

“This is a needed book for the 21st century.”

—Mardy S. Ireland, Ph.D., author of *Reconceiving Women:
Separating Motherhood From Female Identity*

THE BABY

Why Freeing Our Minds
from OUTMODED THINKING about
Parenthood & Reproduction
will CREATE a BETTER WORLD

MATRIX

LAURA CARROLL

"The Baby Matrix articulately and systematically challenges the multiple conscious and unconscious assumptions that go into the insistent 'pronatal' view of our American culture. Carroll details seven assumptions that make up this ongoing pronatal bias and summarizes relevant research from the last twenty years thereby effectively drawing the reader in to actually 'think' about each assumption.

Describing seven post-pronatal assumptions she then brings the reader toward seeing a society in which every adult would have the psychological freedom to find her/his way to creating a fulfilling adult identity that would not by necessity include parenthood. She lays out a clear roadmap for those in childbearing years to think through their decision to be or not to be a parent and offers compelling reasons why in fact not every adult 'should' become a parent.

This is a needed book for the twenty first century because we need to not only focus on individual and national identities, but, we must also begin to address the responsibilities we have as world citizens to our entire planet and its diminishing resources. Read this book."

-Mardy S. Ireland, Ph.D., author of *Reconceiving Women: Separating Motherhood From Female Identity*

"The Baby Matrix isn't a book about infertility—but it is one of the most helpful things I read while I was in my darkest moments. Carroll explores the myths and pressures behind pronatalism—the pervasive idea that everyone should have children—to make the argument that we'd all be better off if having kids were considered not an inevitability or a duty, but a vocation best suited for those who consider it a true calling. She debunks multiple misconceptions driving pronatalist attitudes, like the "biological clock" and the assumption that having children is the greatest source of human meaning and fulfillment. Reading *The Baby Matrix* as an infertile woman helped me distinguish what parts of my grief were from actually wanting to be a parent, and what parts were driven by social expectations and stigma around childlessness. And being able to define *why* I wanted children was ultimately empowering during a time I felt most helpless."

-Alexandra Kimball, BuzzFeed Contributor

“Carroll’s book is also for *all* of us, whether we are parents or not. Like no other book, it helps people become very aware of the social and cultural pressures surrounding parenthood, and paves the way to free themselves from those pressures when making parenthood choices. This will result in more people making the best parenthood decisions for themselves, will foster a society in which those who are best suited to become parents are the ones who have children, and one that knows what it means to bring a child into the world today.”

-Marcia Drut-Davis, author of *Confessions of a Childfree Woman*

What readers at large are saying...

“This book should be required reading for everyone thinking about having kids.”

“Laura Carroll beautifully and carefully uncovers the powerful and pervasive nature of pronatalism in culture in this highly accessible and very interesting book...It’s a fantastic read for anyone interested in seeing parenthood/non-parenthood from a refreshingly broad perspective and entering into this important decision with facts, intention, and purpose. Personally, I have never felt so excited, empowered, and validated by a book!”

“...I loved every single page of it... it’s quite scary how pronatalism affects our lives, how many people are still trapped in this baby matrix, and how its consequences are overlooked.”

“An eye-opener is an understatement!”

“*The Baby Matrix* questions humanity-old practices and beliefs, allowing readers to get a real sense of reproductive responsibilities versus want.”

“...well-researched and compelling book that makes readers reflect on what they have been brought up to believe—no matter whether they are single, married, or with/without children.”

“Amazing book. Changed my life!”

“Laura Carroll did a great job defining pronatalism and why it is so ingrained within our society. Her book reshapes the myths and offers a new way of looking at parenthood and reproduction.”

“While challenging the assumptions of pronatalism that most people just take for granted as part of our society, this book offers valid and logical alternatives to the pronatalist mindset.”

It “by no means condemns parenthood, and in many ways offers us valuable insight on both choices, be it becoming a parent or remaining/making the choice not to become a parent.”

“She lays out a clear road map for those in childbearing years to think through their decision to be or not to be a parent...”

“I recommend this book for high school students, the childfree and parents alike.”

“This book will challenge some beliefs about the life script.”

“This is one of the must read books for anybody considering children, or aren't. It is in my top 3 must read books.”

THE BABY MATRIX

Why Freeing Our Minds
from OUTMODED THINKING *about*
Parenthood & Reproduction
will CREATE a BETTER WORLD

LAURA CARROLL



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-For Michael-

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INTRODUCTION

Why It's Time for This Manifesto

In the movie *The Matrix*, the character Morpheus offers two pills to Neo—if he takes the blue pill, he will go on with life as he has before, believing what he has always believed. If he takes the red pill, he will find out what the “matrix” really is, and many of his earlier beliefs will be shattered. When it comes to taking a hard look at a specific set of beliefs that has driven our society for generations, *The Baby Matrix* is the red pill. It unravels these beliefs and shows us why they no longer serve us—or why they were never true in the first place.

What is this set of beliefs? It's called “pronatalism,” meaning “pro-“natal” or “pro-baby.” It's the idea that parenthood and raising children should be the central focus of every person's adult life. Pronatalism is a strong social force and includes a collection of beliefs so embedded that they have come to be seen as “true.”

For some people, perhaps you, there may be nothing more fulfilling than raising a child. But I think you'd agree that parenthood is not automatically the right choice for everyone. You don't have to look very far to find parents who never should have had children.

