

Research Article

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The Transition of the Desire for Children: Exploring the Origins and Factors

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to understand how and when the desire to have children is developed. Previous research on pregnancy and childbirth has predominantly focused on individuals who have already given birth or become parents, with an emphasis on the act of giving birth. Recently, there has been a gradual increase in research in Japan examining infertility treatment patients and individuals who have chosen not to have children, as infertility treatment has gained more visibility. However, the factors influencing the decision to have or not have children, as well as the subsequent changes in attitudes, have not been adequately explored. In the medical field, there is a concept called preconception care, where women and couples consider future pregnancies while addressing their lifestyle and health. However, this concept often prioritizes natural scientific factors like alcohol consumption and smoking experiences, overlooking the broader social science aspects. Decisions and considerations related to pregnancy and childbirth involve complex social factors such as economic reasons and partner perspectives. In this study, we aim to examine reproduction from a more sociocultural perspective, and to achieve this, we will conduct interviews. The interviewees will include professionals such as teachers and obstetricians who are involved with parents and children in their professional capacity, considering ethical considerations. This approach allows us to gather responses from a third-party perspective. For the analysis, we will employ the KJ method, which is well-known as a qualitative research analysis technique. By examining these elements, we aim to shed light on the formation of thoughts and considerations concerning pregnancy and childbirth.

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Introduction

Why do we desire children? In recent years, societal values and attitudes toward families have become increasingly diverse, leading to changes in the choices surrounding marriage and parenthood. While in the past, many individuals considered getting married and having children as a natural progression, the present reality includes a growing number of people who choose not to have children or face infertility issues even when desiring to become parents. However, despite being aware of these circumstances, there still exists a strong desire in some people to have children, myself included, as I have harbored this desire since childhood. Nevertheless, the origins of such desires and the reasons behind wanting to have children have not been extensively studied in the past. Therefore, this research aims to explore why individuals desire children, investigating the factors and evolving thought processes associated with this desire.

The objective of this study is to elucidate how the idea of having children is constructed. Previous research in the field of pregnancy and childbirth has primarily focused on individuals who have already given birth or become parents, with childbirth as the central point of investigation. In recent times, with the increase in infertility treatments and the acknowledgment of diverse circumstances, there has been a gradual increase in research concerning infertility

patients and individuals who have chosen not to have children in Japan. However, the processes through which various factors influence the decision to have or not have children and how these thoughts evolve afterward have not been adequately explored. In the medical field, there exists the concept of preconception care, which involves women and couples contemplating future pregnancies and addressing their lifestyles and health accordingly. However, this approach has primarily emphasized quantitative elements, such as alcohol consumption and smoking history, while the qualitative aspects have been underrepresented. Decisions and thoughts related to pregnancy and childbirth are influenced by complex social factors such as economic considerations and the partner's views. This study aims to extract these elements and explore the fluctuations in emotions, shedding light on how thoughts regarding pregnancy and childbirth are developed.

Research Literature

Researchers Z. Neil and J. Neil conducted a study in 2022, examining the status of having children in Michigan, a state with demographics largely representative of the entire United States. The study aimed to highlight the lack of research on those who choose not to have children, known as "childfree," despite their significant numbers. The survey offered the following options:

- Having children (Parent)
- Planning to have children in the future (Not yet parent)
- Childfree (Childfree)
- Wanted children but couldn't have them (Childless)

- Undecided about having children (Undecided)
- Indifferent, whether having children or not (Ambivalent)

Additionally, Sato’s research focused on individuals who chose not to have children. Sato noted that previous research primarily centered on women who became parents, neglecting those who did not. While recent studies have begun to explore topics like infertility treatment experiences and decisions, they are still in their early stages. Research from Western countries has started to examine the psychological and long-term effects of childlessness, but this area remains relatively understudied in Japan. Sato also highlighted how the social significance of having children, the advancement of reproductive medicine, and ethical norms regarding reproduction can vary between cultures and nations. From a cultural anthropology perspective, Matsumoto studied reproduction and family. Matsumoto pointed out that reproduction always involves considerations beyond oneself because human life is limited, and societies must continually produce new members for their continuity. These considerations extend beyond just individuals and can encompass cultural, medical, policy, and rights-related aspects. For example, in Japan, there was a long tradition of home births with only family members or midwives present, but today, hospital births are the norm and home births are considered risky. While it may seem that individuals have the freedom to choose their birthing method, the available choices are often limited, and individuals may mistakenly believe they are making unique choices. Similarly, when it comes to desiring or not desiring children, people might think they are making free choices when, in fact, their options have already been narrowed down.

