

Between Existential Fulfilment and Economic Constraints: Unpacking the Childbearing Decision-making Process

Extended abstract

Introduction

The decision to have a first child and become a parent, or to have more children and grow one's family, is one of the most important life decisions an individual can make. As with any decision, it involves an assessment of the costs and benefits of having a first child, or an additional child. A large range of scales and instruments have been developed by demographers and social psychologists to assess these perceived costs and benefits. The perceived costs or negative motivations for childbearing may include: the direct economic expense, opportunity cost of lost income, the stress and worry of raising children, discomfort of pregnancy and labour, limited time for leisure or other activities, potential for relationship tension. Some of the positive motivations or benefits of children identified include giving meaning to life, carrying on a family name, having someone to love, social recognition, companionship for another child, strengthening/growing an existing bond with a partner, and assistance in old age. These perceived costs and benefits will vary according to an individual's circumstances and their stage in the life course. Discussion of risk and uncertainty as it pertains to childbearing is also prominent in the literature. A module has recently been included in some Generations and Gender surveys, which includes questions about global crises, including military wars and conflict, economic crises, pandemics, climate change, etc. These are likely not seen as direct costs of having children, but uncertainty about these issues may affect people's perceptions about having children.

As noted by Bein, et al (2021) the perceived costs and benefits of children are a key component of numerous theoretical models of fertility decisions including Becker's (1960) economic utilitarian model, as well as the 'Value of Children' (VOC) theory which was particularly popular in the 1970s and 1980s (Hoffman, et al 1978). These earlier theories were criticized for being overly simplistic and reduced the childbearing decision making process to a simple cost-benefit analysis (Bein, et al 2021; Liefbroer 2005). This led to more nuanced theories such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen & Klobas 2013). In the Theory of Planned Behaviour as applied to fertility behaviour, beliefs about the perceived beneficial or bad implications of having a child are modelled as contributing to the formation of either a positive or negative attitude towards the decision to have a child, which in turn influences the intention to have a child, in conjunction with subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. Empirical studies using the Theory of Planned Behaviour as a framework have shown that costs and benefits considerations do directly influence fertility intentions (Billari, et al 200; Dommermuth, et al 2011), and that they are a distinct determinant from norms and behavioural control which also have their own impact on intentions (Mencarini, et al 2015).

As fertility continues to decline in many countries there has been a resurgence of interest in the topic how attitudes towards children and their perceived costs and benefits influence fertility decisions (Chen, et al 2019; Bein, et al 2021; Jian et al 2021). While perceived costs and benefits of

children form only part of the overall childbearing decision making process and should be seen in the wider context of the economic, structural, and cultural factors that influence fertility they can give us some insight into how people think about children.

In this paper we seek to understand how men and women in Australia perceive the costs and benefits of children. We are particularly interested in gender differences and differences by socio-economic status.

Data

We use data from two Australian surveys. The first is the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey conducted in 2019. HILDA is a longitudinal national household panel survey that interviews respondents annually since 2001. Every member of a household aged 15 and above was interviewed. It covers a variety of themes are covered, including job, education, childbearing, and family life and in select years, including 2019 it also included a question on fertility intentions and considerations. Our sample includes 8,261 respondents aged 18 to 49 years old.

The second survey is the ANU Poll 56 which was conducted in August 2023. This is part of a series of surveys conducted three times a year in Australia to assess opinions on a wide variety of topical issues. The sample comes from the probability-based online panel called Life in Australia™ (Kaczmirek, et al. 2019). Our analytical sample includes 1,717 respondents aged 18-49 years old.

In both surveys, respondents were presented with a series of considerations that people may consider when thinking about whether or not to have another child. They were then asked to how important each consideration was to them at the present time. The importance was rated on a 4 point scale ranging from 1) Not at all Important , 2) Of limited importance, 3) Important , 4) Very important. Both HILDA and ANU Poll included the same considerations but ANU Poll also included some additional ones.

Considerations against

- The stress and worry of raising children
- Having time for leisure or social activities
- The general cost of raising children
- Having time and energy for your career
- The impact of children would have on the environment (ANU Poll only)
- Uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic (ANU Poll only)

Considerations for

- Giving your parents grandchildren
- Having someone to care for you when you are old
- Having someone to love
- Providing more purpose to life
- The impact children would have on economic growth and the retirement system (ANU Poll only)

ANU Poll also includes the set of global uncertainty measures that are part of the Gender and Generations Survey module. These ask how much respondents worry about each of the following:

- Terrorism
- Climate change
- Overpopulation
- Economic crises
- Increased number of refugees
- High unemployment
- Organised crime
- Military conflicts or wars
- Global epidemics
- Weakened democracy
- Increased social inequality
- Political extremism

Method

Our analysis starts with bivariate analysis examining the overall rating of each consideration across the two surveys to understand what considerations individuals rate as most important in their childbearing decision making process. We then investigate this further by a series of logistic regressions where the independent variable in each model is whether a particular consideration was rated as 'very important'. Independent variables include the sex of the respondent, their age, their highest level of education, relationship status, country of birth, as well as self-assessed prosperity. We also consider their individual's childbearing desire which is grouped into three categories (low, ambivalent, high).

Results

Table 1 show the percentage of respondents who rated a particular consideration as 'important' or 'very important', categorised by whether they were parents or not and in which survey they had participated in.

Across both surveys and for both childless respondents and those who were already parents the consideration that had the highest percentage of respondents rating it as important or very important was 'the general cost of raising children'. Having time and energy for career was also rated as an important consideration, particularly among childless respondents. Parents and childless respondents considered 'the stress and worry of raising children' as important, while having time for leisure activities was less of an important consideration for parents. Overall uncertainty due to the impact of COVID-19 had little influence on childbearing considerations, and was rated as important or very important by only 18% of childless respondents and 19% of parents. Childless respondents were moderately concerned however about the impact of children on the environment.

Turning to the positive considerations, we find that 'having' someone to love was rated as being of high importance across the board, followed closely by 'providing more purpose to life'. Less

important were giving your parent’s grandchildren or having someone to care for you when you are old, or the impact that children have on economic growth and the retirement system.

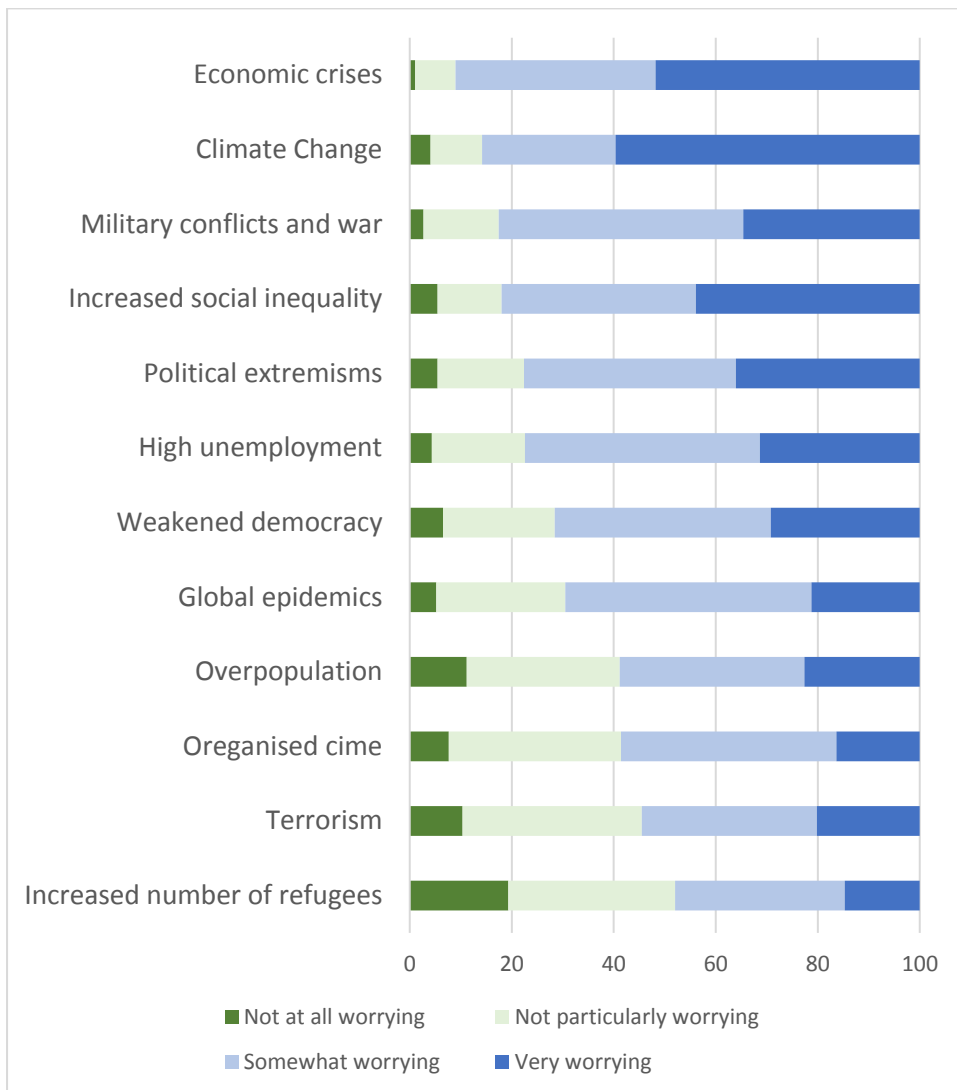
Table 1 Percentage of respondents who rated consideration as ‘important’ or ‘very important’ (weighted)