The problem with pronatalism is that it leads *everyone* to believe they should have children—even people who shouldn't have children. And pronatalism leads people to believe they have the right to have as many children as they want—even people who shouldn't have

children. This creates problems that extend beyond families and the children who may be suffering from the effects of poor parenting. At a time when we humans are consuming resources over 50 percent faster than the planet is producing them, every choice to bear a child has implications for the larger community. That's why this conversation about pronatalism is one that involves all of us, parents or not.

During my research for *Families of Two* and since then, I have learned a lot about how pronatalist beliefs affect us individually and collectively, and not in a positive way. This has been explored before; in the 1970s, Ellen Peck and Judith Senderowitz confronted pronatalism head-on with *Pronatalism: The Myth of Mom & Apple Pie*. Their book includes chapters with a number of different contributing authors who explain what pronatalism is, how and why it is so pervasive in society, and the negative effects of that pervasiveness.

It's time to take another hard look at pronatalism. Many people have begun to question its tenets, and rightly so. They are waking up to the fact that this set of implicit assumptions furthers the agendas of power structures such as the church, state, and industry—not individuals. They are questioning how they've been unconsciously influenced to accept beliefs that ultimately serve others' agendas, and how this negatively impacts not just themselves but people from all walks of life. Pronatalist assumptions dictate how we're supposed to follow the "normal path" to adulthood. They also put unwarranted pressure on us to have biological children (and the "right" number of them), fail to foster a society in which those who are best suited to become parents are the ones who have children, and do a disservice to children who are already here in need of loving homes. The assumptions also result in inequitable workplace and tax policies that favor parents over people with no children. And they work against leaving future generations a better world.

It's time for all of us to understand why we can no longer afford to leave pronatalist assumptions unquestioned and why now is the time to transition to a "post" pronatal society. *The Baby Matrix* is the manifesto to ignite this transition. In this book, I present seven long-held pronatalist assumptions and the reasons they are incorrect, are no longer necessary, or no longer work. I lay out an alternative set of assumptions that reflects present realities and supports true reproductive freedom and reproductive responsibility in today's society.

Don't misunderstand: I am not against people who choose to become parents. *The Baby Matrix* urges all of us to take a closer look at pronatal assumptions in order to see the truth about parenthood, reproduction, and our future. Like the red pill in *The Matrix*, which instigates an awakening to what is real, this book takes a hard look at why it's so important to stop blindly believing pronatalist doctrine and start realizing its serious costs. It poses powerful ways to shift our thinking for the betterment of all.

This book is for anyone who reveres the truth and wants the best for themselves, their families, and our world. If that's you, I say go down the pronatal rabbit hole where you will find the truths that need to be told, and see why I invite you to join me in being part of the emergence of a post-pronatal society.



1

AWAKENING TO PRONATALISM

Grist.org, a well-known environmental news and commentary site, claimed that 2010 was the year that “childless by choice” or the “childfree” went “mainstream.”¹ However, mainstream it isn’t. Having children remains the norm. If having no children by choice was part of the norm, it would mean that those who make this choice would be members of a widely-accepted group and that we as a society have accepted their choice. This is not the case. Why does our society find this choice so hard to accept? It boils down to an old and dominant underlying social force in our country called pronatalism.

What is Pronatalism?

Pronatalism is a powerful ideology and set of beliefs that goes back many generations. The book, *Pronatalism: The Myth of Mom & Apple Pie*, gives one of the best definitions of pronatalism: “...an attitude or policy that is pro-birth, that encourages reproduction, that exalts the role of parenthood.”² With its definition comes a host of supporting societal assumptions that might have served a purpose at one time, but have now outlasted their usefulness, or have actually never been true at all.

At its core, pronatalism is designed to glorify parenthood. While the existence of this glorification has a long history, in her 1995 book,

Why Don't You Have Kids?, author Leslie Lafayette wrote that the 90s may have been “the most pronatalistic period of our society.”³ However, it can be argued that the most pronatalistic time in our society is *now*. As Ellen Walker comments in *Complete Without Kids*, we are living in a time of “baby worship.”⁴ Thanks to celebrities and the media, pregnancy and the raising of children is glamorized like no other time in history.

While pronatalism is everywhere and affects all of us, it has not been seriously examined as a driving force in our society today. As far back as 1974, Peck contended that pronatalism was not talked about enough because it's one of modern society's “invisible devices.” That is to mean, then and now, it's so pervasive that we no longer realize it's there.⁵ To understand this pervasiveness, let me take you back in time to its origins and what led to the numerous ways its power manifests in so many areas of our lives.

Where Did Pronatalism Come From?

Historically, pronatalistic values have been driven by two motives: survival and power. Throughout human history, valuing fertility was necessary to ensure survival. For example, to ensure population growth in Roman times, ruler Caesar Augustus instituted the Augustan Laws, which rewarded people who had many children and penalized childlessness.⁶ The laws promoted the idea that it was a person's duty to ensure the survival of its society.

From as far back as 50 BC, the Fathers of the Christian Church instilled the idea of duty as well. It was a person's duty to God to “be fruitful and multiply.” Idolizing the role of motherhood ensured a growing population of the church's members, which would continue to increase the church's religious power. Over many years in history, the church's pronatalist forces have reigned along with social and

political forces as societies developed. Encouraging and even mandating population growth was important to offset population losses due to infant mortality, war, and disease. And the larger a society's population, the more it could expand and gain power.

High fertility has been necessary in any time of settlement in new territory. For early American settlers, for example, children were necessary for survival. Children, and lots of them, were needed to work the land and help with all that comes with homesteading. During this time, says sociologist E.E. LeMasters, people had children with no "great expectation," other than "simple care, nurture, and teaching of rural settlement skills." Having children was a practical matter, and one that brought economic benefit to a family.⁷

However, women's valued reproductive role didn't come without its downsides and risks. LeMasters pointed out that when a social role such as motherhood and fatherhood is difficult, a romantic myth needs to surround it to keep it in its most positive light.⁸ In this case, idealizing pregnancy and motherhood would continue to guarantee women would have children and ensure survival. Early feminist Leta Stetter Hollingworth wrote of the sources of these myths, or "social devices" as she called them, that were needed to emphasize the positives of parenthood and encourage pregnancy. In her 1916 paper, "Social Devices for Impelling Women to Bear and Raise Children," Hollingworth laid out nine social devices or forms of social control that promote the perpetuation of pronatalism.⁹

She called the first social device the creation of certain "personal ideals" of what it means to be a "normal" woman. These include pushing ideas like the belief that a "womanly woman" means wanting to be a mother, and wanting children is just part of being a woman. To admit otherwise would make one appear abnormal, something no one wanted to be. Hollingworth also spoke of the social device she called "public opinion." This device was found in all the different types of

media at that time, such as newspapers and magazines. Another social device that reinforced natalism was the law, such as laws that rewarded births and outlawed birth control and abortion. Laws preventing women from owning property were particularly powerful in fortifying natalism; not being able to own property of their own made women more dependent on men to provide them the place to do what socially accepted, womanly women did—have children.

Hollingworth also spoke to “belief” as a social device—specifically, those religious in nature. This includes any messages that promote reproduction as one’s duty to God. Education was another social device that was designed to ingrain early in students’ minds the idea that they are destined to grow up and become parents. Art was another powerful social device that upheld the ideal of motherhood, from painting to literary works and song.

“Illusion” has also served as a social device. Those who perpetuated illusions made sure that pregnancy and child rearing were spoken of in positive terms only, and they made it taboo to talk about the negatives, such as the agonies that can be present at childbirth, the tragedy of the death of the mother and/or the baby in childbirth, or the drudgery and challenges of raising children. They magnified the joys of motherhood so that women believed the illusions rather than recognized the realities.

Last, Hollingworth talked about the social device, “bugaboos.” These are supposed facts to influence women to have babies. For example, at the time she wrote this paper, to encourage women to have babies early in life, doctors told women that if they delayed pregnancy until 30 years or older, the “pains and dangers will be gravely increased.” The medical community at the time also purported that women who bore children would live longer than women who didn’t, and there were serious perils associated with having only one child.

These kinds of social devices have been the means by which pronatalism became a powerful social influence in society. They supported the post-World War II baby boom, along with the idealization of domestic life during that time, as men came home from the war and women returned home from men's jobs they had taken while the men were gone. These social devices continued and remained intact even during the women's movement. While the movement empowered women in a number of ways, it did not challenge childbearing directly. The empowerment that came from access to birth control focused more on their power to choose *when* to have a child, not *whether* to have a child at all.

Since the time of the women's movement, these kinds of expectations and pressures on women to become mothers have remained strong. When women began having careers outside the home, they began delaying parenthood, which fueled an increase in the numbers of women having infertility treatments. And while the 2008 U.S. Census fertility report tells us that peak childbearing years are between 25-29, the infertility business is going strong, as more women than ever over 40 years old are having their first child. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, between 1980 and 2004, the number of women giving birth at age 30 doubled, it tripled at age 35, and almost quadrupled after age 40. Birth rates are lower today than 30 years ago; the 2008 Census report indicates that women aged 40-44 had an average of 1.9 children compared to 3.1 in 1976. People may be having fewer children later these days, but it remains a social given that they will have them.¹⁰

Just like in times past, media, law, religion, education, and art support pronatalist ideals. Even today, there are taboos about telling the entire truth about parenthood, and the medical community also provides questionable information. Today, as in the past, social forces are reinforcing the universal idealization of parenthood and maternity.

Why Does Pronatalism Remain Pervasive Today?

You might ask yourself why pronatalism remains rampant today when we don't have the "underpopulation" worries of societies past. Even though we theoretically no longer need the social control mechanisms because population shortage is certainly not a problem, these social controls have hammered the universal longing for motherhood into our cultural hardware so hard for so long that it has sunk deeply into the fabric of our consciousness, culture, beliefs, and values. In a word, pronatalism is the norm. Like with other norms, we learn early in life what is expected, what the "rules" are, and why they are "right." Being around others conforming to the norms constantly reinforces those beliefs and influences our behavior.

Social controls are still in place for survival and power. Today, three realms greatly benefit from the perpetuation of pronatalism. Keeping pronatalism alive guarantees that government, the church, and businesses will continue to flourish and gain power. Government wants to encourage births so tax bases will grow, which ensures its survival and continued power. The church wants its adherents to cherish childbirth and parenthood so that the church can continue to gain more followers, which ensures its survival and continued power. More than ever today, business reaps the rewards of a pro-baby, pro-parenthood society because it supports the growth of capitalism. Pushing pro-baby values because of the demand it creates for products and services brings big profits to business. These power realms work to keep pronatalist norms in place and promote reproductive conformity.

