

The psychology of human reproduction

Motives underlying the urge to procreate are coming under increased attention as birth control makes choice more practical

by James Moriarty

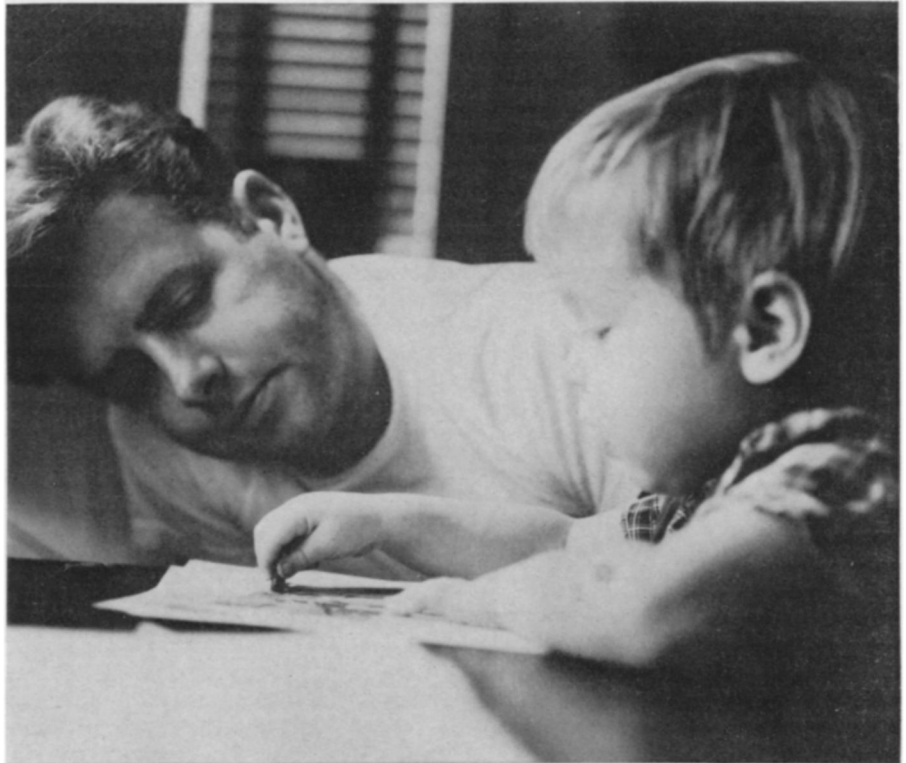
While scientists understand the physiology of sexuality and reproduction, the psychological relationship between the two phenomena is less clear. By the same token, understanding of the psychological reasons why man exercises his reproductive prerogative is little understood.

"Despite our extensive knowledge of the physiology of reproduction we know almost nothing of the psychology of reproduction," says Dr. Frederick Wyatt, a psychologist at the University of Michigan. "Population control is one of the most critical issues of our time. We should not only study the mechanical means whereby people have children, but we should also come to understand 'What is the meaning of children?'"

At present, behavioral scientists have carried out little empirical research on the motives behind human reproduction. In order to investigate this type of question and related issues, the American Psychological Association has recently established a task force on psychology and population. The APA task force and the Population Council in New York are hoping to stimulate interest among behavioral scientists by allotting research funds and disseminating knowledge in the field to scientists who may be interested in the phenomenon.

Current research indicates that many people have children not so much because they have a strong desire for parenthood but simply because they do not know that alternatives are available to them. Dr. Kurt Back, a social psychologist at Duke University, has found such results in Puerto Rico and Jamaica. In these places, he says, "the high fertility rate is due not to high motivation for fertility, but rather to the fact that the motivation for low fertility is not strong. The difference is subtle but critical."

Dr. Chester Insko of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill found a similar situation among lower-class whites and blacks living in public housing. Interviewees were either poorly or inaccurately informed about birth control measures. Many reported that they thought birth control resulted in cancer of the breast or malformed children. Others simply reported that they felt it did not work.



A father's motives can influence a son's attitudes toward his own children.

This type of research in underdeveloped and deprived regions indicates that many people have children because there are no alternative choices open to them, or when there are, they are not fully understood. Hence the efforts of administrators of population control programs (President Nixon has recently established a Commission on Population Growth to develop national policy guidelines) have focused primarily on disseminating information and techniques of birth control to such populations.

While for many people having children is simply a part of the daily course of life because no alternatives are open to them, another aspect of reproduction is why people choose to have children when there are alternatives open to them. This question is particularly pertinent for middle-class and working-class populations in developed countries.

