

When Desiring “2” Children Means Something Else:

Fertility Preferences of Dutch Men and Women,
Some Experimental Results

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“... there is a need for ... **increased precision**
and **sensitivity to variation** ... ”

Lolagene Coombs (1974)

“Ideals” vs. “Intentions”

Ideals

- Like Miller’s “desire”
trait (economist’s taste”)
- Framed in **abstract**
- May or may **not predict**
behavior

“Ideals” vs. “Intentions”

Ideals

- Like Miller’s “desire” **trait**, or economist’s “taste”
- Framed in **abstract**
- May or may **not predict** behavior

Intentions

- The subject of most of this conference
- Framed in respondents real life
- Changeable
- We expect it to predict behavior

Public Policy Motivation for studying ideals

EC Green Paper (2005)

“Surveys have revealed the **gap** which exists between the number of children Europeans would like (2.3) and the number that they actually have (1.5).

.. **if appropriate mechanisms** existed to allow couples to have the number of children they want, the **fertility rate could rise** overall, ...”

Research motivations for fertility ideals

- Ideals are an important determinant of fertility itself (Bongaarts framework)
- **Variation between countries**
Is German low fertility “wanted” or is it just hard to get daycare?
- **Over time**
Do ideals fall over time, as low fertility becomes self-reinforcing?
- (Not interested in prediction)

Long history of measuring “ideals”

“What do you consider is the ideal size of a family -- a husband, a wife, and how many children?”

(1936+ Am. Inst. of Pub. Opin.)

Long history of measuring “ideals”

“What do you consider is the ideal size of a family -- a husband, a wife, and how many children?”

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“How many children do you think make the **nicest** size family?”

(1948 Roper)

Challenges

- Conceptual: **No** explicit mention of **tradeoffs**
 - **Nonsense** for economist thinking of “preferences”
 - **Deep truth** for those studying images of the family, aims in life, heterogeneity within population (e.g., Hakim)
 - Ideal automobile? Ideal room number in house?

Challenges

- Practical: **Little variation**
 - Default response of “two” is very, very common (~ 60%). A **mix** of
 - Uncertainty
 - Social desirability effects
 - Really want 2
 - Doesn't change much across countries, over time, nor within population