The Media

The power of pronatalism in business is very evident in all forms of media. And it's so rampant that so much of the time, we don't even

notice it. Studies since the 1940s have shown that magazines come from a strong pronatalist position. Articles and advertisements project the ideal woman as mother, while glorifying pregnancy, babies, and raising children. Visual messages reinforce the awe and glorification of motherhood. Childbearing celebrities have never been more popular. Magazines idolize parenthood through the lives of the stars; in articles and photos, they follow the rich and famous' every natal move. In other print media, such as newspapers, we see countless articles and ads portraying the happy and amazing lives of families with children.

It's all over digital media as well, from ezines to the deluge of parenthood and parenting sites, not to mention digital advertising. Even the tech culture is child-centric in its approaches to advertising. Websites that have nothing to do with pregnancy, parenthood, or kids have Google ads about all of these things. Why? The algorithms pick up on certain words and associate them with their pronatalist roots. Or take Facebook—why do we see pregnancy ads on a 20-something's page on her birthday? The algorithm must predict that she will be getting pregnant soon. It seems the algorithms take certain facts or words from the site and formulate associations from a larger cultural context, not the context in which it appears. And that cultural context is child-centric.

Advertising on television, in print, and in digital media use pregnancy as a product sales tool. We see sentimentalized images of children and a multitude of products solving parents' problems. Pregnancy-related and children's products are big business. Advertising even uses the image of "family" to sell its products, whether the product is designed for that purpose or not.

Where else but in a child-centric society would television shows featuring a "mega-family" become a reality show sensation? These shows—"19 Kids and Counting" featuring the Duggars, "Kate Plus,"

“Raising Sextuplets,” and “Table for 12”—all celebrate the idea that you can never have too many children. And of course, there’s the media sensation, Nadya Suleman or the “Octomom,” who has a television documentary about her family of fifteen.

On the opposite side, it’s often what we don’t see that points more powerfully to pronatalism at work. How often do we see shows where there are couples without children because they are happy that way? Or dialogue that makes it clear that this is the case and an integral part of the show’s story? On talk shows, print media, and digital media, how often do you hear from celebrities about the *joys* of being a celebrity with no children? In the last few years, some celebrities have spoken out a bit more about their childfree status, but it’s nothing compared to the attention that celebrity parents get. Instead, from all media directions, we get sent the message that “family,” meaning parenthood and children, is what’s in style.

Baby as Status Accessory

Celebrities, coupled with our status-driven culture, have taken the baby-craze to new heights. People watch celebrities have perfect pregnancies and the “supernova” version of parenthood they present. They have wealth, the perfect family, and all the parenting accoutrements that show their socioeconomic status. They have the nannies and fandangos strollers. Their children go to all the right private schools, starting with hard-to-get-into pre-schools. Like the best Prada bag, their number of homes, and their glamorous lifestyles, their perfect children help show the world that they are at the top of the success heap.

According to *Momzillas* author, Jill Kargman, the baby-as-accessory concept has morphed “into the idea that one isn’t enough. It manifests in the status symbol of four-is-the-new-three megafamilies in New York, where just by having that many kids, it’s like saying we have

Oprah money; we can hack four tuitions, five bedrooms, the help, the life.”¹¹ The number of children it appears you can afford to have reflects your socioeconomic status in life, and like money, more is better.

People are motivated to emulate this picture of perfection, and not just in the upper socioeconomic echelons. An inordinate amount of energy goes into being perfect parents today. Jennifer Senior, a *New York Times* journalist who has written on the lives of parents, describes this energy as the “aggressive cultivation” that parents put into their kids these days. They want to be perfect parents of perfect kids.¹² This phenomenon has taken the pronatalist norm to new heights and helps keep it even more pervasive, because now more than ever before, parents can use their children as a tool for status achievement and recognition.

Policy

Governmental policy, particularly in the area of tax law, operates as a social control to reward reproduction. There are a number of ways the tax code benefits parents. For example, there is a personal exemption for each child under 19, or under 24 if the son/daughter is a full-time student. If the parents are divorced, the exemption goes to the parent who had most of the custody of the child. There is also the “child credit” or a tax reduction per child, as well as a “child care tax credit” and income tax credits for parents. Other examples include how parents have the opportunity to contribute to educational savings accounts with tax-free withdrawals for education-related expenses and get tax breaks from tuition programs in the form of higher education tuition credits and deductions.

Programs like welfare are intended to help those with little or no income, and this is a good thing. However, they are structured such that the welfare payments rise with the birth of the first child and rise

again with each additional child. This not only encourages births, but does so for women who can't afford it. Because of the demands of childcare, having more children can make it even more difficult for a mother to find work and break the cycle that keeps her on welfare.

Local laws also favor parents and children. For example, local property taxes very often go to public schools. Those with no children don't pay less than those with children, and depending on their reported income, they can easily pay more than families with children. Those with no children pay into the school system to invest in the country's future, but parents see the more direct benefit and more value for their tax dollars.

