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**NOTIONS OF BIOLOGY IN VALUE OF CHILDREN RESEARCH:
APPLICATION OF AN INTERPRETIVE PERSPECTIVE
TO A DEMOGRAPHIC PROBLEM**

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ABSTRACT

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The paper proposes the adoption of interpretive perspectives as a means of accessing the meanings which demographic phenomena have for everyday people. In so doing one might deduce explanations of fertility which reflect the subjects' practical worlds, rather than the theoretical constructs of the researcher. Notions of biology are employed to illustrate how questionnaire responses, representing intellectual (theoretical) concepts, might misrepresent everyday (practical) realities. The discussion indicates the distinction between researchers' scientific paradigms and respondents' commonsense paradigms. Evidence is offered for the primacy of biology, as a social construction rather than a physiological state, as an explanation of childbearing for a group of pakeha New Zealanders.

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Introduction

The research discussed in this paper implies a questioning of the conventional paradigm for demographic research, in which demographic phenomena are treated as social facts and whereby social context is interpreted as an aggregate of social variables. The present argument is that demographic phenomena also have social meaning, and that social context implies a construction of interactions and situations which are held in common by the members being studied.

In particular, fertility has social meaning which is constructed and sustained by members in their interaction with each other. This meaning may be of quite a different order to the understandings attributed to fertility by demographers expecting to study it as an empirically observable ("factual") occurrence.

Recognition of such differences necessitates a different mode of analysis of fertility. The proposal is for application of a perspective derived from interpretive sociology. The potential for such application is illustrated by an analysis of the relevance of notions of "biology" in value of children research.

The Biological Explanation as a "Value" of Children

In their seminal paper on the value of children, Lois and Martin Hoffman listed what they called nine "basic values" of children:

1. Adult status and social identity
2. Expansion of self; tie to a larger identity;
"immortality"
3. Morality; religion; altruism; good of the group;
norms regarding sexuality, impulsivity and virtue
4. Primary group ties, affiliation
5. Stimulation, novelty, fun
6. Creativity, accomplishment, competence
7. Power, influence, effectance
8. Social comparison, competition
9. Economic utility. (1973:46-61)

While they acknowledged a biological basis of childbearing, the Hoffmans concluded that:

the biological hypothesis is not useful for explaining cultural variations and historical trends. It has therefore been omitted from the value scheme. (op.cit:46)

The research findings discussed in this paper were obtained in the course of a study into the "value" of children to pakeha New Zealanders. The data were derived from both a formal questionnaire survey and from interpretive analysis of informal conversations. They suggest that the Hoffman's omission is a consequence of the research perspective, rather than a consequence of the social reality of the subjects referred to. This conclusion was indicated by a comparison of responses to various questionnaire items with the informal analysis, for various aspects of children or child-bearing, but it was particularly evident with respect to ideas which might be labelled "biological".

Among a list of items presented to survey respondents were included the statements:

A boy becomes a man only after he is a father

A girl becomes a woman only after she is a mother

Of 154 respondents, only 7% agreed with the first statement, and 13% agreed with the second statement. In each case twice as many men as women agreed, but the overall frequency of agreement was very small. In neither case would these factors be considered very relevant to a definition of "value" of children.

Informal conversation analysis however, indicated that, firstly, ascription of adult status might be an important part of the meaning which children have to these pakeha New Zealanders, and secondly, that genders differ as to whether this emphasis is on physical (mechanical) or social (interactional) states.

The distinction is a consequence of the researcher's view of the world, and also of the respondents' view of the research situation. Intellectually, people "know" that one doesn't need to have a child to become a man or a woman. Responding to survey questionnaires to many people in this culture is an intellectual exercise. Thus they produce negative responses to the statements. Emotionally, however, in the everyday world people act as if one does need to have children in order to achieve adult status. It is this emotional and everyday interaction (rather than the intellectual scientific interaction) which produces pressure on individuals to have children.

In other words, the researcher is interested in "rational reasons", which are theoretical. The respondent lives and acts in a world which is practical. The realities each perceives differ accordingly. Understandings of these differing realities necessitate different methodological perspectives.

The Social Construction of Biology as an Explanation of Fertility

The perspective which is proposed in this paper is derived from Blumer (1969). Blumer advanced the following premises for a method which focusses

on everyday meaning:

1. Human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them.
2. The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows.
3. These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the thing he encounters. (Blumer 1969:2).

Blumer advocated that one should "approach the study of group activity through the eyes and experience of the people who have developed the activity" (p.139). To not do so "leads to the setting up of a fictitious world" (p.51).