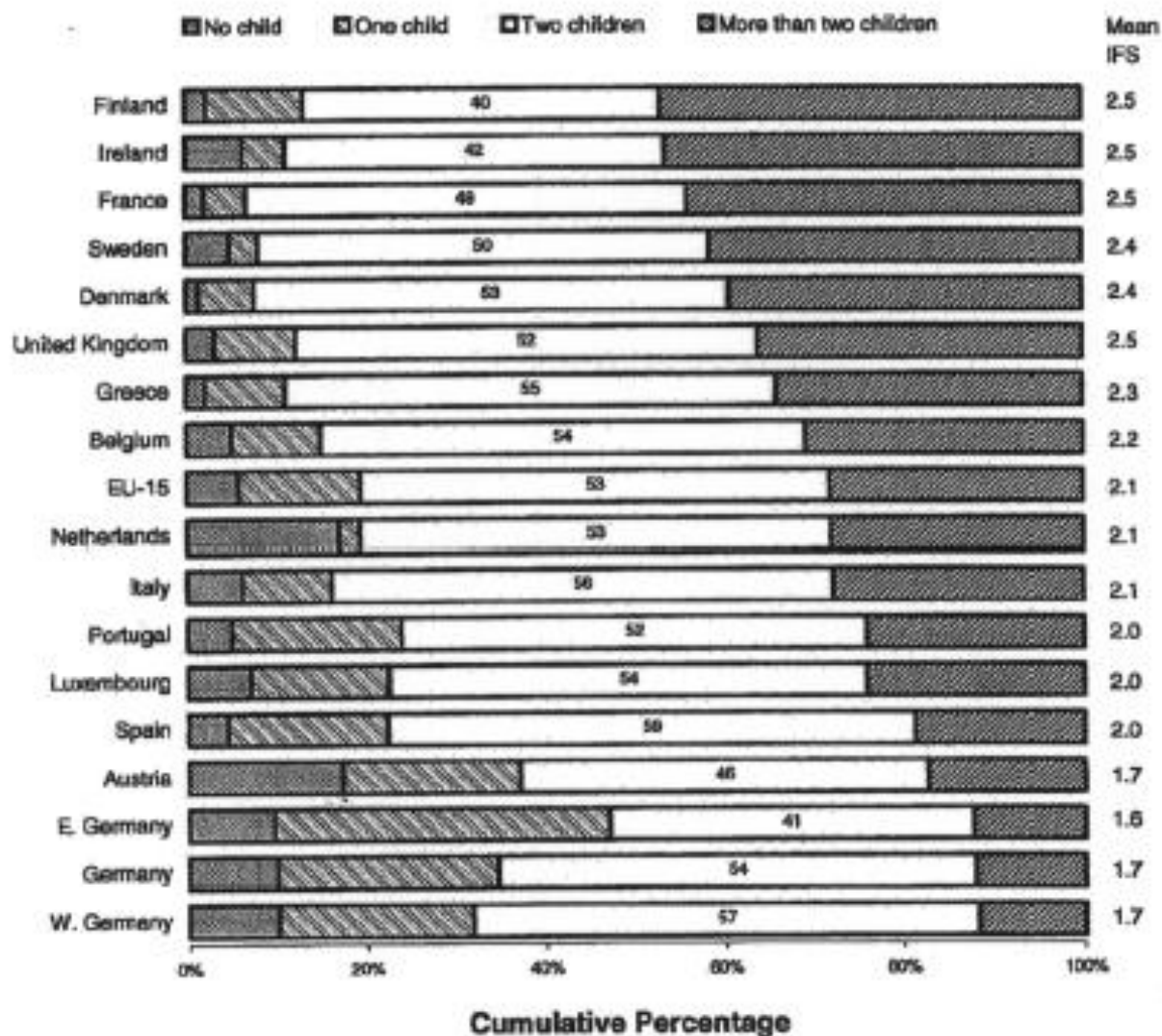


Figure 2. Distribution of personal ideal family size, women aged 20-34 years.

Coombs' approach

- **Multi-stage** question:
“What is your ideal?”
“If you couldn't have (X), would you prefer (X+1) or (X-1)?”
and continues
- As early as Goldberg and Coombs (1963) in Detroit Area Study

Our experiment

- We implement Coombs question in modern Holland
- Tilburg Univ's LISS representative panel, with internet administration
- We received one module but would love help if others have suggested experiments
- Just got the data back from 1st round last summer
- About 1,600 respondents

Question wording

“We now turn to the topic of family and having children. We want to learn more about your preferences for *different* numbers of children.