State, federal, and corporate policies also encourage pregnancy through parental leave policies. This kind of policy has its benefits. A recent report by the Center for Economic and Policy Research indicates that over 90 percent of employees who used paid parental leave (with partial wage replacement) said it "had a positive effect on their ability to care for their babies." Employees also reported that it improves a dad's bonding with his newborn. It also indicates that California's program had "no or very little impact on their business operations." In fact, 89 percent surveyed said this kind of leave had either no effect or a positive effect on productivity, 96 percent said it reduced employee turnover, and 99 percent said it improved morale.¹³

According to Jeremy Adam Smith, author of *The Daddy Shift: How Stay-at-Home Dads, Breadwinning Moms, and Shared Parenting Are Transforming the American Family*, only seven percent of men take advantage of parental leave, but about half of America's women have access to it.¹⁴ While parents can take this time to care for their new baby, those with no children (yet or by choice) don't get that time. All of these types of benefits favor and reward those who choose to reproduce, not those who do not.

The Church

The role religious organizations play as a pronatalist force cannot be underestimated. Christianity and Islamic religions are the two largest religions in the world, both of which adulate children and the role of parent. Over 78 percent of Americans are Christian. Most Americans are either Protestant (about 51 percent) or Catholic (24 percent).¹⁵ To one degree or another, Christians believe it is the word of God to propagate, that their children are gifts from God, and that they have a moral duty to bring God's gifts into the world. The Catholic Church believes in procreation so strongly that it forbids the use of birth control as a family planning tool and professes that a woman will die "in sin" if on any kind of birth control at the time of death. Just fewer than two percent of Americans practice Judaism, which also strongly values procreation. Together, most religions play a powerful role in influencing people to have children to fulfill their obligation to their chosen religious communities.

Schools

Pronatalist messaging begins at an early age in schools, from the first time children are told, in one way or another, that one day they, too, will be parents. Parenthood biases promulgate with teachers and textbooks, but these biases have not been studied much. One of the few studies that looked at biases in textbooks was done in the 1970s by Nancy Cox of the State of Maryland Commission on the Status of Women.¹⁶ Cox developed criteria to help identify pronatalism in textbooks and used them to determine whether they had a pronatal bias. The criteria included: 1) When "inevitability of parenthood is assumed," 2) when "childfree lifestyles and/or marriages are not acknowledged," 3) when "childfree marriages are treated as problematic or undesirable," and 4) when there is "adherence to theories

of maternal instinct or maternity as central to women's life." Cox surveyed textbooks used in the home economics department in the Baltimore County school system and found most had a pronatal bias.

These criteria can still be used today to evaluate textbooks and the attitudes teachers have that influence their students' thinking on parenthood. But have they been? This area has been sorely understudied. Biases as they relate to how gender roles appear in texts have been studied and show that there has been improvement in this area. Religious bias has also been studied, and, as a result, textbooks have shown more sensitivity in this regard in recent years. This isn't the case for parenthood bias.

The fact that there has been very little research on pronatalistic biases in schools suggests that these exist. Why the lack of study? Because pronatalism is the norm, and the expectation of parenthood is so strong, we just don't think to question it, much less study the impact of its influence.

We also see the evidence of pronatalism in the lack of classroom discussion about the childfree lifestyle choice. Because parenthood is assumed, the childfree lifestyle is rarely talked about in the classroom. If it is, it likely includes less than positive explanations and stereotypes. Most theories of gender identity still see womanhood as synonymous with motherhood, so students are taught to understand it in this way, which only reinforces the adulation of motherhood and parenthood.

Film, Books, Music, & Art

Pronatalism lives in story, in the form of film, books, and song. So many films feature love and relationships moving ultimately in the direction of marriage and children. In her piece, "Go Forth and Multiply," Eve Kushner, author of *Experiencing Abortion: A Weaving*

of *Women's Words*, accurately and wittily speaks to how pronatalist imperatives show up in films. In her words, some popular messages in films that idolize pregnancy and parenthood include:

- ❖ If you have an unplanned pregnancy, birth is the only option ... even if you or your partner is unhappy about the conception.
- ❖ If circumstances make the pregnancy problematic, don't worry—everything will work out somehow. Just be happy. After all, a baby is on the way.
- ❖ You will glow with pride and femininity as you proceed with the noble mission of carrying (the baby) to term.
- ❖ When you deliver the child, there will again be irrepressible joy and widespread celebration. It'll be glaringly obvious that birth was the only valid decision.
- ❖ If you're a man, you may feel unready or unwilling to have a baby (but) should rise to the occasion and improve yourself if necessary.
- ❖ Babies only strengthen romances. Couples may worry that new babies could stress out their relationship. But no—babies keep families together.
- ❖ What this world needs is babies, babies, babies. Bring them on by the caseload. Don't stop to think about the population explosion. Only sarcastic, recalcitrant jokers and misanthropes would be so low as to point out that three or four children might be more than enough for one couple.
- ❖ A childless life is worthless, and anyone who doesn't want kids must be bitter and selfish and morally deficient. If you postpone or eschew parenthood, you'll face a future of unhappiness and regret.¹⁷

In a word, storylines in film tell us that pregnancy and babies will bring the happy ending. On the flipside, pronatalism is reinforced by what we don't see in the movies. While there are childfree singles, we don't see childfree couples living just as fulfilling lives as those who are parents. The film, *Sex and the City 2*, is a rare example. Carrie and John are explicitly content together being childfree, but the storyline can't let that alone; in the film, Carrie has to question whether their life together shouldn't be something more.