	Childless respondents				Parents			
	HILDA		ANU Poll		HILDA		ANU Poll	
	%	95% CI	%	95% CI	%	95% CI	%	95% CI
Negative considerations								
The general cost of raising children	78.9	77.7-80.1	85.9	83.8-87.9	74.6	73.2-76.0	86.8	86.7-86.8
Having time and energy for your career	65.2	63.8-66.6	75.7	73.1-78.2	49.6	48.0-51.2	65.2	65.1-65.3
The stress and worry of raising children	65.2	63.8-66.6	73.5	70.8-76.1	62.8	61.2-64.3	68.9	68.9-69.0
Having time for leisure and social activities	63.5	62.2-64.9	76.8	76.7-76.9	56.2	64.6-57.8	68.3	68.3-68.4
Uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic			18.2	18.1-18.2			19.2	19.2-19.3
The impact children would have on the environment			50.9	50.8-50.9			34.0	35.9-36.0
Positive considerations								
Having someone to love	72.3	71.0-73.6	70.7	70.7-70.9	73.8	72.4-75.2	73.7	73.7-73.8
Providing more purpose to life	64.8	63.4-66.2	67.0	67.0-67.1	65.9	64.3-67.4	73.8	73.8-73.9
Giving your parents grandchildren	38.0	36.6-39.4	28.9	28.8-28.9	23.3	21.9-24.7	25.9	25.9-26.0
Having someone to care for you when you are old	38.1	36.7-39.6	28.9	28.9-28.9	34.7	33.2-36.2	36.6	36.5-36.6
The impact children would have on economic growth and the retirement system			33.5	33.5-33.6			31.8	31.7-31.8
Total N	4,385		754		3,959		954	

Source: Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Wave 19 & ANU Poll 56

The measures of uncertainty are demonstrated in Figure 1 for childless respondents. These measures show that childless Australians are most worried about economic crises, climate change, increased social inequality, and military conflicts and war. Preliminary analysis to reduce the number of items to summary scales using Factor Analysis, found four dominant scales, representing: (1) Conflicts and crime; (2) Social concerns (climate change, social inequality, epidemics; (3) Political stability; (4) Economic stability. These scales will be used within the multivariate models as independent variables explaining the importance placed on different considerations when deciding to have children.

Figure 2 Percentage distribution of concerns about measures of uncertainty (childless respondents 18-29 years)



Source: ANU Poll 56

Multivariate analysis

The multivariate analysis gives us further insight into the how the importance placed on different considerations varies by parity, gender, socio-economic status and age. From the multivariate analysis we find that women were significantly more likely than men to rate as very important the stress and worry of raising children (all parities), having time and energy for their careers (childless women), and the general cost of raising children (childless women and those with 2+ children), and the impact of children on the environment (all parities). There was no consideration which men rated more important.

Not surprisingly, we also find that socio-economic status a strong predictor of how highly individuals rate the general cost of childbearing as a consideration. Interestingly, those with lower levels of

education are also more likely to emphasise the benefit of children as being to have someone to care for you when you are older compared to their more educated peers.

In terms of how these considerations relate to childbearing desires we find that individuals who had low desires for having a child, considered the stress and worry, economic cost, time for leisure and social activities as well as time and energy for career as very important considerations. In contrast, who had high desires to have a child instead rated highly the 'positive' considerations such as having someone to love, and providing purpose in life and placed much less emphasis on the 'negative' considerations.

Although the perceived cost and benefits of children form only part of the overall fertility intention process, the findings provide some important insights into some of the factors that childless individuals and those who already have children consider. In line with previous literature we find that the considerations taken into account by childless people differ from those of parents, and in overall childless respondents were more likely to rate all considerations as important or very important. This is likely an indication that childless respondents have imperfect information or less information about the costs and benefits of being a parent. More external considerations regarding the broader impact of children on the environment or the economy were generally considered as much less important than more direct personal considerations regarding the economic cost of children, or their potential psychological benefit to the individual.

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