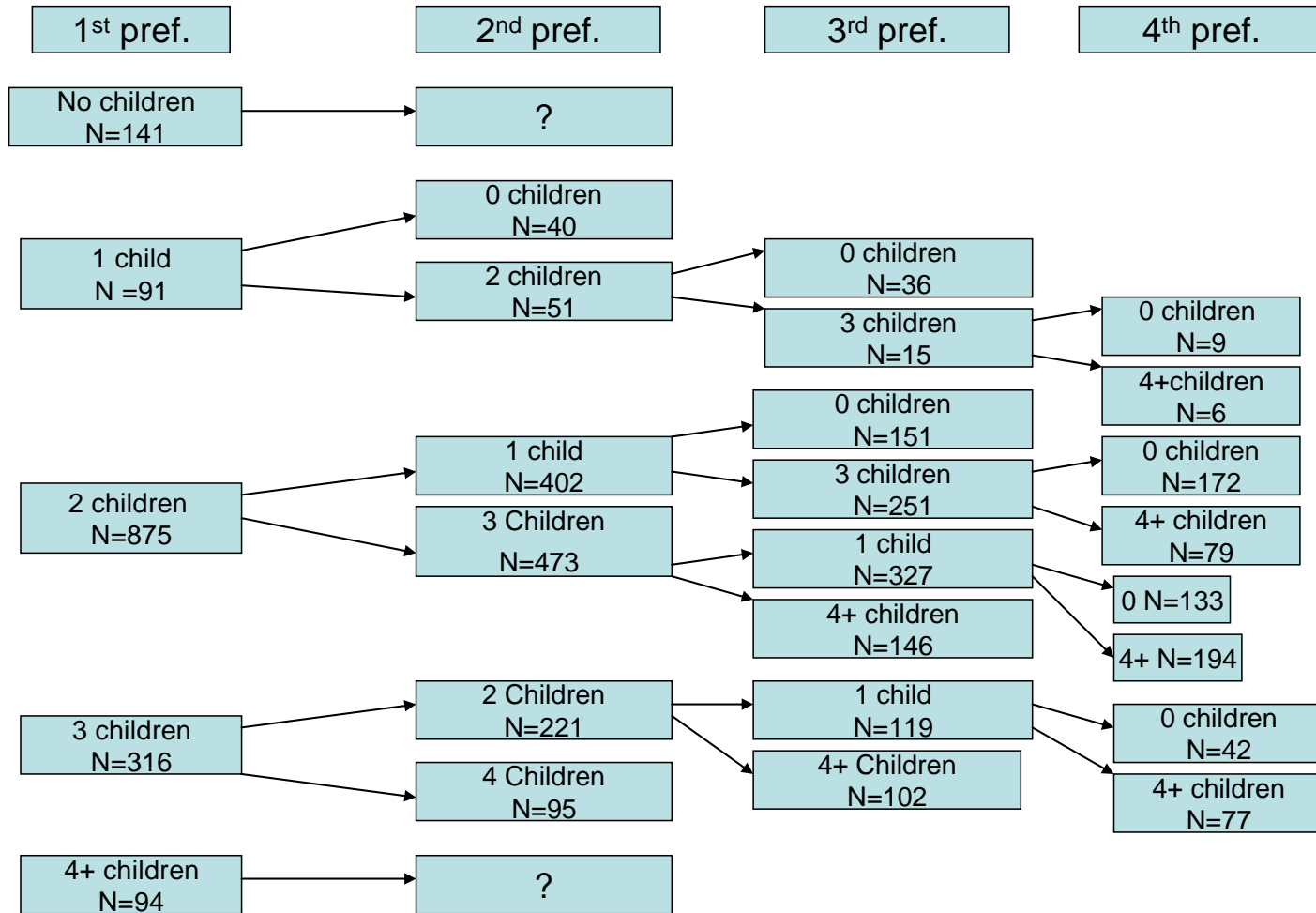
Can you tell us how many children you would *ideally* desire? If you already have children, we would still like to know how many children you would *ideally* like to have. The children can be born to you or adopted.

What is your ideal number of children?”

no children.....	0
1 child.....	1
2 children.....	2
3 children.....	3
4 or more children	4