In books, it is hard to find fiction that has protagonists who are childfree, much less stories that don't in one way or another cast the childfree in a negative light. As childfree column writer Lori Bradley observes, "Many stories begin with an interesting main character, only to disappoint as the character devolves into an obsession with children or childbearing."¹⁸ In nonfiction, even women's history books often don't acknowledge the existence of the childfree, much less the rising numbers of them. For example, in the recent book, *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women from 1960 to the Present*, respected author and journalist Gail Collins does not touch on the childfree life at all. Instead, she speaks to "the expectation that sooner or later a baby would come" and that in the new millennium, women have not been, "in general, responding to work stress by opting not to have children."¹⁹ She does not mention the rising numbers of women who are opting out of motherhood, or that for women aged 40-44, the numbers have doubled since the 1970s.²⁰ There are nonfiction works on the childfree life, but they are characteristically written by the childfree themselves, who oftentimes attempt to justify and demystify this lifestyle choice.

In song, we hear pronatalism's presence when the lyrics reinforce the life path—find love, find your life partner, and have children together to experience life's *raison d'être*, life's biggest gift of all. We

hear it anytime the lyrics exalt the bearing and raising of children and express woes about a life without children. We hear it anytime the lyrics uphold the ideals associated with motherhood and fatherhood. You don't have to tune in very closely to find these messages throughout popular music. We are so used to hearing them, we often don't realize they are there.

The same goes for the visual arts. In many historical periods of art, children have been idolized. This goes back to periods long ago in which paintings had religious themes. Today, anytime you see a painting or any visual work that puts mothers, fathers, and children on a pedestal or is designed to instill feelings of admiration for such themes, it invariably arises from the bedrock of pronatalist values in the culture. Just like with music, you don't have to look around much to see pronatalism is all around us in public murals, posters on the side of a bus, or works in art galleries.

Collectively, these cultural expressions keep pronatalism alive and well, but they are not at the root of what truly drives the strength of pronatalism. Underneath these are the core attitudes and beliefs—the value-based *assumptions* of pronatalism. The following chapters examine these assumptions and why we need to let go of them. They propose the adoption of alternative assumptions which reflect today's realities and promote ideas and practice that will make for a better world for all of us.



2

THE DESTINY ASSUMPTION

The first pronatalist assumption that deserves a hard look has to do with our fate in life. Pronatalist dogma tells us that everyone is destined to become parents. Today, because more people are starting to have children later, the assumption could be expanded to say, “We’re all supposed to want them—*eventually*.” Why? Because we are supposedly hard-wired to have children. Or said another way, the pronatalist assumption has been:

We have a biological instinct to have children.

From an early age, we’re taught that we’ll grow up and have children one day. Women in particular are given strong messages that they are wired to have children and *want* them. They’re told they’ll experience this uncontrollable urge from deep within calling them to become mothers and fulfill their biological purpose. Women are led to believe that this urge is primitive and has been hard-wired over many years of evolution. If this primal urge never arises, we’re told there must be something wrong with us. Giving birth, we’re told, is a basic human need.

Looking Closer

Let’s look at the heart of this assumption and ask, what is instinct? When we think of it in relation to animals, we think of behaviors they

just “do” without any training. For instance, birds know how to build nests, newborn sea turtles know how to walk into the ocean, and most animals know how to fight and protect themselves. Do human beings have instincts? Psychologists and sociologists have defined instinct differently over time, as research about human behavior has become more rigorous. By the end of the 1800s, these experts considered most kinds of repeated human behaviors as instinctive. By around the 1980s, however, psychologists like Abraham Maslow began to argue that humans have evolved to the point that they’re not at the mercy of their instincts. He asserted that “humans no longer have instincts because we have the ability to override them in certain situations.” Maslow and many psychologists and sociologists agreed that if we can choose to override a behavior, it isn’t an instinct.¹

Some experts argue that the desire for sex constitutes a biological instinct or primal urge. This may have been true in earlier phases of human evolution, but as humans and societies developed, having sex was not something people just automatically did; they consciously chose to engage in it. Sex and pregnancy are behaviors that, in Maslow’s terms, can be “overridden.” Seen this way, even sleep and hunger are not human instincts. It may seem extreme to say this, but the truth is we can choose to engage in these behaviors or not.

In addition, there is no real evidence to support the notion that everyone has a “biological instinct for the desire to bear children.” In the words of author Ellen Peck, “Conception is biological; pregnancy is biological. Birth is biological. Parenthood is psychological in its application.”² Just because we humans have the biological ability to conceive and bear children does not mean we have an instinctive desire to become parents or even have the ability *to* parent.

We know that during pregnancy, the woman is under the influence of hormones like estrogen and progesterone, which kick in at

conception and continue through pregnancy, along with the neuro-hormone, oxytocin, which fires at the time of delivery. Research also indicates that biology is at work in mom once the baby is born. For example, a good deal of research tells us that the scent of the baby becomes chemically imprinted in mom within the first few days of the baby's life. Mom's brain also responds differently to various baby behaviors; her brain activity looks different when the baby is smiling versus when it is not smiling.³

But what about *before* pregnancy and motherhood begins? What hard-wired biological process *creates* the desire for a child, or what neuropsychiatrist Louann Brizendine calls “baby lust—the deep felt hunger to have a child”? Brizendine contends that certain smells, like the smell of an infant's head, carry pheromones that stimulate a woman's brain to produce “the potent love potion oxytocin—creating a chemical reaction that induces baby lust,” that somehow is “nature's sneak attack to trigger the desire to have a baby.”⁴ If the brain worked in this way to create the longing, the urge, all women would end up feeling this way. But they don't. All women don't experience baby lust—so is it a lack of oxytocin or something else?

