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# Chapter 1

## The Reasons People Give for Having Children

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### Many Reasons

Asking someone their reasons for having children is a simple enough question. You may get straightforward answers, such as "I just knew I would enjoy being a parent", "It seems like the natural thing to do", or "Ever since I was very young, I have always wanted to have kids of my own." Although these answers, and many others I will discuss, certainly have a ring of truth about them, not everyone or even most people would endorse them. This is because any list of reasons for having children typically expresses the great variety of personal perspectives that can affect this domain. To fully appreciate this point, it is instructive to examine some of the lists of reasons for childbearing that have been generated.

An interesting place to start looking for such lists is on the internet, where so many different agendas are represented and it is possible to find many different perspectives on just about everything. For example, one British website that strongly supports healthy parenting lists fifty reasons why it is fun to be a parent. Here are a few examples from that list: 1. Gazing into your baby's eyes and knowing he trusts you totally; 2. Breathing in the best smell in the world --sleepy baby; 3. Watching your partner show "his" son or daughter off; 4. Exchanging a smile with other pram-pushing mothers; and 5. Discovering that she's inherited your love of music or her dad's interest in racing cars. The same website also lists fifty reasons to be glad you are having *another*

baby. A few of examples of these reasons include: 1. Knowing that your labor is probably going to be shorter and hopefully easier this time around; 2. Watching your toddler "helping" with her new brother or sister; and 3. Seeing your children grow up together, inventing their own secret games and words.

Another website[2] that has a decided religious emphasis includes the following among their reasons for having children: 1. It's so exciting to see who God will send to bless us each time; 2. I love being "with child"; 3. The birth of a baby is the ultimate fulfillment of love between a husband and wife; 4. My children help me surrender the selfish desires of my flesh; and 5. Parenthood is investing in eternity.

The reasons I have cited to this point all express a positive perspective. What is obviously missing are the negative reasons. Another website[3] lists twenty reasons not to have children, including: 1. Diapers; 2. Three A.M. wake-ups; 3. Hard on marriages; 4. Free time; and 5. Money. Yet another website[4] that takes the perspective of living a childfree life is directed at the fence sitters who are deciding whether or not to have children. It lists some "wrong" reasons for becoming a mother, such as: 1. To save the marriage ("This will create a bond between me and my spouse"); 2. To vicariously relive childhood ("I'm going to give my child everything I never had"); and 3. As an insurance policy ("I'll have someone to take care of me when I am old"). It also lists some "wrong" reasons for becoming a father, including: 1. To prove fertility/virility ("I'm a tough man who can impregnate women") and 2. To continue the family name ("My family name and genetic line will go on").

Some web-based lists of reasons for having children take a didactic perspective with the goal of helping individuals and couples to make optimal childbearing decisions.

Frequently these reasons are grouped according to some common theme. For example, on the "potpourri" section of a website devoted to being childfree by choice[5], there is a quiz designed by Resolve, a national infertility association. The quiz, written from the perspective of those who have not had success getting pregnant, consists of 70 responses to the question "Why is it so important for you to have a baby?" and visitors to the website are encouraged to complete the quiz by rating the importance of each reason to them. The 70 reasons are grouped by themes, including: Couple's needs (e.g., I want a baby because it is important to my spouse); Ego needs (e.g., I want to create a new life in my image); Life-style needs (e.g., Both of us have full-time jobs we enjoy); Needs of others (e.g., Our parents want us to have children); and Nurturing needs (e.g., I want children so I can give them love and affection). Following the quiz, each theme is discussed in order to help visitors gain some useful insight into their own childbearing motivations, with the goal of reevaluating the importance to them of having children.

A similar website[6] but one that is not so oriented to the childfree perspective provides a list of reasons for having children that are taken from Chapter 9 of James Park's (2007) book, New Ways of Loving. This list is also didactically oriented and organized according to very broad themes, including Couples' reasons for having children (e.g., Giving meaning to our lives); Women's reasons for having children (e.g., Maternal 'instinct'); Men's reasons for having children (e.g., The 'Family Man' identity); and Reasons for not having children (e.g., Genetic defects that should not be passed on). This website also has a good bibliography of help-oriented books published during the last forty years that discuss why people want to have children and the decision-making that is involved.