Follow up

Preference distribution



What could go wrong with this question

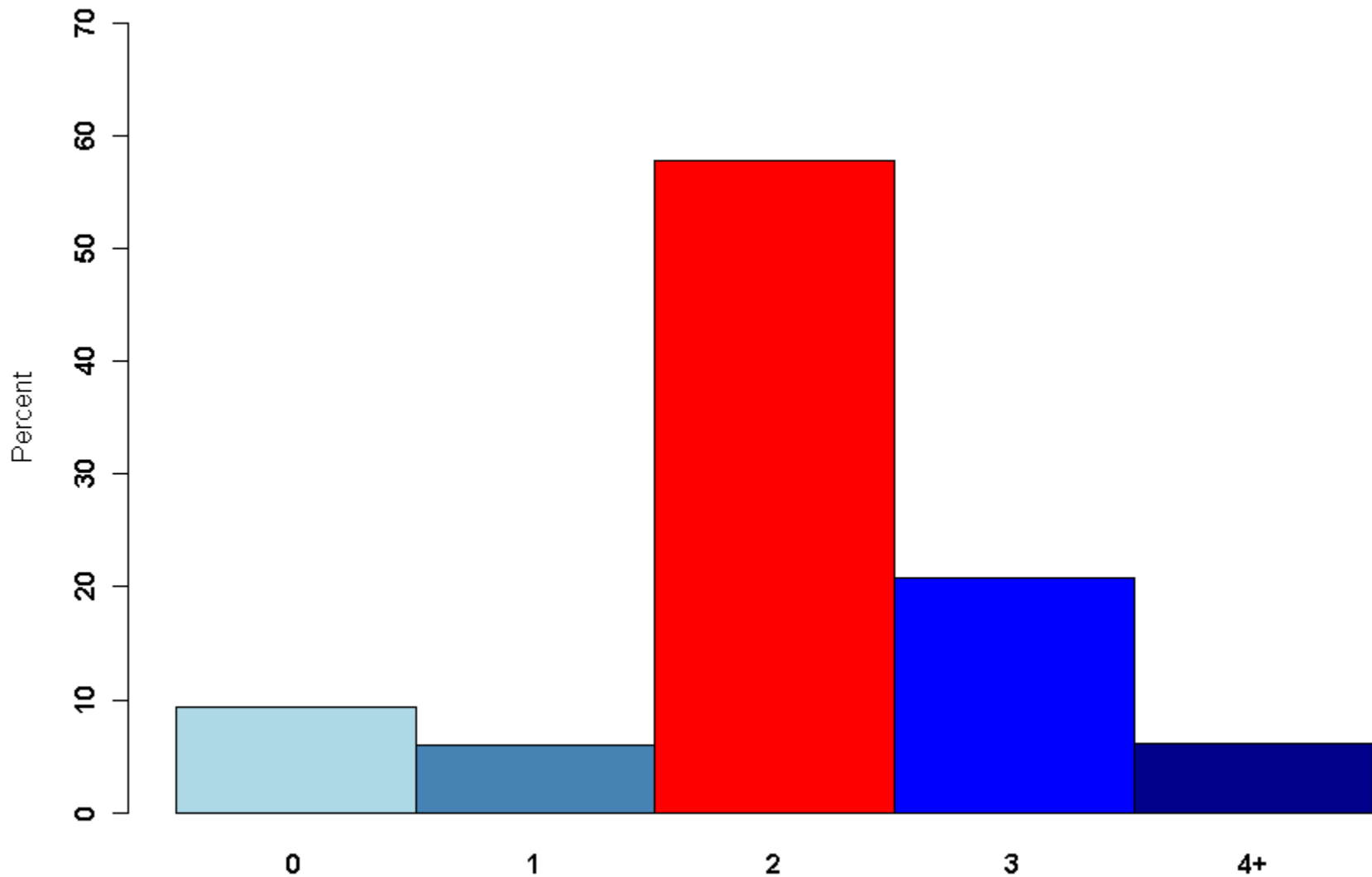
- Non-response
- Random, uninformative response
- People interpret the question in a directional way (“unable” to have more children)
- Those who already have children can’t answer.
(A floor, or question makes no sense)

What could go right?