Research has looked at other biological processes that somehow get the “biological clock” ticking in women and men. A recent study done by St. Andres and Edinburgh Universities tells us that women lose about 90 percent of their eggs by the age of thirty.⁵ So we know there is egg loss, but how is it connected to the “biological urge” that many women claim comes over them? Is it because women are getting down to the final number of eggs, and somehow, their reproductive system instinctively sends their brains a message saying, “Use those eggs now!”? Like the supposed magical flood of oxytocin, if this sort of biological process was truly at work, all women would feel it. As far back as the 1970s, researcher and psychoanalyst Dr. Frederick

Wyatt said, “When a woman says with feeling she craved her baby from within, she is putting biological language to what is psychological.”⁶ Rather than a biological process, it’s a psychological process. The woman realizes that her reproductive years are coming to an end and that she might miss out on what pronatalist society tells her is the most fulfilling experience in life. Believing she might not get to have this experience can create quite the yearning for it.

The longing or yearning can also come from a desire to find purpose in life. Rather than delve into and figure out what purpose and fulfillment means to her, strong pronatalist messages make it easy for her to believe that “the” way to find purpose and meaning is through motherhood. Not only is she doing what all women are supposed to do in life, but she is also choosing the socially acceptable path, according to pronatalism.

How does the longing, the urge, work for men? Researchers have looked at how a biological “clock” relates to sperm and age. A good deal of research tells us what happens to men’s sperm as they age and how that affects fertility. Dr. Ethylin Jabs, Director of the Center for Craniofacial Development and Disorders at Johns Hopkins, sums up the research by saying that the “bottom line is: As men age, the percentage of damaged sperm they carry in their testes tends to increase.”⁷ Recent studies from Israel, California, and Sweden have connected “late paternal age” (statistically, “late paternal age” starts at 30) with some serious medical conditions. The longer a man waits to have a child, the more likely his child will be affected by things like schizophrenia, dwarfism, bipolar disorder, or autism. In some cases, the risk factors skyrocket. A 2005 study conducted by the University of California, Los Angeles, found a fourfold rise in Down syndrome among babies born to men 50 and older.⁸ In his book, *The Male Biological Clock: The Startling News About Aging, Sexuality, and Fertility*

in Men, Harry Fisch addresses similar risks and discusses what happens to men's ability to have children as they get older.⁹

So this tells us that the longer men let their biological clocks tick, the greater the risk of having a baby with a birth defect due to the poor quality of their sperm. But where is the biological link to wanting children to begin with? While many men don't describe the same kind of emotional yearning that women talk about, many feel strongly about wanting to become a father. Why? Because they've bought into the notion that becoming a father means they are virile, and that through fatherhood, they will find the true legacy of their lives.

We can look at the question of whether men or women have a biological instinct to want or have children another way. Rather than biological, the urge, the wanting has its roots in a *learned desire from strong social and cultural pronatal influences*. And we've been influenced so strongly that it feels like the desire for children is "innate"—it's so ingrained that we've thought it's just part of who we are. Leta Stetter Hollingworth gets to the heart of why it isn't: If wanting children was actually an instinct, there would be no need for the social controls to encourage and influence reproduction.¹⁰ If it were truly instinctive, there would be no need for the "social devices" and cultural pressures to have children. If it were instinctive, childbearing rates would remain high. Humans wouldn't think about it; they would just have babies and continue until they biologically could not.

Instead, childbearing numbers have varied over time. For example, in the 1930s, 20 percent of women had no children; in 1970, this number was 12 percent. Since the 1970s, the percentages have almost doubled, and recent figures are at about 20 percent. If it's instinctive to want children, we would not see this variability, nor would we see what the Center for Work Life Policy reports as the "exceptionally large number" of Gen Xers who are choosing not to have children.¹¹

For too long, pronatalist propaganda created by social institutions to control human behavior has influenced our emotions, thinking, and social values. It's time to recognize that the pronatal assumption that we are biologically destined to want children is *not* a biological reality. What is the reality?

The Alternative Assumption

Our biological capacities allow us to make parenthood a choice.

At one time, it was necessary to create social mechanisms to promote childbearing and ensure increases in population. The old Destiny Assumption has been one of those mechanisms. Look at where it's taken us. We now have more people on the planet than generations past could have ever imagined. We no longer need to live by the old notion that biology is destiny in order to ensure our survival. Now, we can hold beliefs that reflect what is real. Our biological reproductive capacity creates the possibility of reproduction, and our biologically-endowed ability to think and feel affords us the capacity to choose when and whether to have children. Social manipulation makes us think otherwise, but reproduction is ultimately a choice; it isn't an instinctual drive.

The Larger Reality

The Alternative Assumption reflects the current truth that we no longer need population growth. The global population is seven billion and counting, so no social good can come from continuing to believe that we're all destined to reproduce. According to Robert Walker, the Executive Vice President of the Population Institute, we could see the population rise by another two billion by mid-century, a calamity in a world already struggling to feed the seven billion plus people who are already here.¹² Given our current population-related problems, we are

far better served by a mindset that gives equal legitimacy to becoming a parent or remaining childfree.

Promoting the Right Parenthood Choice

The Alternate Assumption gives us back the power to make parenthood a conscious choice. It opens the way for us to look at whether we want the experience of raising children, and if we think we do, to look harder at how much of it relates to external conditioning. Assuming it's a biological imperative doesn't foster this kind of pre-parental reflection. Instead, the old mindset encourages us not to think too hard about pregnancy and parenthood, and just to do it like everyone else. The problem with people not giving this enough serious thought beforehand is that it confers parenthood on people who, in hindsight, realize that they should not have become parents and, given the choice again, would not choose to have children. Dr. Phil surveyed 20,000 parents, and one-third agreed with the statement, "If I knew what I know now, I probably wouldn't have started a family."¹³

Those parents may have come to this conclusion because their feelings shifted once they learned the realities of parenting. However, it can also mean that they didn't fully examine whether parenthood was right for them before going into it. And by "fully examine," I mean doing things like spending significant chunks of time with children of all ages and talking to parents about the less than positive aspects of parenthood. The latter can be tricky because pronatalist beliefs make it taboo for parents to admit any discontent. Living by the new Destiny Assumption will make it easier for parents to speak more openly about all aspects of parenthood, the good and the bad. This will be invaluable for those trying to decide whether parenthood is right for them.

In *I'm Okay, You're a Brat!: Setting the Priorities Straight and Freeing You From the Guilt and Mad Myths of Parenthood*, author Susan

Jeffers, Ph.D. offers invaluable questions for mindful consideration. She says that parenthood can be the right choice if you can truly say “yes” to the following statements:

- ❖ *Even though my life is good now, I am ready to trade it in for a different one;*
- ❖ *I have experienced many of the things I have always wanted to experience, such as education, career goals, and travel;*
- ❖ *I realize having a child will mean putting certain aspects of my relationship and other areas of my life on the back burner until my child grows up; and*
- ❖ *I understand that the process of parenting can be difficult.*¹⁴

This kind of self-reflection needs to be undertaken when people feel the proverbial “urge” or “longing” to have children. When we realize we can’t just chalk up that longing to instinct, we can better analyze the origins of our feelings. Here are other questions that need to be asked when people feel the “urge” or “longing”: What is at the essence of this feeling of longing? Is my longing truly to raise a child, or is it another yearning I think the child will fill for me and my life?

It needs to become commonplace for men and women of child-bearing age to ask themselves these questions *before* children come on the scene. We have to better educate people so that rather than assume that parenthood will give them meaning in life, they know enough to figure out what purpose means to them. They can then identify how children fit into that picture. Such a process of self-exploration can help people realize that what they are truly longing for is not a child, but something else. The better we understand our motives and the more we recognize parenthood as a choice and not a biological imperative, the more likely we are to make the best choice for ourselves and our society.

Societal Acceptance

This Alternative Assumption also fosters social acceptance of a life that does not include parenthood. If we recognize that parenthood is a biological possibility, not biological destiny, what reason is there to judge people who opt not to have children? Fully adopting the Destiny Assumption also allows our society to let go of judgments of those who are child-“less”—those who do want children but are having trouble having them or can’t have them. The supposition that giving birth is a biological imperative has put unnecessary pressure on want-to-be-parents to deliver on their reproductive destiny. Society has been all too good at reinforcing the old assumption with judgments like “you are somehow defective because you can’t do what you are supposedly wired to do, so you are a ‘failure.’” Focusing on pregnancy as something that *can* happen in life means we don’t have to judge others when it doesn’t happen. There is no reason to judge ourselves either. Dealing with the emotions that come with being childless is challenging enough. There is undoubtedly grief, but it’s easier to work through and self-reflect on the best next course to take if society’s judgments about not being able to get pregnant are not also an issue. This affords a healthier emotional environment in which to explore other options such as adoption or other ways to make children a meaningful part of one’s life.

Whether we are parents, childfree, or childless, if we can stop drinking prenatal Kool-Aid, we can put parenthood and non-parenthood in their rightful social and cultural context. Either choice is equally legitimate and is equally acceptable and respectable. There’s no reason to think otherwise.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



In addition to *The Baby Matrix*, Laura Carroll's books include *Families of Two: Interviews with Happily Married Couples Without Children by Choice*, *Man Swarm: How Overpopulation is Killing the Wild World* (co-author), *Voluntary and Involuntary Childlessness: The Joys of Otherhood?* (contributor), and *Finding Fulfillment From the Inside Out*.

Laura's books have been used in college curriculum, she is an internationally recognized expert on the childfree choice, and since the year 2000, Laura has been featured on network television, including ABC's Good Morning America, CBS' The Early Show, and has been a guest on a variety of radio talk shows, US and Canadian public radio. Her articles and work have appeared in major print and digital media, including *Fortune*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Vice*, *The Guardian*, *New York Magazine*, *Women's Health* South Africa and UK. She has also been a contributor at The Huffington Post. Find out more about Laura at lauracarroll.com.

