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Family Size Attitudes: A Comparison of Measures\*



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These observations refer to data from a small sample of women and their adolescent daughters in Bogota, Colombia. The data permit comparisons between two different approaches to the measurement of family size attitudes. One is termed the "valence pattern" approach (Simmons, 1974). The other is the "preference scale" method (Coombs, Coombs and McClelland, 1975). Our purpose is to indicate differences between the two approaches and to suggest the uses to which they may best be put. The following general conceptual and methodological observations set the context for the empirical analysis which follows later in the paper.

#### Conceptualizing family size attitudes.

Family size attitudes may be conceived as networks with various interrelated components. One general model of these components presented by Simmons (1974) suggests that researchers can usefully distinguish:

(a) Definitions which specify the range of family size alternatives considered by people living in a given social or cultural context. Such definitions may specify the range of alternatives from "small" to "large" families (Simmons, 1974) or may introduce a normative component and specify from "too small" to "too large" (Ware, 1972; Micklin and Marnane, 1975).

(b) Beliefs about the advantages and disadvantages of different sized families (or different family compositions for which size, sex of the children, socio-economic status, etc., are specified) within the range of perceived alternatives. Such beliefs are the principal components in research on the "value of children" (Hoffman and Hoffman, 1973; Fawcett et al., 1974; Mueller, 1972; Turner, 1974; Simmons, 1974; Micklin and Marnane, 1975).

(c) Valence patterns, which are the attitudinal biases reflected in the balancing of perceived advantages against disadvantages of different size (or different size-sex-social status, etc. composition) families. The notion of balancing competing beliefs about relative advantages of one sized family against other sized families is explicitly recognized in the various "value of children" or "utility" approaches, and may be found in measurement techniques which attempt to scale family size attitudes in complex ways (see for example, Terhune and Kaufman, 1973). However, methodologies which explicitly seek to assess the nature and extent of ambivalence (or lack of a clear size bias) have been used only in a few studies (for examples, see Simmons, 1974; Mueller, 1972).

(d) Family size preferences (see Coombs, Coombs, and McClelland, 1975; Myers and Roberts, 1968) have demonstrated that there is generally an ordering of size-sex preferences within the range of alternatives. Such an ordering presumably reflects a valance pattern, but no test of this assumption has yet been made. Of course, the common assumption in most simple questions (such as those used in general fertility surveys) on family size attitudes is that preferences peak at a single size number which respondents can state when asked a question like, "Considering your life as it is, how many children would you most like to have?"

(e) Behavioral intentions. There is a further attitudinal component which is at the level of stated behavioral intentions to, for example, use contraceptives and not have children in the next two year period, or to definitely seek to have a child within the next year (see Davidson and Jaccard, 1974).

As one moves down the preceding list, the attitudes become increasingly concrete with respect to decisions, such as the decision to adopt contraception, which may directly influence fertility. Definitions of the range of alternatives and beliefs

about alternative family compositions may often be only rather general and thus provide only vague guidelines for day-to-day action. In contrast, behavioral intentions are likely to be extremely specific and over the short run predictive of decisions designed to influence fertility. Family size preference orderings would seem to fall between these two extremes.

It has been argued that even very traditional non-contracepting populations are aware of advantages and disadvantages of families which differ in size, sex composition and other culturally relevant dimensions (see for example, George, 1973, p. 363). However, other attitudes which are more concrete with respect to fertility decisions may not be present in all societies. Or, if present, they may not be clearly and explicitly formulated by respondents. This is most apparent with regard to behavioral intentions designed to influence fertility; presumably these emerge only under special conditions where the desire to limit childbearing exists in combination with knowledge of and access to acceptable methods of fertility control.

The extent to which family size preferences exist is a question open to considerable discussion. Difficulty in getting respondents in non-contracepting populations to state single numerical ideals has been noted in many studies. Frequently respondents do not want to answer, or answer by saying that the number depends on "fate" or "God" and not on the parents (an extreme example is given by Stycos, 1964). Interpretations of this phenomena vary. George (1973, p. 363) for example, believes that people really do have ideals but feel that to state them would be impolite to children already born after the ideal parity was achieved. He argues his point on the basis of his findings that, when repeatedly requested for an answer, individuals will give single family size preferences which fit in with the general belief and valance patterns they have revealed on other attitude scales and projective questions. One wonders, however, about the extent to which the demand characteristics of the interview were drawing out

ides which were unclearly formulated or of low salience to the respondents. The general arguments we have presented above would suggest that individuals in non-contracepting populations will frequently have difficulty specifying family size preferences with precision, and that open-ended questions which request a single number will be particularly difficult for them to answer, as will questions which require indicating preferences among very detailed comparisons among different sized families.

Even where attitudes at each of the different levels of concreteness with respect to fertility regulating decisions are present, one should not assume a perfect correspondence between them. General beliefs and valence patterns presumably reflect in great part culturally determined perceptions of surrounding social circumstances. There may be considerable ambivalence in the valence patterns, indicating that family compositions which have undesirable features may also have some desirable features, and the opposite may be true as well. Behavioral intentions may reflect some part of these general beliefs and valence patterns, but in addition they are likely to reflect a variety of immediate circumstances, such as the wife's health, the couple's income, their residential circumstances, and their attitude toward contraception, to name just a few factors.

It would seem likely that family size preferences measured under the assumption of "existing conditions" (e.g., "In your present situation, what do you think would be the best number of children for you?") would be influenced both by general beliefs about the advantages of different sized families, and by immediate circumstances. On the one hand, this makes the concept of family size preference a particularly useful link between general beliefs and concrete behavioral intentions. It may also make the concept a useful "compromise" in research which seeks to investigate two different hypotheses: (a) the influence of family size attitudes on fertility related behavior,

and (b) the influence of social and cultural change on family size attitudes. However, where the time and cost restrictions of the investigation do not require that only a single measure be developed and used, the investigator would be advised to think carefully about which of the above two hypotheses is of primary interest and add other measures of family size attitudes which are appropriate to the research goals. For example, if the focus concerns the influence of social and cultural variables on family size attitudes, then questions which get at family size definitions, beliefs and valence patterns would seem to be particularly useful. The content of these beliefs themselves should indicate specifically which aspects of existing social and cultural conditions influence family size attitudes. Alternatively, if the focus is on predicting fertility, then behavioral intentions related to fertility goals should be assessed.

The preceding arguments provide some general expectations for what one might find in comparing two different family size attitude measures: one of valence patterns; and the other of preference orderings among different family compositions. Briefly, one would expect some correspondence between the results, suggesting that general beliefs and valence patterns do influence preference orderings. However, since other factors more closely related to immediate family circumstances, and other personal goals presumably also influence family size preferences, the relationship between the two should not be more than approximate. Valence patterns should be particularly sensitive to differences in general social-cultural conditions which influence the costs and benefits of different family size compositions. The preference orderings in turn should allow greater precision in assessing the numerical size preference patterns, and in addition will allow an assessment of sex bias. In sum, both measures should be useful for different purposes. The following results from a preliminary analysis are designed to promote further discussion on the arguments presented above.

## THE SAMPLE

The Bogota study includes lengthy personal interviews on sex roles and family formation experiences and preferences with mothers and one of their adolescent (ages 13 to 19) daughters. In a given family, the mother and daughter were always interviewed at home, by separate female interviewers, and simultaneously to avoid exchange of information between them. Mother-daughter pairs were selected from three kinds of residential areas within the city; those designated as "upper", "middle" and "low" strata according to the national census classification of "barrios" in Bogota. Respondents were contacted in various ways: by door-to-door inquiry; through high school girls in the areas, and through reference of participating pairs to others who might take part. The study was intended for testing analytic hypotheses about the relationships between variables among respondents with select characteristics, hence the sample was not intended to be statistically representative of any particular universe. Some selected characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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## SELECTED RESULTS

### Valence pattern measures.

Table 2 presents social class and generational differences on a number of measures related to the separate components of family size attitudes discussed earlier. Definitions of "large" and "small" families are operationalized here as their lower and upper limits respectively. Both low strata mothers and their daughters perceive that a family begins to be "large" with fewer children than do

the mothers or daughters in the other strata. This result is interesting since in their valence patterns low strata women were also less likely to favor large families.