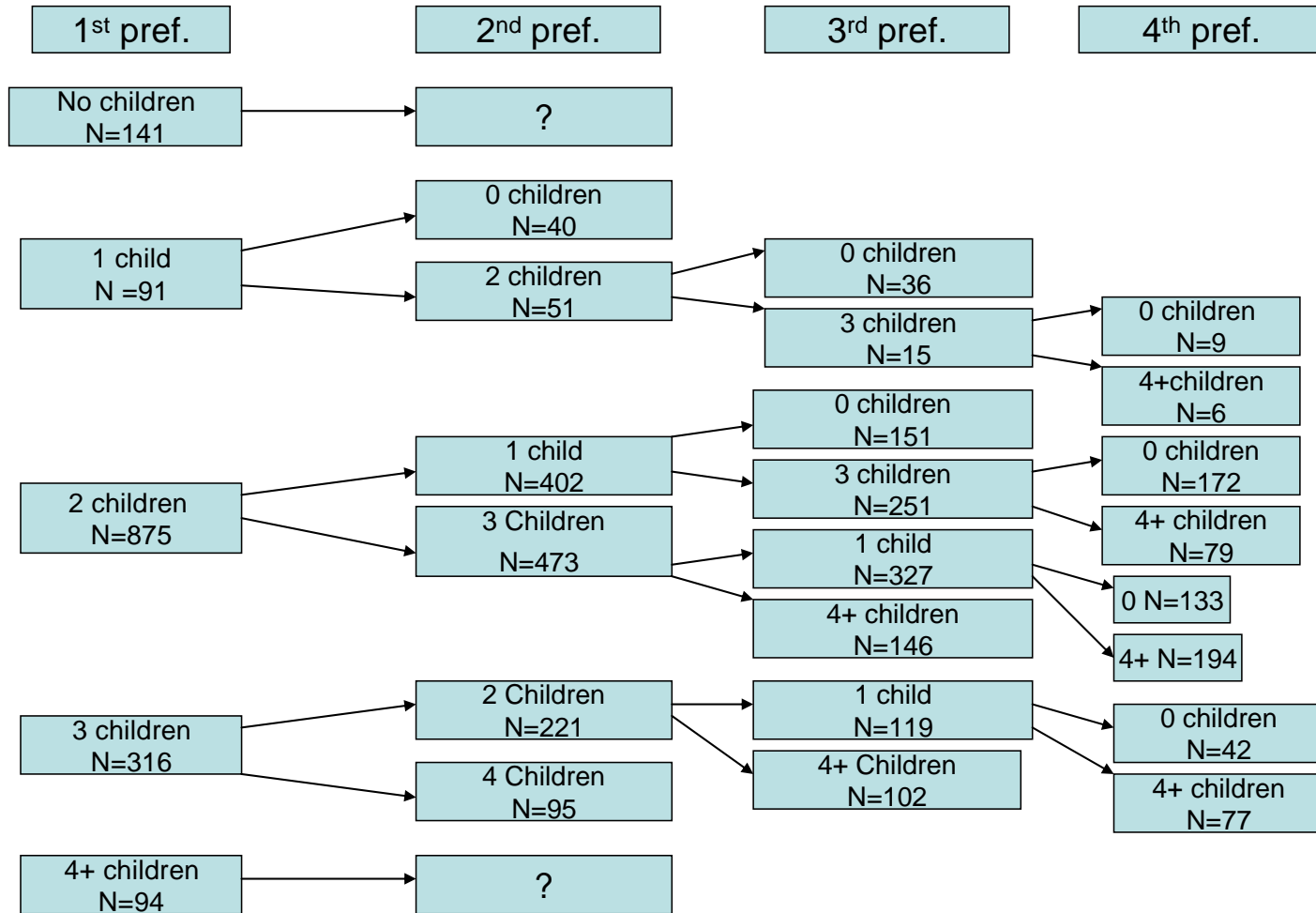
- We can amplify “signal” in 1st answer? (replicate standard results).
- We can see if there are clusters (preference groups) or a continuum?

1st choices

Ideal Number of Children, LISS 2010, Netherlands



Preference distribution



(1) A two-way street (2) internal consistency (3) lots of information

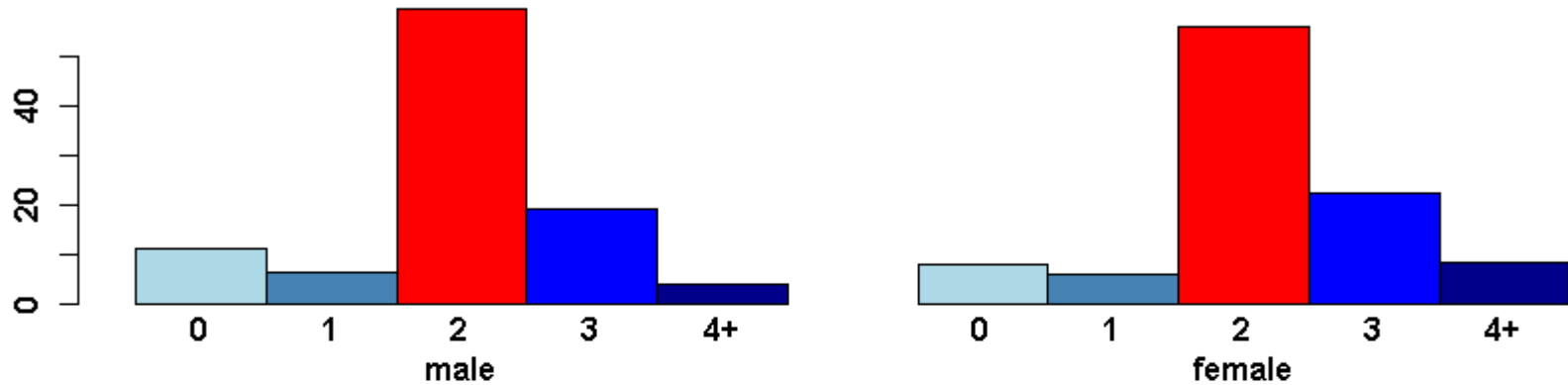
Important features

- Rough symmetry of climbers and descenders throughout 2nd choices
 - 1 doesn't mean “not zero”
 - 2 doesn't mean “at least two”
 - 3 doesn't mean “at least 3”
- Later choices are consistent with overall distribution → kind of internal consistency