I have sampled only a few of the many reasons for having children that are compiled into lists on websites and only some of the many perspectives that determine how those lists are framed. Had I expanded my search to cover the websites of different nationalities or the reasons commonly endorsed in different cultures, a whole range of additional perspectives and their related reasons would certainly have appeared. At this point, then, a question that naturally arises is how to organize our thinking about all of these reasons and how to determine which ones are relatively important for actual childbearing and which ones are not. A clue to the answer lies in the themes that some websites use to organize their lists, themes that are built around the commonalities shared by groups of reasons. In order to develop the idea of themes further, I will examine a more systematic and meaningful way of using them than is typical of these websites.

## Catalogs and Taxonomies

Certain approaches to thinking about the reasons for having children may be characterized as catalogs and taxonomies. A catalog may be described as a list that fully enumerates the contents of some domain, in the process arranging them systematically according to some descriptive features. Of course, when it comes to the reasons for having children a full enumeration is not really possible because of the many subtle differences in the ways that such reasons can be verbalized. However, an enumeration of most of the important reasons is possible.

Perhaps the best example of this type of enumeration is in a book by Edward Pohlman (1969, Chapter 4, p. 48) where he presented "a catalog of possible motives for wanting children". Here, the word 'motive' may be considered equivalent to the word 'reason'. He labeled his organizing themes, which are primarily descriptive, with such

terms as Innate Factors, the Psychoanalytic Hypothesis, Conformity to Social Norms, Liking for Children, Financial Gain, A Role for Women, Factors Involving Husband-Wife Relations, Factors Involving Other Children, Factors Involving the Sex of the Child, Influence of the Couple's Parents, and Religious Factors. He also enumerated the costs of having children, by which he meant the motives for not wanting them. His organizing themes of costs included the Negative Effects on Husband-Wife relations, the Psychological Costs, the Costs of Parental Roles, and Financial Costs. Subcategories of the psychological costs included: 1. Anxiety, conflict, separation, and grief; 2. Mess, noise, confusion, and congestion; 3. Time, confinement, and hard work; and 4. Health and appearance. It can be seen that Pohlman's scheme for cutting up the motive pie is one that covers many of the reasons I have already cited from online sources. However, his categories are not ones that everyone would agree upon, in full or even in part.

A taxonomy may be defined as a systematic classification of all the reasons for having children on the basis of some pre-established comprehensive principles. Although taxonomies tend to have the same problem as catalogs with respect to whether they command universal agreement, they are distinct from catalogs in that their organizing principles are not descriptive but rather reflective of a conceptually meaningful way of understanding the domain under consideration, in this case factors that motivate childbearing. Thus they are more like the theoretical frameworks used in empirical research, which will be discussed in the next section.

The most extensively used and widely accepted taxonomy of the reasons for having children is the Value of Children to Parents framework, first developed and written about by Lois and Martin Hoffman (1973). Their framework was based on the

idea that the value of children to parents is a function of the needs they fulfill for their parents. After excluding the biological value of children to parents because it did not fit their framework criteria of a value that was influenced by social structure and subject to cultural variation, they generated nine categories or basic values, including: 1. Adult status and social identity; 2. Expansion of the self, tie to a larger entity, "immortality"; 3. Morality, including religion, altruism, good of the group, and social norms; 4. Primary group ties, affiliation; 5. Stimulation, novelty, fun; 6. Creativity, accomplishment, competence; 7. Power, influence, effectance; 8. Social comparison, competition; and 9. Economic utility. Each of these nine categories may be viewed as encompassing a group of psychologically related reasons for having children.

Hoffman and Hoffman (1973) viewed Pohlman's (1969) compilation of motives for parenthood as an excellent first step for what at the time was a newly developing branch of knowledge, one that was concerned with some very practical issues such as unwanted pregnancy and overpopulation. In turn, they saw their framework as an open ended second step, subject to modification on the basis of future work. And this is, indeed, what happened. Their taxonomy provided a critically important substantive foundation for a number of empirical studies that were soon to follow.

## Empirical Research Approaches

An empirically based off-shoot of the Hoffman and Hoffman framework was the cross-national study known as the Value of Children (VOC) project (Arnold, Bulatao, Buripakdi et al., 1975). More than twenty thousand men and women from six developing and two developed countries participated in this survey. These respondents were asked about their reasons for wanting children, their attitudes towards children, and whether

children could satisfy their values and needs. As reported by Fawcett (1983), these and other closely related constructs were analyzed extensively with a variety of techniques that resulted in a revision of the Hoffman and Hoffman framework into one that expressed a somewhat different set of themes or psychological dimensions. An added feature was that some of these themes addressed an obvious limitation of the original Hoffman and Hoffman taxonomy, namely that it did not specify any negative themes based on what have been called costs or disvalues. This new classification scheme included three satisfactions (or values) of children, including Instrumental assistance (e.g., help in old age; and financial, practical help), Rewarding interactions (e.g., companionship, love; and play, fun, distraction), and Psychological appreciation (e.g., living through children; and achievement, power). The VOC scheme also included four costs (or disvalues) of children, including Financial costs (e.g., the cost of education), Childrearing demands (e.g., emotional strain; and health, pregnancy), Restrictions on parents (e.g., being tied down), and Costs to social relationships (e.g., marital strain). A great deal of cross-cultural work has been conducted examining both the influence of social structure on these value and disvalue dimensions and the linkages that these values and disvalues have with various fertility outcomes.