In the field of medicine, there is a concept known as preconception care, where women and couples consider future pregnancies and focus on their lifestyles and health. Over the past 20 years, this approach has gained momentum, particularly in the United States, leading to the establishment of standards and guidelines for promoting preconception care. In 2006, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States issued a report related to reproductive health, and in 2013- 2014, the World Health Organization (WHO) compiled a report titled “Preconception Care.” In 2015, a Preconception Care Center was established in Japan within the National Center for Child Health and Development.

The benefits of preconception care include promoting healthy behaviors, increasing internal health control, boosting self-efficacy, and reducing anxiety during pregnancy. The items on the preconception checklist provided by Preconception Care Centers are listed in Table 1, Preconception Checklist (for Women).

Table 1: Preconception Care Check Sheet (For Women)
Preconception Care Check List (for women)

• Maintain a Healthy Weight.
• Quit smoking and Avoid Passive Smoking.
• Limit Alcohol Consumption.
• Strive for a Balanced Diet.
• Actively Incorporate Folic Acid Into Your Diet Through Meals and Supplements.
• Aim for 150 minutes of Exercise per week. Keep both your Mind and Body Active.
• Avoid Accumulating Stress.
• Protect Yourself From Infections (Rubella, Hepatitis B/C, Sexually Transmitted Infections, etc.).
• Get Vaccinated (Rubella, Influenza, etc.).
• Avoid using Illicit Drugs.
• Steer Clear of Harmful Chemicals.
• Check for Lifestyle-Related Diseases (Blood Pressure, Diabetes, Urine Tests, etc.).
• Get Screened for Cancer (Breast Cancer, Cervical Cancer, etc.).
• Consider the Cervical Cancer Vaccine at a Young Age.
• Establish a Regular Gynecologist.
• Learn about your Chronic Conditions in Relation to Pregnancy (e.g., Medication Use).
• Be Aware of your Family's Medical History.
• Get Vaccinated.
• Maintain Oral Hygiene.
• Involve Your Partner in Managing your Health.
• Plan: Consider Future Pregnancy and Childbirth as Part of Your Life Plan.

Materials and Methods

In this chapter, we will detail the research methodology, analysis approach, survey content, and the insights derived from it. The survey involved conducting interviews with experts in the field of childcare and parenting, such as educators and obstetricians, in order to explore the leverage points of the study. Up to Chapter 2, we have discussed the complexity of various factors intertwined in reproduction. The objective of the survey is to investigate where people are paying attention to and being influenced among these factors. Subsequently, we organized the points and challenges obtained from the interviews and reevaluated our hypotheses.

Through the snowball sampling method, we selected experts in the field of childcare and parenting as our survey subjects via personal introductions. The main topic of the interviews, “Why do people desire children?” is likely to touch upon interviewees’ backgrounds, their relationships with their own children or partners, and other personal matters. This makes it a subject requiring careful ethical considerations. Therefore, as a preliminary investigation, we focused on third-party experts. A list of interview collaborators is provided in “Table 2: Interviewee List.”

Table 2: Interviewee List

Interviewee	Occupational Category	Occupation	Age	Gender	Additional Info
A	Education	Nursery Teacher	20s	Female	-
B	Education	Nursery Teacher	20s	Female	-
C	Education	Kindergarten Teacher	20s	Female	Works at an international school
D	Education	Elementary School Teacher	20s	Female	-
E	Education	Elementary School Teacher	20s	Male	-
F	Education	Elementary School Teacher	20s	Female	-
G	Education	Elementary School Teacher	30s	Male	-
H	Education	Middle School Teacher	20s	Female	Previous experience as an elementary school instructor
I	Education	High School Teacher	30s	Male	-
J	Education	Education Cram School Instructor	20s	Male	Specializes in STEAM education at a private learning institute
K	Healthcare & Welfare	Occupational Therapist	20s	Female	As a part-time job at a day service facility for special-needs children
L	Healthcare	Obstetrician and Gynecologist	30s	Female	-
M	Healthcare	Nurse	20s	Female	Holds a midwifery qualification
N	Public Relations & Media	Medeia Management	30s	Male	Engages in providing information services related to women’s health

