

The eReview provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage.



Why have children?

What is an ethical debate to some is a more simple desire for many more

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Overall, C. (2012). Why Have Children? The Ethical Debate. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Prospective parents might spend time pondering things like nursery colours, child rearing strategies or baby names. Few spend time contemplating whether children will bring them sufficient happiness, whether they have the “right” to reproduce in the first place or how their child might contribute to environmental degradation. Enter feminist philosophy professor at Queen’s University, Christine Overall, who aims to change that with her 2012 book called *Why Have Children? The Ethical Debate*.

There should be a burden on potential parents to ponder the moral considerations of bringing a new person into the world, Dr. Overall insists. She writes, “[i]n contemporary Western culture, it ironically appears that one needs to have reasons not to have children, but no reasons are required to have them.” Dr. Overall’s controversial thesis is that parents (known to her as “inseminators” and “gestators”) should not have more than one child per adult.

While it’s likely that Dr. Overall doesn’t intend her book to guide public policy, she’s chosen to examine issues that are focal points in politics and policy today. One of these is demographics, specifically, how to grapple with Canada’s flatlining youth population as the number of elderly surges. The policy implications that her recommendations would have, if they were implemented, are alarming enough to merit an examination.

Extrapolating on ideas that were cutting edge back when tie-dye was popular, namely those that echo the sentiments of Paul Ehrlich’s 1968 *The Population Bomb*, she manages to ignore a growing body of demographic evidence showing that the western world needs more people, not fewer.

Statistics show the following:

- Since 2006, childless couples have been more prevalent than couples with children. Canada’s average fertility rate of 1.67, well below the replacement rate of 2.1, clearly demonstrates that the woman with many children is much further from the national average than the woman with none. [1]

- By the year 2015, the elderly could outnumber children in Canada.[2] As highlighted in a recent international report by Dr. Brad Wilcox, sociology professor at the University of Virginia, this presents concerns for our economy, as employers are unable to find talent to staff businesses and likewise for healthcare and welfare, as we struggle to pay the bills for social services. [3]

Even United Nations statistics show a continual decline in worldwide birth rates. Nonetheless, the author persists in antiquated fears of overpopulation. She insists that, “[l]arge families are parasitical on small ones in the sense that some families’ lower fertility rate gives parents of large families the illusion that their procreative choices are not environmentally costly.” University of Toronto professor Clifford Orwin states he wishes he had more children: “I’m sorry, learned researchers, but my calculation is different from yours. Looking at my own two children, now young adults, I find myself completely unrepentant... I wish I could have had more.” Dr. Overall responds to this by writing, “his failure to acknowledge any environmental responsibility is reprehensible.”

The bigger problem, so often overlooked by feminists, is that, well, people like kids. They don’t feel obligated to contrive a philosophical justification for having them. Surveys indicate women in Canada today want to have more children than they are currently having. [4] Infertility has become a pressing issue and many women are surprised and saddened to learn that by their thirties and forties, natural fertility has declined significantly and fertility treatments are not always successful. Research by Dr. Judith Daniluk, a professor at the University of British Columbia, reveals that women are vastly overconfident that new medical advancements will be able to compensate for waning fertility as they age. [5]

It’s not only in demographic research that the author has catching up to do. She is also behind on social science research showing children fare best when raised by their own married parents. [6] Instead, she puts forward the idea that marital status is not a determinant of one’s success as a parent. This is not borne out by the research. Single parents are more prone to live in poverty and suffer from depression. Children raised in two parent families are more likely to excel in school, exhibit fewer behavioral problems and be healthier. [7]

While most people see some value to human beings on the planet, according to Dr. Overall, we are under no moral obligation to ensure the perpetuation of our own species. The capriciousness of her one-child-per-adult limit should raise questions for readers of all persuasions. Those who buy the author’s overpopulation arguments will likely stick to the Canadian average of well-below one child per adult. Others who prefer large families might rightly identify some of the ironies—that they have large families in lieu of, for example, taking gas-guzzling flights to far away places for holidays.

The reality is that most Canadians are reproducing at a rate acceptable to the author, without giving any thought to the philosophy behind it. Though thorough in its deliberation of philosophical questions, *Why Have Children?* demonstrates just how far removed from reality the feminists in today’s universities are.

Canadian parents will find time is better spent by skipping this book in favour of choosing nursery colours, child rearing strategies and/or baby names. Those with time to spare might take a moment to refute the false notions presented in *Why Have Children? The Ethical Debate*.

Endnotes

- [1] Statistics Canada. (2011). Births and total fertility rate, by province and territory. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Retrieved [here](#).
- [2] Statistics Canada. (2012). Population Projections: Canada, the provinces and territories. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Retrieved [here](#).
- [3] Wilcox, B. and Cavallé, C. (2011, October 3). The sustainable demographic dividend: What do marriage and family have to do with the economy? Charlottesville: The Social Trends Institute. Retrieved [here](#).
- [4] World Values Survey. (2000). Ideal number of children. Retrieved [here](#).
- [5] Daniluk, J., Koert E. and Cheung, A. (2012). Childless women's knowledge of fertility and assisted human reproduction: identifying the gaps. *Fertility and Sterility*, 97(2), pp. 420-426.
- [6] Manning, W.D., Smock, P.J., and Majumdar, D. (2004). The relative stability of cohabiting and marital unions for children. *Population Research and Policy Review*, 23, pp. 135-159.
- [7] For an extensive list of sources on this, see footnote two in Mrozek, A. and Walberg R. (2009). [Private choices, public costs: How failing families cost us all](#). Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada.