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The wish to become a father: How do men decide in favour of parenthood?

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Approximately eighteen months ago I started to work on the project decision-making on parenthood: the role of men. I soon discovered the absence of a long scientific tradition on this subject. On the one hand this was a pleasant discovery, giving me the exciting opportunity to enter a new field of scientific research. On the other hand it was an unpleasant discovery, because I had no guide or map to show me the way. It is not my intention however to bother you here with my personal experiences, joys, fears and doubts. Instead I will give a brief overview of the theories that concern choice processes on fertility, and present a conceptual model of possible determinants with regard to the fertility decision by men, partly based on a small survey I conducted recently.

Theoretical perspective

For some ten to twenty years there was considerable psychological interest in the wish to have a child, but, although no scientific consensus was reached and no clear results were produced, the attention has flagged (Gerson, 1986). This lack of attention is rather curious, since there remains a desire to know more about fertility decisions in order to explain, for example, the decline of the total fertility rate in western countries. Macro-level theories seemed to be insufficiently able to explain this so-called second demographic transition, whereas micro-level theories seem to be more promising (De Bruijn, 1993; Vermunt, 1993). It is only quite recently that demographers moved their focus from a macro-level to a micro-level of analysis, thereby encompassing, among other things, the micro-sociological and social-psychological disciplines (Burch, 1980).
A widely used starting point in the studies on motivation for parenthood is the value-expectancy model (Fishbein, 1972; Crawford, 1973). For several reasons this model is quite convenient. The well-known Theory of Reasoned Action developed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) fits into this model, and it is easy to use, especially in surveys, because it focuses on measuring attitudes. One approach within this framework is to explain motivation for parenthood in terms of costs and benefits. Exchange theory (Heath, 1976) and New Home Economics (Becker, 1960) are examples of this kind of theorizing.

The Exchange Theory assumes a maximization of utility in the exchange between people of costs and rewards of, for example, paid and unpaid labour. It focuses mainly on the human resources education, profession and income. Applied to the fertility decision the theory 'predicts' that socio-economic status and gender role orientation influence perceptions of the costs and benefits of having children (Seccombe, 1991). Seccombe found that the higher the male's occupational prestige, the less likely he is to rate either opportunity or financial costs as very important. For women no such relation was found. She further noted that traditional men see more benefits in having children than do nontraditional men.

Within the theory of New Home Economics children are considered (more or less) as consumer goods. Emphasis is placed on financial costs, rather than on opportunity costs. "The demand for children would depend on the relative price of children and full income. An increase in the relative price of children reduces the demand for children and increases the demand for other commodities (if real income is held constant)" (Becker, 1981 p.96).

A problem of this kind of theorizing is that behaviour is supposed to be the outcome of a rational individual weighing process of costs and benefits, thereby maximizing utility (Voets, 1994). Predictions based on this model are poor when it is applied to the fertility decision. People do not seem to be able to make a rational decision on dilemmas which imply a long-term commitment, such as the decision to have children, simply because it is impossible to consider every aspect and consequence of the decision (Lindenberg, 1991). This leads to over- or underestimation of some of the advantages or disadvantages known to the individual. So, the limits of the rational choice process are threefold: People usually do not see every advantage or disadvantage; they cannot accurately estimate their value or consequence; and last but not
least, they can act in contradiction to their point of view. Therefore fertility decision-making is at least partly an irrational choice process.

The irrational part of a choice process is very difficult, if not impossible, to investigate. So that leaves us, for the time being, with the rational part, which does indeed consist mainly of the weighing of costs and benefits. Analyzing the rational part of the choice process is not, by any means, enough to predict a person’s actual choice. But, if we leave the ultimate (social-scientific) goal of predicting behaviour for a moment, we can use this theoretical framework as a tool in explaining the rational part of behaviour. It gives us the opportunity and right to examine attitudes (Bell, Bancroft & Philip, 1985), and, what is more, we can take the outcome of the choice process as an independent, or perhaps better, control variable in our model. And this makes it possible for us to refine this model.

Men only

Most studies done thus far concerning procreative behaviour have focused on women, some on both sexes, and only very few on men. Some of these studies suggest that there are only small differences between men and women regarding the motivation for parenthood (Rabin & Greene, 1968; Hoffman, 1972). Recent sociological developments, however, no longer justify a gratuitous combining of the sexes when it comes to investigating the wish for children. Individualism, increasing labour force participation of women and the changing gender-identity of men (and women) make it necessary for the decision-making on parenthood for both men and women to be regarded separately (Gerson, 1986; Lesthaege & Surkyn, 1988; Seccombe 1991; Marsiglio 1991).

There is a clear omission in the current research programmes with respect to procreation: men are underexposed. Clearly the best thing to do is to study both men and women, in other words: take the couple as a unit of analysis (Corijn et al., 1994). It is very difficult however, to investigate the actual choice process. A longitudinal design seems necessary. Besides it is useful to know more about the respective views on this topic of both sexes separately, before examining the interaction between the sexes.
The aim of my research project is to describe, and to some extent analyze, the determinants that contribute to the decision to become a father. The first task was, of course, to indicate these determinants. The value-expectancy model provides us with the concept of the wish for children in terms of costs and benefits. Exchange theory supplies other determinants such as socio-economic status and the division of paid and unpaid labour between men and women. These determinants should be brought together in a conceptual model. Before going into the details of this model I will first describe the determinants.

The wish for children

Rabin (1965) classified motivation for parenthood into four categories which seem to be important: First, altruistic motives concerning mainly affection for children; second, fatalistic motives which regard having children as an inescapable part of life: 'it is the order of things'; third, narcissistic motives which refer mainly to self-assurance; and finally instrumental motives on the basis of which people try to achieve certain goals in life such as a better relationship. These categories focus mainly on the benefits of having children, not on the costs (see also Rabin & Greene, 1968).

Another effort has been made by Hoffman and Hoffman (1973) with their value of children project. They also seemed to be more interested in the advantages than in the disadvantages of having children. They developed a 'value scheme' which consists of nine categories or 'basic values'. These values are: Adult status and social identity; Expansion of the self, immortality; Morality, religion, altruism; Primary group ties, affiliation; Stimulation, novelty, fun; Creativity, accomplishment, competence; Power, influence; Social comparison, competition and Economic utility. I will not go further into this, but I have mentioned them because all of these basic values are used, mutatis mutandis, in this study. Besides benefits Hoffman and Hoffman do consider costs, as well as 'barriers'. Unfortunately they pay considerably less attention to these aspects of their model of procreative motivation. Nonetheless their systematic inquiry provides a good basis for further investigation.

Besides considering the wish for children as composed of a series of benefits and costs I make another distinction. That is the distinction between a latent and a manifest wish for children.
Before entering a choice process there has to be some kind of dissensus with the person’s actual situation. A mental incongruity should be felt between the present situation and a desired situation. This incongruity can exist for a long period of time without the subject doing anything to diminish this incongruently (Tazelaar, 1980). Other competing incongruities are considered more important, or the incongruity is simply not strong enough. In this case the desire (or wish) is called latent. A latent (dispositional) wish can manifest itself, sooner or later, in an intention or an expectation. This change from latent to manifest is caused by intrapsychic and situational influences (Miller & Pasta, 1988). The transition from latent to manifest follows the same pattern as in the Fishbein/Ajzen model: Beliefs/attitudes (latent) → intentions (manifest) → behaviour.

The distinction between latent and manifest is not found in the relevant literature. Nonetheless we can find sufficient implicit support. In many studies we find ‘the wish to have children sometime during life’ as part of the motivation for parenthood (Hoffman & Hoffman, 1973; Mott, 1983; Marsiglio, 1991; Seccombe, 1991). This sentence can be viewed as an operationalization of the latent wish for children. Later on we will find other operationalizations as well. A manifest wish for children implies intention or action. Since ‘intention’ is difficult to measure, ‘action’ is incorporated in the operationalization of the manifest wish for children. A clear example of action is ‘the decision not to contracept’ as Luker calls it (Luker, 1975). I have added some other indicators of the manifest wish, which I also will discuss later.

Socio-economic status and gender role orientation

As mentioned before there are other indicators of the fertility decision than simply the wish for children. I refer to socio-economic status and gender role orientations, and of course the role of the woman. It has been argued that socio-economic status plays a role in fertility (Lewis et al., 1982; Beckman, 1983; Hollerbach, 1983; Seccombe, 1991). Unfortunately it is not clear in which direction this influence works. Seccombe argued that men with higher socio-economic status see more benefits in having children. This is only true if these men do not have to give

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1 Marsiglio (1991) introduces another distinction, namely procreative consciousness and procreative responsibility. Although procreative consciousness shows much similarity with my concept of a latent wish for children, he considers procreative consciousness as more dynamic and temporary than I do.
up their role of breadwinner. They expect their wives to be at home, cherishing their so-called traditionalist gender role orientations. The link between socio-economic status and fertility is thus mediated by gender role orientation. Socio-economic status is considered as partly responsible for having modern or traditionalist gender role orientations: people with lower socio-economic status are more traditionalist.

One of the hypotheses in this study is that either modern or traditionalist gender role orientations may facilitate the fertility decision. If a couple agrees on a traditionalist division of tasks (i.e., the man takes care of the income, the woman takes care of the child) there are less barriers to want a child. But it can also be the other way around: if a couple agrees on a modern division of tasks (i.e., the man and the woman want to share the responsibilities of the income and the caring for the child) there are also less barriers to want a child. The facilitating factor is therefore agreement between man and woman. ‘Modern’ in this sense is defined as being willing to work parttime. This does not alter the fact that there can be other barriers (financial barriers for example) that overrule the barrier of disagreement on the division of paid and unpaid labour.

In the following I will examine in more depth the proposed determinants of the fertility decision. I will start with a brief treatise on the small survey I conducted recently. Then I will reflect in more depth upon the wish for children in men. Finally I will re-examine the complex relationship between socio-economic status, gender role orientation and the fertility decision.

A small survey

Students of sociology were asked to gather three men from their friends and family circle who meet each of three criteria: They are married or cohabiting with a woman longer than one year (May, 1982); their partner is younger than 40; if they have a child, it is younger than 2 years of age. Each student interviewed three men, unknown to them, using a structured questionnaire. Couples not capable of getting children were filtered out of the sample. 177 usable cases were collected, in 62 of which there already was a baby.
The group of respondents is slightly higher educated than the average of the Dutch population; a well-known problem when gathering information in the way just described. The sample is limited of course. It should be noted however that it is just a pilot-study, to be followed by a larger, nationwide survey. On the other hand the group is big enough, and the results are interesting enough, to be used here as a basis for the conceptual model.

Since the outcome of the choice process itself is used as an independent variable it was necessary to determine to which group the males in question belonged. There are four groups:

1. Those who have decided not to have a child, at least not within 5 years.
2. Those who have not decided yet. They still doubt, and cannot give a term within which they want their first child to be born.
3. Those who have decided that a child would be welcome, preferably within one or two years. Obviously those who do not use any contraceptive fall into this category as well.
4. Those who already have a child.

By combining several questions from the questionnaire it was possible to put almost all the men in one of these groups (apart from the fourth of course, which is obvious).

To measure the wish for children 13 advantages and 13 disadvantages of having children were mentioned in the questionnaire. I do not speak of benefits and costs, because, according to the literature, these terms have different and diverse meanings. Nonetheless the idea is the same. The items were collected from several studies, some of which already have been mentioned before (Hoffman & Hoffman, 1973; Out & Zegveld, 1977; Niphuis-Nell, 1981; May, 1982; Bell, Bancroft & Philip, 1985; Morahan-Martin, 1991; Seccombe, 1991; Van Balen, 1991). The overall question, concerning the advantage-items, was: `Do you consider the following statement as a reason to want a child?'. If a respondent already had one child, the question was if they considered it a reason to want another child. The question with respect to the disadvantages was analogous. A factor analysis on both the advantages and disadvantages separately clearly pointed to three factors each. The advantage-items were divided into 4 items concerning

\[1\] Strictly speaking the question to want another child is different from the question to want the first child. The group 'men with one child' is therefore considered as a control variable in the model, and always regarded separate from the group 'men without children'.

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affective aspects, 4 items concerning instrumental aspects and 5 items concerning situational aspects. The affective aspects refer to the more emotional side of becoming a father, such as giving love and affection to the child and taking care of it. The instrumental aspects refer to achieving a goal, such as enrichment of the relationship with the partner, continuing the family name, and giving a meaning to life. Finally the situational aspects allude to external factors contributing to the wish for a child, such as the opinion of family and friends in this respect, and to what Rabin (1965) calls *fatalistic* motives, such as 'it's part of life', or a logical consequence of getting married.

The disadvantage items were divided into 4 items concerning freedom-constricting aspects, 4 items concerning responsibility aspects, and 4 items concerning practical impediments. One item constituted a factor on its own, namely the fear for a child with a serious handicap. Freedom constriction has two aspects. First, the loss of freedom in general, and second, difficulties of combining paid labour with having children. The second category, responsibility, refers exactly to what the word implies: the responsibility of having children is too big to handle. The third category refers to what Hoffman and Hoffman call *barriers*. Well-known barriers are a shortage of money, a home that is not suitable etcetera. I found also disagreement on housekeeping tasks and the situation in the world as 'practical impediments'.

**Results**

To get a good overview of the scores on these items I set out the 4 groups against a weighed percentage of agreement on the various advantage and disadvantage-items. This means that a score of 100% on one item indicates that everybody agrees on this item and finds it very important. The results are shown in two graphs. First I will examine the advantages.

[ Figure 1 ]

**Advantages**

The general pattern is that the advantages are seen as more important when the decision to get a child is more likely. Most important are the affective aspects of having (or getting) children.
Some advantages, especially the instrumental, are only seen when the woman is pregnant, or when the baby has been born. We see a significant difference between those who do not want a child, and those who have one, on the item ‘seeing children growing up is an experience I don’t want to miss’. The same goes for ‘children provide a meaning to life’ and ‘it enriches my relationship’. That does not alter the fact that affective and instrumental advantages of having children are considered quite important by every group. Situational aspects are not seen as clear advantages, except for the item ‘my own childhood and upbringing play a role’, which, after all, is not the prototype of a ‘situational aspect’.

[ Figure 2 ]

Disadvantages

Looking at the disadvantages we see a roughly similar pattern, albeit in the opposite direction. Freedom-constricting aspects and ‘not feeling ready for children’ are seen as the most important disadvantages, even when the child is born. The decrease in importance, when a positive decision is at hand, is nevertheless spectacular. Practical impediments are the biggest problem when there is still doubt. What is striking is that disagreement on the division of housekeeping tasks is rare. Only 12% of the men in the doubting phase considered this a (major) problem.

Responsibility is not felt as too heavy to bear. Not feeling ready for children is an exception, but this has more to do with age than with feelings of responsibility.

Let us consider the influence of age more closely. Although the sample is small, this study indicates that age interferes with the perceived importance of the various disadvantages, regardless of the phase in the choice process. There is no such influence of age found on the advantages\(^1\), which are relatively stable throughout a person’s lifetime. There is one cohort-effect, however, in the sense that younger men call affective motives more important than older men do. The phase in the decision process is most clearly indicated by the importance of the disadvantages of having children. Therefore I made post-hoc operationalizations of the latent wish for children and the manifest wish for children. A latent wish for children is considered

\(^1\) One clear exception on this is the statement ‘Having children enriches my relationship’. A lot of childless men answered this question with ‘I don’t know’, which was regarded as ‘I don’t agree’.
as proportional to the perceived importance of the affective advantages of having children; the manifest wish for children is inversely proportional to the perceived importance of the disadvantages. Also McCormick et al. state that benefits are relatively stable, costs being both more liable to change and sensitive to the environment (McCormick et al., 1977). Seeing the advantages of having children is similar to a disposition for wanting them, and overcoming the disadvantages paves the way for a positive decision.