The age group of interviewees is limited to individuals in their 20s and 30s, which shows a bias. However, since the primary aim of the preliminary survey was to establish the research methodology, we did not add individuals from different age groups. While the majority of the collaborators belong to the education category, they each work in different locations, reflecting regional characteristics, so we included all of them as survey subjects. Although elementary school teachers make up a significant portion of the occupations, we determined that it is not a problem since we have been able to conduct interviews with ten different types of specialists after excluding duplications.

Between January and February 2023, semi-structured interviews were conducted using the online meeting tool Zoom. With the consent of the interviewees, Zoom sessions were recorded and later transcribed. Furthermore, prior to the research cooperation request and at the beginning of each interview, the research and interview purposes were communicated both in writing and orally. The interviewees were informed about the confidentiality and protection of personal information, interview content, and data. They were also informed that they were not obligated to answer any questions they did not wish to address, and their consent was obtained before commencing the interview.

The research structure involved interviewing experts to gain insights into the thoughts of children and parents. In the section focused on children, the objective was to understand “how children under the influence of these experts perceive and comprehend the idea of having children.” The interviews were conducted with individuals who regularly interact with children, including nursery teachers, kindergarten teachers, educators, cram school instructors, and occupational therapists working with special needs students.

The content of the questions varies depending on the phase of interaction with children and the profession of the expert. Table 3 provides Sample Questions about Children below.

Table 3: Sample Questions about Children

Sample Questions
What are the Influences and Preferences of the Children?
How do they perceive the Idea of having Children?
What are their Thoughts on Marriage?

In the Parent section, we conducted interviews with the main theme being, “How do parents feel about having children, and what are their expectations for their children?” We conducted interviews to understand how parents think from the perspective of experts. We interviewed professionals who deal with parents, such as obstetricians, nurses from infertility treatment clinics, and media professionals specializing in women’s health, as well as professionals who primarily interact with children, such as educators, and also engage with parents through meetings and other means.

Sample questions for parents are provided in Table 4 (Sample Questions - Parents). These samples are directed towards obstetricians and nurses working in infertility treatment clinics.

Table 4: Sample Questions about Parents

Sample Questions
What is the Demeanor of Patients when they discover they are Pregnant?
What is the Mentality of patients before Giving Birth?
Do you notice any changes in the Patients' Emotions after Childbirth?

For the overall analysis of the survey, the KJ method by Kawakita was utilized, which involved conceptualizing and classifying the obtained information. The KJ method is one of the qualitative data analysis techniques that involves grouping data, illustrating the relationships between groups, and then articulating and interpreting the results in written form. Through these processes, researchers actively use subjectivity to generate new ideas and hypotheses. This characteristic was leveraged in the preliminary investigation to deepen hypotheses using the KJ method. The originator of this method, Jiro Kawakita, was a cultural anthropologist, and the fundamental principle of the KJ method is to “let the data speak.” Therefore, with reference to Tanaka’s KJ method analysis, two points were noted for the analysis. The first point is not to “fit it into prior research.” Organizing data based on existing hypotheses or theories can compromise fidelity to the data. Moreover, the KJ method starts as a creative thinking method, aiming to derive new insights from the data. Fitting it into prior research can hinder the discovery of new perspectives. The second point is not to “classify by categories.” One of the steps in the KJ method involves grouping, which can be used as a method for categorization. However, as mentioned earlier, the primary goal of the KJ method is to generate new ideas. Categorizing and organizing are not the primary objectives.

Results and Discussion
Analysis for Children

Through the survey, it was possible to explore the understanding and recognition process and factors related to having children. It was found that thoughts about having children change due to external factors such as environment and culture from infancy to high school. The following are trends and factors that were observed as changes in thinking:

Undivided Family Roles (Infancy)

During infancy, there is an awareness of family and family structure, but the roles within the family are not clearly defined. This is analyzed from the following statements:

- “(The child) thinks her sister is also her child.”
- “A student said that they understood boyfriends and girlfriends, and they understood wives and husbands, but they don’t get the difference.”