The importance of understanding initial motivation for parenthood lies in a parent's later attitudes toward his children; the motive may dictate the later attitude. "Parental attitudes may be

health-promoting or pathogenic in the development of the child," says Dr. Albert Rabin of Michigan State University. "By studying the relationship between motivation for parenthood, expectancies and the attitudinal constellation of the parent, it may be possible to identify the antecedents of the influences that impinge upon the child, that bring about health or pathology."

Dr. Rabin is one of the few researchers carrying out empirical investigations on why people have children. His efforts have led to the development of the Child Study Inventory (CSI), which taps four major motives for parenthood: altruism, fatalism, narcissism and instrumentality.

Altruism refers to unselfish motivation for parenthood. "It is a nurturant attitude whereby a good deal of gratification is attained by giving rather than receiving," says Dr. Rabin. It entails affection for children, concern for their health, and the need to express nurturance in relation to them.

Fatalistic motivation, or predestination, expresses the notion that man has



Univ. of Mich.

Wyatt: *What do children mean?*



MSU

Rabin: *Looking for ulterior motives.*

an obligation to procreate and perpetuate the species. It is in the order of things: simply the will of God or the destiny of man.

Narcissistic motivation involves the expectation that the child will reflect glory upon the parent, prove his masculinity (or her femininity) and generally demonstrate his physical, biological and psychological adequacy. It may mean having John Smith Jr. so that he can be everything that his parents were not.

Instrumental motivation entails seeing the child as a utility. He is a means to an end. This motivation is reflected by parents who have a child to "save the marriage" or gain an extra farm hand. The child is instrumental in the sense that he is employed as a vehicle in the achievement of specific parental goals.

Dr. Rabin has carried out a number of studies to validate the inventory and to explore various dimensions of motivation for parenthood. Scores on the Parent-Child Relations Questionnaire, an inventory which measures characteristic behavior of parents toward their children, were correlated with responses

on the CSI. Two forms of the Parent-Child Relations Questionnaire (for father and mother) were administered with the CSI to 66 undergraduates.

In general Dr. Rabin found that subjects, especially females, who tend to view their parents as loving also tend to emphasize altruistic motivation for parenthood. Those who view parents as rejecting or demanding tend to de-emphasize altruistic motivation and emphasize narcissistic motivation for parenthood.

In another study Dr. Rabin compared the responses of schizophrenics and normal subjects on the Child Study Inventory. He found that schizophrenics stressed instrumental motivation to a greater extent, while non-schizophrenics scored much higher on the altruistic dimension. Interestingly, Dr. Rabin found no difference between normal subjects and schizophrenics on the narcissism dimension. All the subjects were males.

While Dr. Rabin's work has centered on developing a test to assess motivation for parenthood that can be used with large numbers of people, most of the thinking in the field to date has resulted from clinical insights.

Dr. Robert Gould, a psychiatrist at the New York University Medical Center, has suggested a number of the "wrong reasons" for which people often have children. Several are subsumed under Rabin's rubric for narcissism: "It is the only way to prove you're a man (woman)." "A child is my only claim to immortality." Some of the other reasons parallel Dr. Rabin's category of instrumentality: "A baby will give me something to do." "I need to be needed." "We thought it would help our marriage."

Dr. Edward Pohlman of the University of the Pacific at Stockton, Calif., suggests that children are often used by one of the parents to control or dominate the other parent. Some wives see children as a means of holding their husbands to them. Dr. Gould says such behavior is expressed in the attitude: "A baby will keep my husband attached to me and less likely to stray from home." On the other hand husbands who wish to dominate their wives by limiting them to the household often see pregnancy and children as a means. Dr. Gould says that this is expressed in the belief that, "A baby will keep a woman in her place."

The upshot of such malevolent instrumental motivations for parenthood is an unhealthy environment for children. The major hypothesis of Dr. Rabin's work is that unhealthy motivation for parenthood may result in unhealthy childrearing practices and emotionally unhealthy children who, in turn, have inappropriate motivations for having children of their own. □

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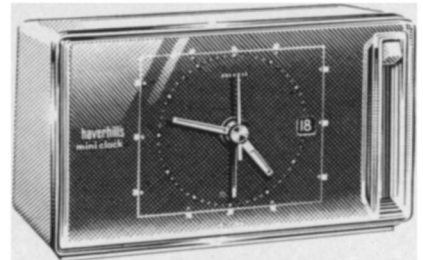
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