Earlier I supposed that socio-economic status and gender-role orientations influenced the fertility decision as well. I suggested that there should be agreement between man and woman on the division of housekeeping and child caring tasks. As we saw before, there is only a small group of men who consider this as an impediment to having children in the short run. Those who, for the time being, do not want children do not consider it a problem at all. Only those who are in the doubting phase mention it. This supports the supposition, but it cannot be considered an important factor.

When we use socio-economic status and gender-role orientations as sociological variables, a positive effect on the fertility decision should be found, according to several studies (Lewis et al., 1982; Beckman, 1983; Hollerbach, 1983; Seccombe, 1991). However, socio-economic status is partly determined by age. The finding, in this study, that men with a high socio-economic status are more likely to come to a positive decision, is therefore useless. Older people have a higher socio-economic status, fewer financial barriers and therefore they are more likely to make a positive decision. This study was too small to control for age and cohort-effects. In the larger study these will be taken into account.

Gender role orientations are very difficult to measure. That is, the link between attitudes and behaviour on this topic is very weak. On the ‘Attitude towards Women Scale’ (Spence & Helmreich, 1972; Nelson, 1988), for example, a score of 80 (with 100 as a maximum) is considered ‘low’. Modern gender role attitudes are common place, and social desirability plays a major role. This means that people do not act according to their uttered ideas (Willemsen, 1992). So, before being able to estimate the influence of gender role orientation, a good instrument has to be developed, specialized on aspects of the fertility decision.
I have nearly reached the end of my lecture. I would like to conclude with a presentation of the conceptual model used in, and partly based on, this study.

[ Figure 3 ]

The dependent variable in this model is in fact the manifest wish for children. The distinction between a latent and a manifest wish for children is somewhat artificial, however: the latent wish is operationalized in terms of advantages and the manifest wish in terms of disadvantages. That does not alter the fact that we find empirical support for approaching these concepts as discrete, since a number of advantages are relatively stable throughout a person's lifetime, whereas a number of disadvantages are not. The choice *process* is therefore located in the manifest part of the wish for children. The role of the woman finds its way into the model through the outcome of the choice process to the manifest wish of the man. Socio-economic status and situation at work influence gender role orientation, which may facilitate the fertility decision, by decreasing the perceived importance of the disadvantages and barriers.

**Rationality reconsidered**

Entering the field of choice processes in general, and with regard to the fertility decision in particular, may fill us with doubt. Every social scientist who writes about choice processes mentions the fact that a choice process is not a rational thing, although no one comes up with a solution. This should not prevent us from searching for a good model. Considering the outcome of the choice process not as a dependent, but as an independent variable, may help us to find one.
References


Advantages of having children

Category 1: Affective aspects
a: Seeing children growing up is an experience I don’t want to miss
b: I can give love and affection to children
c: I would like to take care of children
d: Raising children seems a challenge to me

Category 2: Instrumental aspects
e: Children provide a meaning to life
f: Having children is convenient when I am old
g: I want to continue my family name
h: Having children enriches my relationship

Category 3: Situational aspects
i: My own childhood and upbringing play a role
j: The opinion of family and friends is important to me
k: Having children is a consequence of being married or cohabitant
l: Having children is part of life
m: My religion plays an important role
Disadvantages of having children

Decision:

Category 1: Freedom constricting aspects
a: Having children constrains my freedom
b: I want to do things which are difficult to do having a child
c: Having children is difficult to combine with my work
d: Having children is difficult to combine with the work of my partner

Category 2: Responsibility aspects
e: I do not feel ready for having children
f: I look up to it
g: I can not handle the responsibility
h: The upbringing is too difficult for me

Category 3: Practical impediments
i: My dwelling is not suitable
j: I can not financially afford it
k: We do not agree on the division of householding tasks
l: The situation in the world
m: I fear for a child with a serious handicap
CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Latent wish for children

Conceptions on fatherhood (Gender role)

Situation at work

Socioeconomic status

Manifest wish for children

Age

The choice for the first child

Outcome

No child (yet)

Doubt

A child

Woman: wish for children, situation at work, conceptions on motherhood