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Insert Table 2 about here  
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Low strata mothers are more ambivalent than their counterparts in other strata while low strata daughters are more clearly in favor of "small" families than their counterparts. The valence pattern measure here gives the advantage of an understanding of the extent of uncertainty regarding "ideals" and preferences.

Generational differences are apparent on the size preference and "ideal" family size measures. It is interesting to note that there is little difference between middle and upper strata daughters on these two measures. However, the valence pattern indicates that middle strata daughters are more favorable to "small" families than are their upper strata counterparts. These results suggest that the valence pattern variable is a more sensitive measure to class differences, for there is a linear increase for small families as social strata declines. While the results presented here are only suggestive they do fit with the view that beliefs about the advantages and disadvantages particularly reflect the opportunity structure within which an individual is located, whereas ideals and preference orderings may reflect other factors as well.

If social and cultural circumstances affect valence patterns, then one would expect to find some differences between samples in different socio-cultural settings, such as Taiwan, urban Latin America, and rural Latin America. The results shown in Table 3 indicate preliminary support for this hypothesis. Unfortunately, the



questions (and samples) are not exactly the same in the three studies. However, they are sufficiently similar to make the following tentative comments: Taiwanese respondents were least ambivalent toward "large" families and rural Latin American women are most ambivalent. As well the Taiwanese group was more likely to mention only disadvantages to "large" families. Considering the social structural differences between the ambiances of these three groups of respondents the results are in the expected direction. Over the last 20 years, Taiwan has experienced rapid economic development and a lowering of birth rate. Urban women in Latin America share, to a lesser extent, these two aspects of change. However, the economic structure in rural Latin America is still tied to traditional agriculture for which large families are believed to be functional and therefore desirable even if they also imply disadvantages. Thus at the level of predicting social or cultural differences VOC measures and valence patterns may be especially useful as reflections of beliefs about the utility of family size.

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Insert Table 3 about here  
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Number and sex preference scales.

Table 4 shows the Bogota study results in relation to findings from other research using the size and sex preference scales developed by Coombs et al. These measures also make possible cross-sample comparisons. Most of the results appear to be in line with expectations -- University of Michigan students have the lowest bias to large families, teenage Bogota girls are somewhat more favorable, Taiwanese are definitely on the large family side of the scale and Bogota mothers appear to be highly biased toward large families. It is not clear why University of Leuven

students are so highly biased to large families but it should be noted that the Coombs' measurement technique was not used in that study -- although a roughly comparable methodology was employed (see Coombs et al., 1975, for discussion).

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Insert Table 4 about here  
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We would like to point out that the apparently large difference between Bogota mothers and their daughters on the preference scales may be a reflection of the general high fertility among mothers in the sample. This argument is in line with our contention that measures such as the family size preference scales presented here are more influenced by immediate environmental context than are measures of general beliefs such as valence patterns.

Differences on the sex bias measure should also be noted. Contrary to our expectations neither Bogota mothers nor their daughters reveal a strong boy preference. In fact, mothers are slightly biased toward girls and daughters as a group do not indicate any sex bias. When asked why they preferred one sex over the other, mothers who chose girls were likely to mention the closeness of the mother-daughter tie and, among middle and low income strata, the hope to live with their daughter when they are old. In contrast, moving in with a son was seen, in the words of one mother, as a "fate worse than death" since it would imply competition with the daughter-in-law regarding who should be dominant in running the home.

#### Relationships among family size attitude measures.

We hypothesized that because valence patterns are closely tied to cultural or social-structural factors and "ideal" size preferences are more proximate to decisions affecting fertility behavior, there may not be an exact correspondence between valence pattern

and family size "ideal" using the Bogota study data supports this hypothesis. Among those mothers with CLEARLY FAVORS SMALL valence patterns, 8% indicated their ideal family size as four or more children. At the other extreme, among those mothers with CLEARLY FAVORS LARGE valence patterns, 20% indicated very low family size "ideals" of only one, two or three children. Similar results were obtained for daughters in the sample.

Table 5 shows that the relationship between size preference ordering and valence pattern is also an imperfect one. This is especially true for respondents with AMBIVALENT valence patterns who are distributed across the preference ordering scale from point 2 to 7. The scale point 5 (a slight large family bias) is the most common choice of mothers with AMBIVALENT valence patterns. Similar results were obtained for Bogota daughters.

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Insert Table 5 about here  
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If should be noted that for the mothers the size preference ordering and "ideal" questions specify under conditions "in your present situation." This feature of the preference measures further distinguishes them from the valence pattern measure in which personal conditions need not be made explicit.

In the first section of this paper we argued that family size attitude measures may be ordered hierarchically in their proximity to decisions which influence fertility behavior. According to the model, the variable in the Bogota study which is closest to fertility decision making is "ideal" family size. (Since high percentages of mothers had never used birth control, actual fertility cannot be considered in the place of "ideals" although in a perfectly contracepting population it would be the variable at

the bottom of the hierarchy). We hypothesized that preference orderings would have a stronger correlation with "ideals" than valence patterns due to the distinct theoretical "distance" between the variables. Table 6 shows the full correlation matrix of all the family size attitude measures. A comparison of the correlation of valence pattern with family size "ideal" and the size preference scale with family size "ideal" reveals support for our hypothesis. (Spearman rank order correlations of .33 versus .73 respectively, for mothers; .26 versus .80 for daughters).

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Insert Table 6 about here  
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These results are clearly preliminary and incomplete. There are a number of other important topics to be analyzed with the data, particularly the relationship between social background factors and the various measures of family size attitudes.

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Table 1

Selected Characteristics: Bogota Two-generational Study  
of Mothers and Their Teenage Daughters

	Upper Strata (50)	Middle Strata (46)	Low Strata (23)	TOTAL (119)
Mean age of mothers	40.1	44.6	40.6	42.0
Mean years schooling of mothers	11.0	7.9	2.0	8.1
Percent of mothers with secretarial or professional work skills*	58.7	13.0	0	28.7
Occupation of husbands:**				
Percent blue collar workers	0	28.2	78.2	26.0
Percent small merchants, taxi owners	0	37.0	13.0	16.8
Percent white collar employees	0	32.6	8.7	14.3
Percent professionals or large business owners	100	2.2	0	42.9
Percent of mothers who lived in rural area while growing up	10.9	45.7	82.6	39.1
Mean number of living children of mothers	4.0	7.3	6.6	5.7
Percent of mothers who never used birth control	20.0	54.3	47.8	38.7
Mean age of daughters***	15.7	15.9	15.0	15.6

\* Approximately 30% of each strata of mothers were working for pay at least part-time weekly in or outside of their homes.

\*\* All mothers were currently mated.

\*\*\* All daughters were single, full-time students living at home.

## Summary of Responses to Family Size Attitude Measures: Bogota Study

	Mothers				Daughters			
	High (50)*	Middle (46)	Low (23)	Total (119)	High (50)	Middle (46)	Low (23)	Total (119)
Mean highest number of children in "small" family <sup>1</sup>	1.6	1.4	1.1	1.4	1.5	1.1	1.2	1.3
Mean lowest number of children in "large" family <sup>1</sup>	4.6	4.7	4.0	4.5	4.4	4.6	3.6	4.4
Valence pattern (Simmons) <sup>2</sup> :								
Percent clearly small	6.0	10.9	21.7	10.9	6.0	8.7	21.7	10.1
Percent favor small	20.0	6.5	8.7	12.6	16.0	23.9	26.1	21.0
Percent ambivalent	32.0	37.0	47.8	37.0	38.0	34.8	34.8	36.1
Percent favor large	34.0	34.8	17.4	31.1	40.0	15.2	8.7	24.4
Percent clearly large	8.0	10.9	4.3	8.4	8.7	17.4	0	8.4
Mean highest number of children with which R would be satisfied <sup>3</sup>	5.0	6.6	6.3	5.8	4.9	4.9	4.3	4.8
Mean on size preference scale (Coombs <i>et al.</i> ) <sup>4</sup>	5.0	5.2	4.6	5.0	4.4	4.4	4.0	4.4
Mean on sex preference scale (Coombs <i>et al.</i> ) <sup>5</sup>	3.3	3.7	4.5	3.7	4.1	3.9	4.1	4.0
Mean "ideal" family size <sup>6</sup>	3.5	3.5	3.0	3.4	3.1	2.9	2.5	2.9