The implications of such a theory challenge those researchers who tend to define the situation according to their own experiences, to apply their own objectifications of "values" and "disvalues" or "costs" and "benefits", or whatever labels might seem convenient, yet who at the same time acknowledge that many people do not think about children in this way.

Adopting Blumer's perspective, demographic phenomena are not apart or separate from other phenomena. In particular, "value" of children, proposed by researchers as an intervening or explanatory variable in fertility, is also a social phenomenon which is constructed by everyday people in their actions with children, and with each other with respect to children. Talk is considered as one form of social action. It is in this context that everyday talk was analysed for subjects' understandings of "value" or meaning of children which reflected a biological paradigm of understanding.

Of the 15 subjects that I talked with and listened to, all except one had disagreed with the survey items mentioned previously - most had disagreed strongly. Yet their talk included references to the ideas which had been intended by the survey statements. They talked, for example, about men needing to "prove they were a man" by having children and in one instance reference was made to proving one was a "real" man, by having sons. There was also talk of childless women as "these girls", a phrase which was particularly common for women who had borne children and given them for adoption. Adult status is commonly associated with procreation (a biological phenomenon) and with parenting (a social phenomenon).

Other questions in the survey asked respondents to comment on infertility. Most people "knew" that either partner could be responsible for an inability to conceive. However, it was the woman who was expected to be concerned about it. The notion of "maternal instinct" (there was no talk of "paternal instinct") was invoked to explain this perceived or expected concern.

Not only were women expected to feel some "urge" or instinct to have children, but they were sometimes thought to suffer physically if they did not. Respondents claimed that people "explained" nervous or physical ailments by saying it is because the woman hadn't had a baby: childbearing

was seen to make women (in researchers' terms) "organically whole". Men did not refer to this organic wholeness, either for men or for women.

For men, fertility was associated more specifically with sexuality than procreation of organic completeness. For some men, for instance, vasectomies remain a worry because of fear of losing their virility. Men who have had vasectomies may join support groups. Although involuntarily infertile couples may also join support groups, there are no equivalent support systems for sterilized women. Men who have large families (however common people define "large") are teased about their sexuality or virility: women are either pitied or praised with respect to the burden they carry as mothers. Informal conversations suggest that there are differences in understanding, differences in meaning, of fertility for men and women. For men, fertility, sexuality and virility seem to be confused. Manliness is to do with sex. For women, womanliness is to do with maternity. Children are thus essential for the image of a "complete" woman. The same is not apparent for men.

The issue of adoption was also addressed by the survey. Almost all survey respondents said it "didn't matter" how one got a baby. But informal discussion raised a number of issues which indicated that it did matter, and that when it comes to having one's own baby then adoption is very much a "second best" way of having them.

Discussion of adoption is particularly insightful in this attempt to understand the meaning of children. In Schutz's terms, adoptive parents and their children, and women who give their children for adoption, are "strangers". As deviants, or marginals, they themselves may negotiate their acceptance in a world of parents. More importantly, other parents perceive a need to explain their acceptance. In everyday conversation that negotiation returned time and again to notions of biology and in so doing illustrates how the biological explanation, or paradigm, is a social construction which in some instances might even be contradictory to accepted (by researchers) "scientific" understandings of biology.

Invariably discussions about adoption focussed on adoptions which are atypical - especially interracial adoptions where a child's lack of "blood tie" might be evident by its colour. There was discussion also about the extent to which adoption agencies are able to "match up" physical likenesses of baby and parents. Respondents did not usually talk about such resemblances, or lack of them, in terms of "genetics". Such scientific concepts have relatively limited use in common speech. But the idea conveyed by the notion of genetics was part of common thought. It received expression in the concept of inheritance (which reflects a social parallel of passing from one generation to another) and in the concept of "blood". "Blood" represents what is perceived as a known physical attribute of inheritance. Something "in one's blood" must have come from somewhere. Blood, commonsense parlance for what scientists know as genes, is inherited.

Physical inheritance, like physical resemblances to parents, is important in everyday life. People comment on "whose eyes" or "whose musical talents" a child has. Contrary to the indications gained from the survey responses, it is important to adults where children come from, and who they have inherited from.

Another issue raised in discussions about adoption was that of bonding. If bonding is a consequence of the birth experience (that is, is biological), then how do adoptive parents achieve this? One of the respondents said that adoptive parents "must have something extra". People who have this "something extra" were labelled "true" adoptive parents.*

Ambivalence about adoption is reflected in such labelling. The terms "natural", "real", and "biological" are all commonly used for birth mothers. Adoptive parents, however, object that the term "biological" is too mechanical and unemotional. Some people preferred not to use the term "mother" at all for the birth parent, thereby implying a social rather than biological connotation for motherhood. These included the people who referred to a birth mother as "this girl". The tensions expressed by these labels, explanations and in some cases contradictions, indicate the complexity of fertility explanations which focus only on childbearing. The negotiations which take place in order to account for, or make sense of, adoptive parents and adoptive children illustrate the manner in which parenthood is socially constructed. They also illustrate the manner in which biological understandings of childbearing are socially constructed and communicated in everyday life.

