life, and then kind of a year to build that up. Some travel somewhere in that year, I don't know where. So we're going to travel. (#221)*

Discussion:
This research suggests that young adults in New York City and Northern New Jersey perceive the ideal age at first birth to be significantly older than reported by adults nationally in the recent Gallup poll (14). Moreover, the common 30-35 year old range reported is substantially older than the average age at first birth in 2009 among New Yorkers (26.8 years) and New Jerseyans (27.2 years) (1). This could be due in part to differences in an urban population, which may differ from the other groups in meaningful ways, such as education or income level. New York City itself may contribute to the higher ideal age at first birth due to unique pressures young adults living in the city face, such as competition for employment and housing costs. Additionally, it may be that males and females in New York City are more aware of women having children at a later age, which may make them more open to childbearing at older ages.

It is noteworthy that the research took place in 2009 and 2010 during a time when the economic recession was still a constant topic in the media (22-24) and the unemployment rate in New York City was about 10% (17). Young adults who had recently entered the workforce may have been especially at risk of unemployment, which could explain why so many mentioned salary and income as the most important factors when thinking about the ideal age to have a child.

A number of respondents, both males and females, spoke of the age 35 as a threshold/perceived end point for having children. The medical community does suggest that women having children over age 34 are considered advanced in maternal age(18), so perhaps

this message has been successfully spread to men and women of reproductive age. Despite seeing 35 as a threshold, most respondents could not specifically articulate *why* biological limitations were important, just that it was more challenging or perhaps unhealthy to have children at that age, suggesting that the messaging around advanced maternal age could be more specific.

Although Millennials are frequently characterized as the 'me' generation[19], it was interesting that few focused on extracurricular activities as necessary things to accomplish before baby. Most discussed needing to get things lined up and finish education as more important. Only a small percentage of respondents discussed needing to travel before baby.

Very little is known about Americans' attitudes regarding the ideal age at first birth. Specifically, we lack an in-depth understanding of how young adults of reproductive age conceptualize the ideal time for having children and what factors contribute to this ideal. Future research is needed to better understand what is seen as "ideal" and how this influences childbearing behaviors.

References
1)   Matthews TJ, Hamilton BE. Delayed childbearing: more women are having their first child later in life. NCHS Data Brief 2009(21):1-8.
2)   Leridon H. Can assisted reproduction technology compensate for the natural decline in fertility with age? A model assessment. Hum Reprod 2004;19(7):1548-53.
3)   Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Assisted Reproductive Technology Success Rates: National Summary and Fertility Clinic Reports, 2006. In. Atlanta: Department of Health and Human Services; 2008.
4)   Almeling R. Selling sex, selling gender: egg agencies, sperm banks, and the medical market in genetic material. American Sociological Review 2007;72:319-340.
5)   Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. National Survey of Family Growth. Available at: http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg.htm
6)   Santelli J, Lindberg LD, Orr MG, Finer LB, Spiezer I. Towards a multidimensional measure of pregnancy intentions: Evidence from the United States. Studies in Family Planning 2009;40(2):87-100.
7)   East PL. Racial and ethnic differences in girls' sexual, marital and birth expectations. Journal of Marriage and Family 1998;60(1):150-162.
8)   Lampic C, Skoog Svanberg A, Karlstrom P, Tyden T. Fertility awareness, intentions concerning childbearing, and attitudes towards parenthood among female and male academics. Human Reproduction 2006;21(2):558-564.
9)   Chen R, Morgan SP. Recent trends in the timing of first births in the United States. Demography 1991;28(4):513-533.
10)   National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle 1 (1973). Documentation available at: http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/nsfg_cycle1.htm. Accessed September 20, 2013.
11) Romero DR, Kwan A, Suchman L. Management and recruitment in a large qualitative study. Presented at American Sociological Association 2013 annual meeting.
12) Corbin J, Strauss AL (2007). Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory.
Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
13) Auerbach C and LB Silverstein (2003). Qualitative Data: An Introduction to Coding and Analysis. New York: NYU Press.
14) Gallup, Inc. "Americans see 25 as Ideal Age for Women to Have First Child". Published online November 8, 2013. Available at: http://www.gallup.com/poll/165770/americans-ideal-age-women-first-child.aspx#1. Accessed November 15, 2013.

15) US Census Bureau. Available at: http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/36/3651000.html. Accessed March 22, 2013.

16) Elliott DB, Krivickas K, Brault MW, Kreider RM. Historical Marriage Trends from 1890-2010: A Focus on Race Differences. Presented at Presented at the annual meetings of the Population Association of America, San Francisco, CA, May 3-5, 2012   Available at: https://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/marriage/data/acs/ElliottetalPAA2012presentation.pdf.

17) New York State. Labor Force and Unemployment Data. Available at: http://www.labor.ny.gov/stats/LSLAUS.shtm. Accessed January 2, 2014.

18) American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, Later Childbearing. Available at: http://www.acog.org/~/media/For%20Patients/faq060.pdf?dmc=1&ts=20140102T1513308507. Accessed January 2, 2014.

19) Pew Research Center (2010). Millennials. Confident. Connected. Open to Change. Available at: http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2010/10/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change.pdf. Accessed January 2, 2014.

20) Testa, MR. Childbearing preferences and family issues in Europe: evidence from the Eurobarometer 2006 survey. Vienna Yearbook of Population Research, 2007:357-379.

21) Testa, MR. *Childbearing Preferences* and Family Issues in Europe. Fieldwork February – March 2006. Publication October 2006. Special Eurobarometer 253 / Wave 65.1. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_253_en.pdf. Accessed January 8, 2014

22) Leonhardt, D. "Job Losses Show Breadth of Recession". New York Times, March 3, 2009. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/04/business/04leonhardt.html. Accessed January 8, 2014.

23) Bremmer, I. "Expect the World Economy to Suffer through 2009". Wall Street Journal. January 23, 2009. http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB123267029592108287. Accessed January 8, 2014.

24) Uchitelle, L. "Jobless Rate Hits 7.2%, a 16-Year High". New York Times. January 9, 2009. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/10/business/economy/10jobs.html?_r=0. Accessed January 8, 2014.

25) United States Census, Current Population Survey. Fertility of American Women: 1998-Detailed Tables. Available at: http://www.census.gov/hhes/fertility/files/cps/1998/tab06.txt. Accessed January 10, 2014

26) National Opinion Research Center, General Social Survey. GSS Questionnaires. Available at: http://www3.norc.org/GSS+Website/Publications/GSS+Questionnaires/. Accessed January 10, 2014.

27) Glaser, BG, Strauss, AL. 1967. The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research, Chicago, Aldine Publishing Company.