While they understand terms like “sister” or “wives and husbands” within the family context, they may not grasp the nuances of these relationships, perceiving the family as a whole unit.

Children Wanting to Care for Others (Infancy)

During infancy, there is a tendency for children to want to take care of things like dolls and stuffed animals. This tendency is analyzed from the following statements:

- “Many kids really like taking care of dolls like Popo-chan.”
- “They make stuffed animals into babies.”
- “(In pretend play) there can be three mothers.”

Experts suggest that the desire to care for others is not limited to whether the child has younger siblings. While this tendency is stronger in girls, boys also exhibit it to some extent through play. Some experts even speculate that children may mimic the care they see mothers, caregivers, or kindergarten teachers providing.

Additionally, this kind of play often extends to the desire to have children, which is observed during this age:

- “I want a baby, I want a baby.” They always say that.
- “Babies are so cute, I want a baby.” Some kids say that too.

Seeing Marriage Rings as Symbols (Infancy to Present)

Children begin to understand that wearing a marriage ring indicates someone is married, starting from infancy. They may not understand when the number or placement of rings is different and may ask questions about it, indicating that they judge based on the location and quantity of rings.

- “I know if someone has a ring on, they’re married.”
- “(If someone usually doesn’t wear an engagement ring but suddenly has two rings on) Why are there two rings?”
- “There’s an Irish teacher at our school, and in Ireland, they say that when you get married, you wear rings on both right and left ring fingers. From the children’s perspective, it’s like, why is that man wearing rings on both hands? That teacher gets bombarded with questions every year.”

Furthermore, some children understand that wearing a ring implies marriage and having children. The following statements indicate this understanding:

- “I saw that they had a ring, so I thought Ms. C is married. Does that mean she has a baby now?”
- “I got married last year and had a wedding and everything, but when they saw the ring, they were like, ‘So, you have a child now?’”

Relationship between Marriage and Children (Infancy to Present)
Teachers (kindergarten teachers, caregivers, and educators) frequently perceive children as having children. The analysis revealed an understanding of the age at which people get married and have children.

- “Ms.XX, you have children, right?”
- “Elementary school kids, around 5th and 6th grade, often talk about when the teacher will get married or how many children they want. There were a lot of discussions like that.”
- “Kindergartners often said they don’t want to get married. (In one class with the same students since kindergarten), there’s a culture of having disputes over who likes and dislikes whom, so when it comes to relationships and marriage, it’s a bit complicated.”

Moreover, they understand the relationship between marriage and having children, and they also understand the sequence of getting married before having children:

- “When I told a kindergarten girl that babies are cute, she said, ‘Ms. C is married, so does she have a baby in her tummy?’”
- “When I got married last year and they saw the ring, they thought, ‘Does that mean you have a child?’”
- “Most older kids pretty much understand that if someone has a ring, they’re married and have children.”

Focusing on the Present (Elementary School to Present)

This tendency is observed from current elementary school students to high school students. They tend to focus on the present and do not often imagine their future. This can be attributed to their busy schedules with activities such as lessons and club activities, as well as their desire to work in the future. When considering their future, they do not often imagine marriage or having children.

- “Right now, I feel like I have a lot on my plate.”
- “Recently, kids are really busy. Extremely busy. I think they have more extracurricular activities now. There are kids who have activities 7 days a week, or they have three activities on Saturdays. Children are so

Analysis for Parents

I analyzed the expectations and thoughts of parents regarding their children and having children. Concerning their children, a strong desire for them to “enjoy going to school every day” was frequently observed. However, the reasons behind this desire varied. As explained earlier, in the section about parents, we couldn’t obtain sufficient information from two specific challenges.

Uncertain Times (Perinatal Period)

From the time of pregnancy onwards, expectant mothers go through uncertain times, oscillating between anxiety and joy. While they experience happiness from the pregnancy itself and the feeling of fetal movement, they also go through moments of anxiety, not knowing if the child will be born safely until delivery.

- “When we found out about the pregnancy, everyone seemed happy.”
- “In cases of ectopic pregnancies, surgery is often required, so there’s a significant mental and emotional burden. They seem to be going through a lot of hardship.”
- “Up until around 12 weeks, the risk of a miscarriage is high, so when they get past that point, you can see a more relieved expression.”
- “Once they enter the stable period (of pregnancy) and start feeling fetal movements... it seems like they are even happier.”