\* These are the total numbers of respondents in each group. Non-response for each measure was as follows: highest number satisfied, 11 mothers and 4 daughters; size preference scale, 4 mothers and one daughter; sex preference scale, 7 mothers and 2 daughters; "ideal" family size, 2 mothers. (for notes, see following page)



Notes to Table 2

- 1 Question: "Often they talk about large and small families ... For you a family with one child is 'small', 'large' or 'regular' in size?" Respondents were asked this question for each sized family (2, 3, 4, 5 children, etc.) until they indicated "large sized." The highest number of children in a "small" family (before it became "regular sized") and the lowest number of children in a "large" family were coded for each respondent.
- 2 Valence patterns were formed by combining responses ("yes" or "no") to four questions regarding advantages and disadvantages of large and small families (see Simmons, 1974). The questions had the following form: "Do you see advantages (disadvantages) to a large family, of \_\_\_ children or more?" The respondent's own definition of the lowest number of children in a "large" family was used as the referent. The same format was used for the "small" family question in which the respondent's own definition of the upper limit of a "small" family was used as the referent.
- 3 Question: "How would you feel if you would have had (were to have) no children at all? Very satisfied, a little satisfied or not at all satisfied?" Respondents were asked this question for each sized family (1, 2, 3, etc. children) until they indicated "satisfied" with some number and then "not at all satisfied" with some higher number. The highest number at which the respondent indicated at least "a little satisfied" was coded.
- 4 The short form of the size preference scale was used (see Coombs et al., 1975). Question for mother: "If you would have had pairs of boys and girls, how many pairs in total would you have liked to have had in your present situation? One pair, two, three pairs or no children at all?" Question for daughter: "If you were to have pairs of boys and girls, how many pairs in total would you like to have?" If the respondent did not choose either zero children or six children, she was asked to make a second choice between the next two logical alternatives, etc. until a complete preferential ordering of the four distinct sizes was obtained. The scale numbers which correspond to the orderings are given below:

<u>Family Size Preference Order</u>	<u>Scale Value</u>	
0-2-4-6	1	0 = no children,
2-0-4-6	2	2 = 2 children, etc.
2-4-0-6	3	
2-4-6-0	4	
4-2-0-6	4	
4-2-6-0	5	
4-6-2-0	6	
6-4-2-0	7	

The wording of the size preference questions was changed from the Coombs et al. study in which the respondent was asked regarding sizes with "equal numbers of boys and girls". Colombian researchers advised that in the Bogota context using the phrase "pairs of boys and girls" made the question clearer without changing the meaning.

Notes to Table 2 Continued ...

5 Question: "If you would have had (were to have) exactly three children, how many boys and how many girls would you have liked to have (like to have)? Would you prefer 3 girls, 1 boy and 2 girls, 2 boys and one girl or 3 boys?" A preference ordering was obtained using the same method as described for the size preference question above. Corresponding scale numbers for each order are given below:

<u>Sex Preference Order</u>	<u>Scale Value</u>	
03-12-21-30	1	03= no boys, three girls
12-03-21-30	2	
12-21-03-30	3	
12-21-30-03	4	
21-12-03-30	4	
21-12-30-03	5	
21-30-12-03	6	
30-21-12-03	7	

6 Question for mothers: "At times for different reasons, the number of children that women have is not the number that they really desire. What, more or less is the total number of children that you would like to have in your present situation?"

Question for daughters: "What would be, more or less, the number in total of children that you would like to have?"

## Summary of Responses to Advantage/disadvantage Questions in Three Studies

	Taiwan Study <sup>1</sup> (Mueller, 1972) Currently mated men under 40 years of age N 2200	Bogota Study <sup>2</sup> (Turner, 1975) Mothers N 119	Their Teenage Daughters. N 119	Pecfal Rural Study <sup>3</sup> (Simmons, 1974) Currently mated women 15-49 years of age N 6814
<u>Regarding "large" family:</u>				
Percent mention only advantages	14	14	17	16
Percent mention both advantages and disadvantages	46	54	53	67
Percent mention only disadvantages	36	29	29	17

<sup>1</sup> Questions: "Most people feel that a couple with 5 or more children has a large family. In your view what are the main advantages to having such a large family? Are there any important disadvantages to having 5 or more children?" "Most people feel that a couple with only two children or fewer has a small family. What are the main advantages .... etc.?"

<sup>2</sup> Questions: "Do you see advantages (disadvantages) in having a large family of \_\_\_\_\_ children or more?" Number filled in by interviewer was that previously specified by the respondent as the lowest number of children in a "large" family. "Do you see advantages (disadvantages) in having a small family of \_\_\_\_\_ children or fewer?" Number filled in was that previously specified by respondent as highest number of children in a "small" family (before it becomes a "regular sized" family).

<sup>3</sup> Questions: "Why (for what purpose) is it good (bad) to have a large family?" Why is it good (bad) to have a small family?" "Large" and "small" are self-defined.

## Distribution of Number and Sex Bias\*

	Number Bias			Sex Bias		
	IN-1 to IN-3	IN-4	IN-5 to IN-7	IN-1 to IN-3	IN-4	IN-5 to IN-7
University of Michigan study (1973)	38.2	37.1	24.7	21.7	20.0	58.3
University of Leuven study (1962)	0.0	12.8	87.2	8.3	9.7	82.0
Taiwan pretest (1973)	0.0	36.0	64.0	1.0	8.2	90.8
Bogota study (1975)						
- Mothers	8.7	18.3	73.1	45.5	24.1	30.4
- Their teenage daughters	17.8	39.0	43.2	36.7	30.8	32.5

\* See notes to Table 2 for a description of the assignment IN-Scale numbers.

Relationship Between Size Preference Measure (Coombs et al.) and Valence Pattern (Simmons)\*: Bogota Study

MOTHERS

	Size Preference							Total	%
	SMALL ←						→ LARGE		
Ordering:	1 0-2-4-6	2 2-0-4-6	3 2-4-0-6	4 2-4-6-0 4-2-0-6	5 4-2-6-0	6 4-6-2-0	7 6-4-2-0		
CLEARLY SMALL			2	4	6			12	10.4
FAVORS SMALL			3	1	7	2		13	11.3
AMBIVALENT		2	1	6	21	10	4	44	38.3
FAVORS LARGE			2	9	14	5	6	36	31.3
CLEARLY LARGE				1	2	3	4	10	8.7
<b>TOTAL</b>	0	2	8	21	50	20	14	115	100%

Spearman rank order correlation = .27,  $p < .01$

\* See notes to Table 2 for a description of these measures.

Table 6

Spearman Rank Order Correlations<sup>1</sup> Between All Fertility Attitude Measures<sup>2</sup>. Bogota StudyMOTHERS  
(N = 119)

	Lowest Number Large Family	Valence Patterns	Highest Number Satisfied With	Size Preference Scale	Sex Preference Scale	Ideal Family Size	Number Living Children
Highest number "small" family	.44**	-.07	.10	.13	-.04	.25**	-.02
Lowest number "large" family		.04	.11	.20*	-.02	.36**	.03
Valence pattern			.26**	.27*	.02	.33**	.22**
Highest number satisfied with				.29**	.05	.31**	.52**
Size preference scale					-.05	.73**	.17*
Sex preference scale						-.15	.15
"Ideal" family size							.12

DAUGHTERS  
(N = 119)

	Lowest Number Large Family	Valence Patterns	Highest Number Satisfied With	Size Preference Scale	Sex Preference Scale	Ideal Family Size	Mother's Number Living Children
Highest number "small" family	.48**	-.18*	.16*	.31*	-.11	.33**	-.16*
Lowest number "large" family		.04	.28**	.35**	-.13	.32**	-.10
Valence pattern			.21*	.32**	.18*	.26**	-.05
Highest number satisfied with				.63**	.01	.61**	-.03
Size preference scale					.12	.80**	-.10
Sex preference scale						.19*	-.04
"Ideal" family size							-.11

<sup>1</sup> An analysis was also done to produce Pearsonian correlations. There was no more than 4 correlation points difference between the two analysis results for any variable.

<sup>2</sup> See notes to Table 2 for a full description of measures.

\* significant at  $p < .05$   
\*\* significant at  $p < .01$