As an illustration of the kind of talk that these conclusions have been drawn from, a portion of an interview transcript is appended. In this conversation the subjects referred to physical genetic likeness: "it would have had to be a pure white one" if they adopted. On the other hand, they suggested, having a child who is like yourself is important mostly to people who don't already have a child - after you have had children you realise "there'll be differences in kids anyway", and, they implied, genetic likeness diminishes in importance.

Secondly, the wife referred to "negative feelings" about infertility. Infertility and adoption meant you do not have your own - you get someone else's child. Thirdly, the discussion about the grandparents indicated that it is other kin, especially grandparents, who are expected to find acceptance of a child of different inheritance, or "bloodlines" problematic.

In this discussion there was also a tangential suggestion that the reason for adopting might be important. Having a child for a change of sex seemed acceptable, just as other subjects had indicated that adopting refugee or underprivileged children was acceptable. In such cases there wasn't the problem of trying to establish inheritance and, perhaps more importantly, the emotional overtones of possible infertility were not present.

Modes of Analysis for Accessing Meaning

Biological ideas were the most pervasive and coherent means employed by this group of subjects for understanding fertility. In that context, biological understanding has been called a paradigm. To analyse the meanings conveyed by this talk, essences have been drawn out which might be used by a researcher to represent the "foci" of the paradigm:

* This was interpreted to mean "adoptive but true" parents.

Researcher's Categories

Respondents' Categories

Genetics	"blood", race, "colour"
Physiology	virility, fecundity, sexuality (these may be confused)
Ethology	behaviour, "drives", "instincts", bonding

These biological understandings of everyday people were not of the same order as those of a scientist or biologist. They were, however, in action a commonly accepted and understood sense-making device and a practical means of rationalizing childbearing.

Children, in the researcher's terms, have a clearly understood biological "value". This was denied by the questionnaire responses but became evident when talk, as a form of social action, was examined for its meaning.

The theoretical premises derived from Blumer provided a basis for this analysis. They might now be further elaborated to include a specifically phenomenological perspective which derives from Schutz.

Adopting Schutz's "stranger" approach, one might ask who are strangers in the world with respect to children, and how this strangeness is negotiated and accounted for. In the present study the strangers were the childless (who had no children), the adoptive parents (who got theirs by "unnatural" means) and the women who gave up their babies for adoption (chose not to rear the children they bore). That is, the strangers were people who contravened a commonly-held notion of biological order in fertility. Their strangeness was accounted for or negotiated with by saying (understanding), for example, that adoptive mothers had "something extra" to make them like "real" mothers, or that childless people were "sick" (physically or mentally), or that they gave their babies away. That is, they are "not like us". To make sense they have to be explained, since we "know" that such situations exist: childless or adoptive parents are not an illusion. In the extreme, the strangeness of childlessness was highlighted by people who expressed a disbelief that anyone could choose to be childless - there must be some (biological) reason for it, which was beyond individual control. Most often, however, strangers were accounted for by reference to biological explanation. Biology, as socially constructed, is one means which everyday people have available for making sense of the world.

The procedure suggested for gaining access to these understandings might be labelled a sociology of commonsense. Its aim is to start with the commonsense world of the subjects, understand it by interaction in that world, interpret those understandings in a manner which is sensible to researchers and to communicate them in a manner which reflects the world where the exercise began. This is an inductive exercise. Accuracy is dependent on understanding and honesty. Validity is dependent on the logical integration of data from multiple sources or subjects. Adequacy is a test of reasonableness in the everyday world context.

In the present study, the following methodological principles were employed to attempt to understand the "value", or meaning, of children:

1. Meaning arises out of and is reflected in the interaction that people have with each other. The "meaning" of children is defined by interaction with children and with others with respect to children.
2. Talk is a form of interaction in which meanings are communicated. To discover everyday as distinct from academic meaning, everyday talk rather than questionnaire survey talk or interview talk must be examined.
3. Talk is itself considered to be a sense-making device. Everyday talk is metaphorical. Therefore it should not be taken at "face value", but should be examined for the common sense which underlies it. It is thus regarded as "containing" expressions of sense-making.

Techniques which people might use for understanding why they have children can be categorised as, for example,

- (a) expressions of order in the world (for example, biological order - that it is "natural" to have children),
 - (b) expressions of ambivalence or tension, and how these are resolved, as reciprocal expressions of social order (e.g., whether one "pities" someone who cannot have children but scorns someone who chooses not to),
 - (c) expressions of marginality or deviance, and how instances of these are negotiated, as reflections of social order (for example, the woman who "gives up" her child for adoption, or the "selfishness" of the voluntarily childfree).
4. Interpretations of these expressions must clearly distinguish those which are the researcher's theoretical constructs from the practical interpretations which are the everyday sense-making procedures which the subjects and researchers have in common.
 5. Adequacy of the interpretation must be tested by taking the interpretation back to the subjects. This need not be done in a physical sense, but the researcher must ask if his/her interpretation would "make sense" (i.e., common-sense "sense") to people in the everyday world. That is, the test of adequacy is a test of being reasonable, and making sense.

As a consequence of such a process which examines order and contradictions of that order, the "meaning" of children so derived is a synthesis of the taken-for-granted and the deliberately negotiated. "Meaning" of children is thus interpreted as a social construction which is grounded in the everyday action and interaction of people in a world which to them is real and understood.

Summary

Contrary to the conclusion that might be drawn from the questionnaire

responses, and contrary to the earlier comment by the Hoffmans, notions of biology can be used as an explanation of fertility. This is not biology as a scientific understanding or physiological condition. Rather it is biology as a social construction, a way of ordering the meaning of one's life.

In New Zealand this biological understanding of childbearing incorporated ideas of fertility, virility and sexuality, notions of instinctive behaviour, and notions of genetics or inheritance. People not only believed in such notions, but they also believed in the legitimacy of using the biological paradigm itself as a mode of explanation. It was considered "scientific" and rational. It was shared in common with other members - i.e., is part of culture. Seen to explain the very basis of both individual and collective survival, biology might almost be regarded as a kind of fatalism: it may be "used" to remove childbearing from any subjection to conscious decision-making.

Although we might interpret our research abstractions otherwise, the people "out there" know that biology - that is, their biology as a social construction, not our biology as a theoretical scientific enterprise - has everything to do with why they have children, expect to have children, and expect others to have children. In real life, they know that people have children because it is "natural" to do so. The challenge to demographers is to understand how this knowledge is created, how it is communicated and how it is sustained. That challenge implies a rather different perspective to that most commonly applied in value of children research. The perspective implies a questioning, both of common sense understandings and of scientific interpretation. Interpretive sociology provides us with some principles for doing this.

References

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- Schutz, Alfred, 1973. "The Stranger". Pp.91-105 in Collected Papers, Vol.I, Maurice Natanson (ed). The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Appendix

Mrs Sumner : "And we sort of fleetingly mentioned it when we lost number three, and sort of said, well we'd give ourselves another year and then we'd talk about it."

Interviewer : "So it wasn't something that you wouldn't hear of?"

Mrs Sumner : "No. But it would've taken a lot of talking through I think. I feel in retrospect it would have. But that's because I think the issue has changed with adoption. My sister has adopted one, who is part-Maori, and I personally would be hung up on this. It would have had to be a pure white and I think my pride would have hated me to have had to stipulate it, because I don't feel I should have that preference. But I would have."

.....

Mr Sumner : "At the stage when we would have been considering adopting it would have been an emotional problem of the greatest magnitude. Now if someone came to talk about adoption and (with) the benefit of hindsight and 4, 5 kids, we wouldn't be too concerned."

Interviewer : "Is that because of your own experience or because adoption itself is something which is more talked about and people are more open about it?"

Mr Sumner : "No, I think if you haven't had a child, and you're thinking of adopting, it's a whole new ball game right from the start. You don't really know what you're in for. But if you have a family you can more readily accept that there'll be differences in kids anyway. And if you adopt one you accept that there'll be a difference there."

Interviewer : "So really, you're suggesting that it would be much easier to handle adopting a child into an already established family?"

Mrs Sumner : "Yes"

Interviewer : "If, for argument's sake, you wanted to have another child and you found that you couldn't, it would have been a much easier thing to have considered adopting that child than ... ?"

Mrs Sumner : "Yes. Because there would be some negative feelings about the fact that you hadn't been able to have your own anyway. Definitely."

Interviewer : "How do you think your parents would consider that? Do you think parents set a big store on ..."

Mrs Sumner : "... bloodlines ..."

Interviewer : "... seeing their ..."

Mr Sumner : "Yes, I'm sure that's the case, although obviously they'd accept it and realize it's better to have a family than ..."

Mrs Sumner : "I think both sets of our parents would, yes, and and certainly my parents have been very accepting of the one my sister has adopted. I think her two sisters have had a harder hassle than the grandparents have ... but they adopted for a change of sex."