There is a mix of happiness and anxiety during pregnancy, especially before childbirth, when the uncertainty of labor and the safety of the baby are prominent concerns.

Instinctual Mental State (Childbirth)

During childbirth, mothers often exhibit what is described as an “instinctual mental state.” This state is characterized by the ability to endure and forget oneself, particularly during labor contractions and the delivery process.

- “Before giving birth, during the time when contractions are happening, they seem to forget themselves.”
- “During childbirth, it’s not their usual selves; it’s like their instinctual mental state or personality comes to the fore.”

Desire for Children to Enjoy School Every Day (Child-Rearing)

After childbirth, many parents express a desire for their children to enjoy going to school every day. During discussions with teachers from kindergarten to high school, parents often express concerns about whether their children will adapt to the new environment more than their expectations for their children.

- “I want them to enjoy going to school every day the most.”
- “Basically, as long as they get along with friends, it’s good.”
- “The most important thing is that they have fun. As parents, we probably want to hear them say they had fun when they come back.”
- “It seems like they prioritize things related to relationships with people and the idea of going to school every day.”
- “As long as they’re happy and cheerful, it’s all right. That’s what many parents seem to think—either a happy child or good grades. It’s really one or the other in our school.”

Parents want their children to have fun at school because of the rapid changes in their environment and the necessity for them to attend school to make a living. Each year, students change classes, and when they transition from elementary to middle school, the physical environment changes significantly. Additionally, Japan has seen an increase in dual-income households, with more than 60% of parents working outside the home, regardless of the number of children they have.

- “For 1st-year middle school students, I primarily wish for them to enjoy going to school, rather than having expectations. It’s more like a wish from the heart.”
- “If a child becomes a school refusal case, it can become a burden for the parents because they can’t go to work. That’s what I think.”

Challenges

Finally, two issues identified in the parental section are outlined. Firstly, when talking to experts, parents tend to focus on alleviating worries and anxieties. Consequently, it was challenging to obtain actual feelings and thoughts about their children from interviews with professionals.

- “When I watch how the mothers behave, in public, they don’t seem to say things like, ‘My child is so cute,’ so much. So, I thought that maybe worries come first when they talk about it in public.”
- “Especially when it comes to childcare professionals, they want to eliminate elements of anxiety.”
- “The most frequent topic is about studying, the child’s learning progress, and test scores. Next would be questions about the child’s relationships with others in the class, who they get along with, etc. Those are the things parents are concerned about.”

Secondly, it was noted that points of contact with experts do not emerge until a specific trigger occurs. In this study, the thoughts before pregnancy were rarely discussed because the opportunity to consult experts arises after events such as infertility treatments or the need for egg freezing.

- “From what I observed, when mothers go for consultations, especially at fertility clinics, they seem to want to eliminate worries or anxieties.”
- “They prioritize adapting to the school environment and enjoying school every day before anything else.”
- I’ve never seen children expressing a desire to get married.”

Conclusion

The hypothesis prior to the investigation was that the reasons people desire children are shaped not only by instinct but also by culture and environment. As a result of the study, it was found that during labor and childbirth, pregnant women often exhibit an instinctual aspect, wherein they seem to forget themselves. However, in most other scenarios, such as the significance of marriage rings, school culture, relationships with parents and teachers, and various factors, it was observed that thoughts about having children are formed through these influences. Additionally, the study shed light on how children themselves contemplate reproduction and how this evolves over time.

On the other hand, when it comes to parents, due to the structural limitations of expert interviews, it was not possible to extract their thought processes, transitions, or influencing factors. The way in which parents shape their thoughts before conceiving or desiring children remains unclear.

As a future outlook, incorporating the methodology of life story research, which follows the life journey of an individual, can be considered to capture the evolution of reproductive thoughts. Given the author’s personal interest as a stakeholder in understanding “why people desire children,” there is contemplation of analysing the author as the research subject. Furthermore, the focus of the research would primarily revolve around the stages when individuals begin to contemplate childbirth or reproduction. This would encompass stages preceding parenthood and would also include a diverse range of statuses and situations, such as individuals who do not desire children. By broadening the scope of research to include these aspects, it is anticipated that a more comprehensive understanding can be achieved.

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