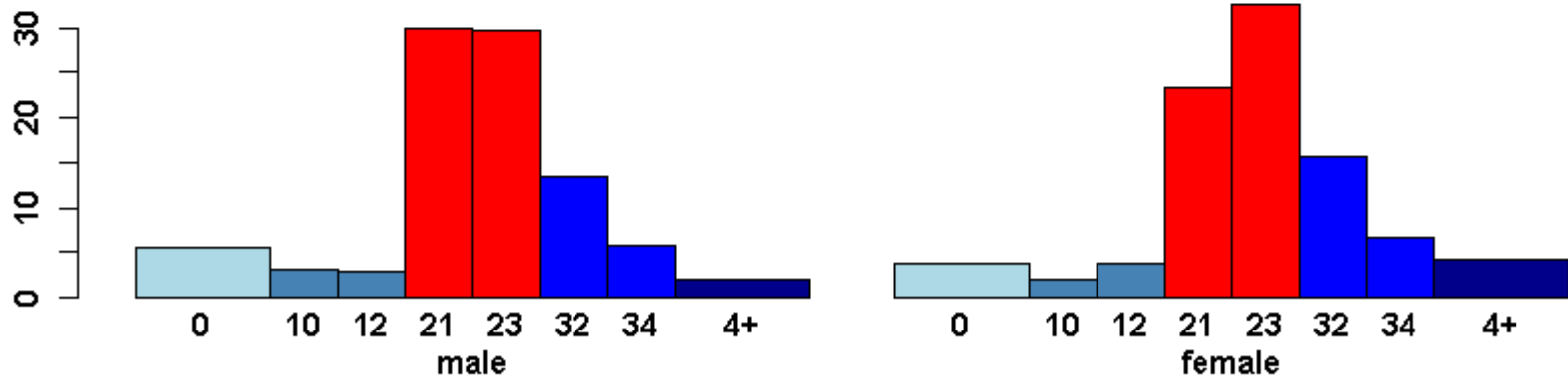
Amplifying differences (1)