A more recent off-shoot of the Hoffman and Hoffman framework is that of van Balen and Trimbos-Kemper (1995), who developed an instrument for measuring the motives of involuntarily childless couples. In subsequent research it has been used to study the mothers of children born of in-vitro fertilization (Colpin, De Munter, and Vandemeulebroecke, 1998) and the mothers of children born to lesbian families (Bos, van Balen, and van den Boom, 2003). This instrument was based on 18 items that stated

motives for having children which they grouped into six scales of three items each on the basis of item content. They then confirmed these scales with factor analyses. The scales (and an illustrative item) included: Happiness (children make me happy); Well-being (children make life complete); Parenthood (being a parent is satisfying); Identity (having children is a sign of being grown-up); Continuity (children continue living after you are dead); and Social control (having children is expected by others). It is noteworthy that only some of many themes enumerated by Hoffman and Hoffman are captured in these eight scales.

Other approaches to the empirical study of reasons for childbearing have included more theoretical elements. For example, Townes et al. (1976) developed a hierarchy of birth-planning values, beginning at the highest level with the three very broad categories: Values centered on self and spouse, Values centered on children, and Values centered on significant others. They then broke each of these categories down, first into second level subcategories and then into third level sub-subcategories. This process produced 20 third-level values. Respondents first rated the importance of each value and then rated the likelihood of each value being fulfilled if they had a child. A final prediction of how likely the respondents were to have a child was arrived at by multiplying each of the 20 values by their respective estimated likelihoods and then summing the resulting 20 products. This approach, based on what is termed subjective expected utility theory, was shown to have some validity in predicting fertility status one year later in a small sample (Townes et al., 1977).

A similar approach based on Fishbein's (1972) behavioral intentions theory was utilized by Davidson and Jaccard (1976). They had success predicting a woman's

intention to have a child in the next two years, using only nine items reflecting her reasons for or against having a child. These reasons were measured as her beliefs about the consequences of having a child weighted by her evaluation of those consequences. Their prediction also included a normative component, based on the woman's perceptions of significant others' beliefs about what she should do (vis-à-vis having a child) weighted by her wish to comply with those others. This study focused on predicting intentions to have a child because in Fishbein's theory it is assumed that those intentions are, in turn, the best predictors of the behavior that actually leads to having or not having a child.

Langdridge, Sheeran, and Connolly (2005) developed a measure of the reasons for parenthood by generating a list of 20 reasons for parenthood and 15 reasons against parenthood and then using a multivariate discriminant function analysis to determine the reasons that best predicted which of their 874 respondents intended to have a child some time in the future. Like Fishbein's approach, their theory assumed that intentions are the best single predictor of childbearing decisions and that reasons are the immediate antecedents of those intentions. Six reasons for wanting a child predicted intentions, including: Giving a child a good home, Having a biological drive, Making us feel like a family, Raising a child would be fulfilling, My partner would be pleased, and It would be a part of both of us. Five reasons for not wanting a child predicted intentions, including: My partner does not want a child, It would restrict my freedom to do things I enjoy, I am concerned about overpopulation, It would interfere with my career, and There are more important things in life. Langdridge et al. also found that these eleven items generally did better at predicting intentions than did the traditional demographic predictors of fertility.

Finally, at the more theoretical end of the spectrum of approaches that I have been describing, there is a study by Schoen et al. (1997) about why Americans want children. These authors propose that the reasons we have children are largely related to the creation of social capital and that they do this by helping to establish new relationships among persons –parents in particular- that are then available as resources for achieving their interests. In order to test this and two related hypotheses, they conducted exploratory factor analyses on 13 items rated by the respondents for their importance when thinking about having a child. Based on these analyses, they identified three reasons-for-childbearing variables, which they called 'The importance of children as social resources', 'The importance of the economic costs of children', and 'The importance of own career'.

I focus on the first of these variables because it relates most directly to their theory of social capital and because it proved to have the most powerful effects in their models. That variable was defined as the sum of the respondents' scores on six items: Giving my parents grandchildren, Giving my child(ren) a brother or sister, Having someone care for me when I am old, Having someone to love, Needing something to do, and Having at least one boy and one girl. They then conducted analyses in which the three reasons-for-childbearing variables were used to predict intentions to have a(nother) child, while controlling for race, gender, union, and parity. They found that the social resource variable predicted intentions in 13 of the 18 models tested. This study is especially interesting because of the researchers' success in confirming their hypothesis, although the six item social capital variable represents only a small fraction of the reasons-for-childbearing universe.

## Reasons and Motivations

What have we learned from this short excursion into the realm of reasons for having children? Perhaps the most obvious thing is that there are a great many different reasons, so many in fact that no one list, catalog, taxonomy, or theory seems complete when all the reasons we have considered are taken into account. It is also obvious that the reasons for childbearing can be articulated in many different ways. There may be differences in terms of the language used, for example, I love being with child versus I enjoy pregnancy. These kinds of language differences often convey subtle but important differences in meaning and emotion. There may be differences in perspective, for example, a religious or a more secular approach, or a focus on the feelings of the parent versus the behavior of the child. There may also be differences in the valence of reasons, that is whether they reflect positive or negative motivations.

Another important difference between reasons lies in the level of explanation. For example, Townes et al.'s (1976) hierarchy of birth-planning values actually built different levels into their taxonomic framework. Take their first level category, Values centered on self and spouse. It had three second level categories, namely Personal identity, Parenthood, and Well-being of family. Within the Parenthood category, there were three third level categories: Caring for the child; Parents' role in education and training a child; and Parent-child relationships. Then within the first third level category, there were five fourth level categories: Caring for a new baby; The experience of breast feeding a baby; Being depended on by the child; The effects of the child on household tasks, responsibilities, and workload; and Cooperation with my spouse in raising a child. Although these investigators did not proceed to a fifth level of categories, it is not too

difficult to imagine one. Thus Caring for a new baby might have categories like Diapering a baby, Giving baby a tub, Getting up at night when the baby cries, etc.

At this point in our efforts to understand the reasons for having children, we might well ask how it is possible to take into account the breadth of that domain and the variation in articulation, perspective, valence, and level of explanation that it manifests. The truth is, of course, that we can never take into account all aspects of all reasons in any over-arching formulation or theory, if only because of the unique considerations that apply for any given individual. There are, however, important conceptual tools available to us in the search for explanation. These tools are critically dependent upon reframing our search from one concerned with reasons to one concerned with motivation. What is the difference? Reasons are explanations we give ourselves for taking some action or, if no action has occurred yet, for wanting to take some action. Reasons involve some specific real world situation that is desired either expressly or by implication. On the other hand, motivations are the feelings, emotions, or drives that underlie and energize our actions. They are what make the specific real world situations of our reasons desirable or undesirable.

If we assume that every reason has at least one primary motivation that energizes us to action, then by looking at a specific group of reasons that tend to be associated with each other in peoples mind and that have some similarity in content, we can begin to identify the common motivation that underlies the group. This in turn helps us to better understand the theme that the group of reasons represents. In order to illustrate this idea, let us consider the group of reasons that Schoen et al. (1997) used to support their social capital hypothesis about fertility decision-making. Looking at their six "social capital"

reasons, we can see that five of them involve either giving or receiving as a child or as a parent. It is not a large inferential step to conclude that the common motivation underlying these reasons has to do with the emotions that people experience being part of a nuclear family. And what Schoen et al. have observed is that when these emotions are positive across a number of aspects of family participation, then they will in sum be a good predictor of fertility intentions. What are these emotions and what is their source? The only one clearly identified in the group of items is love, a broad and complex emotion but one that could, without stretching the truth, be said to underlie and drive all five of the relevant items. An important goal of this book will be to elaborate upon the specific emotions that comprise the phenomenon of love, especially parental love, and to explore the biological, psychological, and interpersonal sources of these emotions. For now, let us simply be satisfied with the point I have argued, namely that groups of reasons for having children with a common theme typically share one or more primary underlying motivations.

Once we recognize the importance of the commonality of feelings, emotions, and drives across a group of reasons, the next step is to measure these underlying motivations. And this brings us to two important additional conceptual tools. One of these involves the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Intrinsic motivation involves motivational forces directed at the rewards inherent in the thing itself. For our purposes here, that is the child or the relationship with the child. In contrast, extrinsic motivation involves motivational forces directed at the external rewards that the thing may afford you. An example here might be such matters as having the admiration of your peer group or knowing that you are fertile. Of course, in some cases the reason for having a child

can be driven by either intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. Thus the desire to have a baby girl may be motivated by wanting the type of relationship you think a female child will provide or by wanting a girl because your two best friends each have girls. As a result, it may not always be possible to draw a sharp line between motivations that are intrinsic and those that are extrinsic. Still, it is a useful distinction and, as I will discuss in later chapters, reasons that have appreciable intrinsic motivation tend to perform differently in our measures compared with those that have appreciable extrinsic motivation.

A second important distinction is that between explicit and implicit motivation. Explicit motivation involves motivational forces that are available to the conscious mind and that may be described verbally. The reasons for having children that people spontaneously offer are invariably driven by explicit motivation. This does not mean that they are necessarily the "real" motivation or the most important motivation. They simply represent the motivation(s) that the individual recognizes as driving their desires or action. Implicit motivation, on the other hand, involves the motivational forces that are not available to the conscious mind. They are important because they often have a large effect on behavior and yet can not be reported directly to an observer, including the actor him or herself, who may be trying to understand that behavior. As a result, indirect ways must be found to measure implicit motivation, either through behavioral indicators or through psychological tests that indirectly assess motivations without directly asking about them, for example in projective tests. I will talk further about these two important distinctions in motivation –intrinsic versus extrinsic and explicit versus implicit- in Chapter 2 where I lay down the foundational ideas of the unified theory developed here

and in Chapter 4 where I discuss the motivational traits that underlie reproductive behavior.

## Need for a More Comprehensive Theory

In spite of the considerable effort that has been invested in theorizing about and researching the motivational determinants of reproductive behavior, there is still much work to be done before we achieve a truly comprehensive understanding of people's reasons for having children. We have seen that the reasons are numerous and complex. Although the theoretical approaches that take these considerations into account have some predictive success, they are not wholly satisfactory. Too often they capture only a small piece of the reasons-for-having-children pie or offer a decision-making formula that uses many reasons to predict but does not truly inform our efforts at understanding. None of the theoretical approaches incorporate biological considerations in a systematic way. Although many theoretical approaches include reasons for having a child that are related to the partners wishes, only the behavioral intentions model used by Davidson and Jaccard brought the partner into the equation in a systematic way.

If we enlarge our perspective beyond why people <u>want</u> children to the broader perspective implied by the title of this book, namely why people actually <u>have</u> children, a whole additional limitation of current theoretical approaches becomes clear. Many people have children not because they want a child but because they want to have sex and then get pregnant by accident. Or perhaps it was "accidently on purpose". And even if their pregnancy occurs as a result of a true contraceptive failure, their childbearing motivations play a role in what is done about the pregnancy: carrying it to term and keeping the child, giving it up for adoption, or seeking an abortion. In other words,

childbearing motivations impact a whole range of preconception and postconception behaviors above and beyond those that result from wanting and planning to have a child. These behaviors, and the motivations that govern them, must also be covered by any comprehensive theory.

The primary goal of this book is to develop a theory that serves to unify all of these complex phenomena and to do it with a focus on motivation. In order to achieve this unification, I will first discuss the main features of human psychology and behavior that are driven by our nurturant motivations, whether the goal is to achieve or prevent childbearing, or whether it is to adapt to the failure to achieve or prevent it. This psychological level discussion will take place in the six chapters of the second section of this book. A central premise of the theory developed here is that the motivation for children is deeply rooted in the biological systems that have evolved to promote social bonding. I will make the argument for this case, and spell out the specifics of how I think these systems interface with the psychological and behavioral features of the theory, in the seven chapters of the third section of this book. Because an individual's mate and sexual partner participates more or less fully in the psychological and behavioral processes of reproduction, it is also essential to include accounts of what happens at the couple, or dyadic, level in any comprehensive framework. This I will do in the four chapters of the fourth section of this book. However, before I launch into those three core sections, let me prepare the way by discussing in the next chapter some evolutionary features of the unified theory that will then be expanded upon in the following three sections.

## Endnotes

[1] http://www.babycentre.co.uk/

[2] http://rubies.articledirectoree.com/articles/family-planning/101-reasons-for-having-children-2.html

[3] http://www.playagaingames.com/interesting/children

[4] http://www.happilychildfree.com/fencesitters.htm

[5] http://www.childfree.net/potpourri_whybaby.html

[6] http://www.tc.umn.edu/~parkx032/NWL145.html

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