Women have higher ideals

1st Preferences



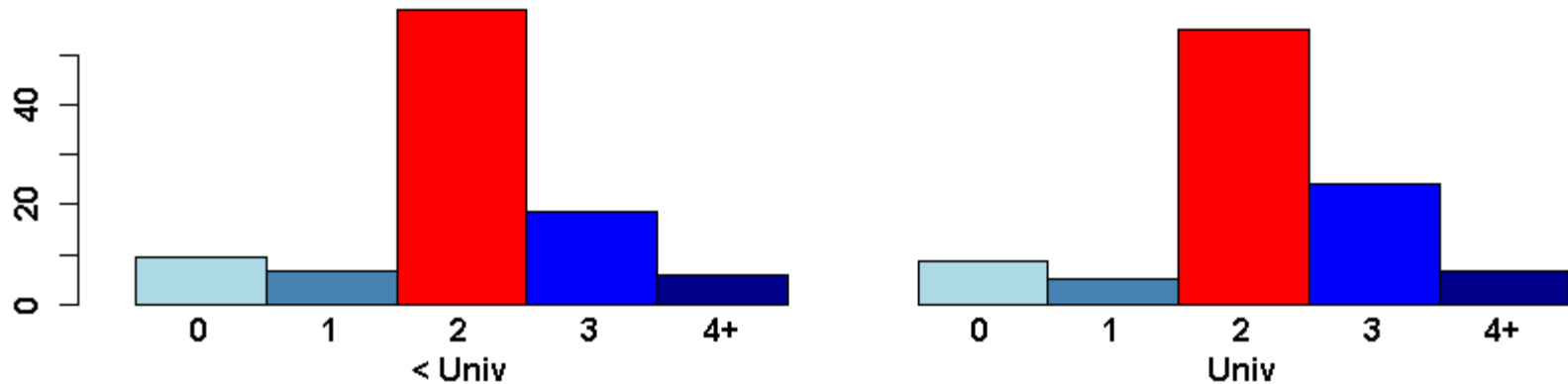
1st & 2nd Preferences



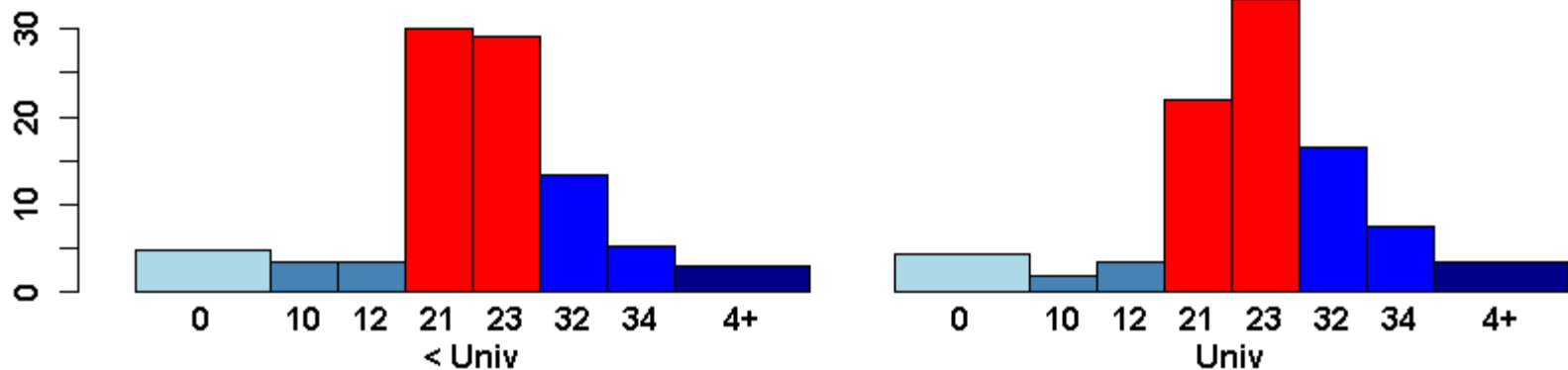
Amplifying Differences (2)

Highly educated have higher ideals

1st Preferences



1st & 2nd Preferences



Beyond 2

Odds of being a climber (2,3) vs. descender (2,1)

Multivariate, logistic regression

	All
Constant	1.2**
Female	1
Male	0.7**
Age	
15-24	1
25-34	0.6**
35-44	0.7*
45+	0.8
Education	
Low	1
Medium	1.4
High	2.1***

Beyond 2

Odds of being a climber (2,3) vs. descender (2,1)

Multivariate, logistic regression

	All	Childless
Constant	1.2**	0.8
Female	1	1
Male	0.7**	0.8
Age		
15-24	1	1
25-34	0.6**	0.8
35-44	0.7*	0.6
45+	0.8	1.0
Education		
Low	1	1
Medium	1.4	1.0
High	2.1***	2.1*

Beyond 2

Odds of being a climber (2,3) vs. descender (2,1)

Multivariate, logistic regression

	All	Childless	Parents	
Constant	1.2**	0.8	1.2*	• Different tendency • But same pattern of variation
Female	1	1	1	
Male	0.7**	0.8	0.7*	
Age				
15-24	1	1	1	
25-34	0.6**	0.8	0.7	
35-44	0.7*	0.6	0.9	
45+	0.8	1.0	0.7	
Education				
Low	1	1	1	
Medium	1.4	1.0	1.6	
High	2.1***	2.1*	2.3*	

Conclusions: good news

1. “Ideals” are **internally consistent**

(If you have standard ideals question, use it with more confidence)

2. Can do **even better**

(Adding 2nd choice provides a cheap amplifier of differences)

Directions for future research

- Quantifying “distance” between answers
- Follow up on reasons and probability of 2nd choice
- Try in other countries
- Alternative approaches:
 - Distribute 10 points among choices
 - \$\$ for children
 - Role play and scenarios