

THE DIFFERENTIAL VALUE OF SONS AND DAUGHTERS IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Research in the developed world over the past half century has consistently found that parents want both sons and daughters. Surveys in the United States which asked the ideal sex composition of a two-child family have found that most respondents prefer a boy and a girl (Wood and Bean 1977; Sensibaugh and Yarub 1997). Other studies consider progression—or intended progression—to a third birth by sex of the first two children. In most developed countries, parents are much more likely to have (or plan to have) a third child if their first two children are either both sons or both daughters, rather than one of each (Freedman, Freedman and Whelpton 1960; Wood and Bean 1977; Young 1977; Sloane and Lee 1983; Jacobsen, Møller and Engholm 1999; Hank and Kohler 2000; Brockmann 2001; Pollard and Morgan 2002; Andersson et al. 2004). This indicates that some of these parents are trying for a child of the missing sex. For example, Australian mothers are 25 per cent more likely to have a third birth if they have two sons or two daughters, rather than a boy and a girl (Kippen, Evans and Gray forthcoming). This extra propensity to have a third child has added three per cent to Australia's total fertility rate in recent years (Kippen, Gray and Evans 2005).

Studies carried out in the 1970s and earlier identified a number of different reasons parents valued sons and daughters. In traditional societies, gender roles are distinct and sons and daughters are not substitutable, hence the desire for both. These studies found that sons are valued for financial and practical assistance in old age, to carry out religious functions, to continue the family name, and for the father–son relationship. Parents want daughters to balance the number of sons, for their practical support and to provide companionship to the mother. Both sons and daughters are also valued for their different personality and behavioural traits (Arnold et al. 1975).

There has been very little research since on the differential value of sons and daughters in developed countries today, despite the fact that gender roles in these countries are different from those in traditional societies, and have changed enormously over the past 30 years. Although there is reference to the *potential* benefits of sons and daughters in modern settings (see for example Pollard and Morgan 2002), there are no rigorous investigations of this issue. It may be argued that in Western countries today, the blurring of gender roles is such that sons and daughters should be substitutable, implying that parents should be indifferent to the sex of their children. However, all the evidence shows that parents prefer to

have children of both sexes, indicating that both sons and daughters are valued. From this we can infer that sons and daughters are still perceived as having distinct qualities and providing differing benefits to parents, and, perhaps, to their siblings and other family members.

It is certainly clear that there remains a significant division in household labour and caring along gender lines (Baxter, 1998), so one question may be whether children are valued for the provision of family work and physical care in old age. If so, girls may be desired to provide these resources.

Hank and Andersson (2002) conclude that investigations should focus on a cultural approach to determine the meaning (or absence) of sex preference, and that such investigations are 'highly desirable and necessary'. This paper addresses this issue directly by focusing specifically on the value of sons and daughters to see if parents give gendered reasons for desiring sons or daughters.

In order to explore the differential value of sons and daughters to parents, we have conducted indepth interviews with 40 parents—12 males and 28 females—14 with two boys, 12 with two girls and 14 with one of each. Each interview lasted for about an hour, and focused on the reasons for wanting or not wanting another child, and the reasons why parents wanted a son or a daughter if that was identified as an important factor. The value of boys and girls and what they provide parents was also central to these interviews.

Using qualitative data from these interviews, we investigate the differential value of sons and daughters to parents. In line with our previous quantitative research, we found that some parents wanted both sons and daughters. For example, the importance of carrying on the family name was given as a reason for having a son. In talking about her partner, Alice noted:

I think he'd really like a son, mainly because he's the last in his family. His dad's got three sisters so he's like the end of the line so it comes back to that sort of link with his family, strong link with the family and I suppose carrying the name on too...(Alice, age 33, two daughters).

Other parents valued daughters in part for the mother–daughter relationship:

I think definitely that since we've got a daughter, that satisfies a need within [my partner] to be able to relate to someone...I've got the impression that girls, daughters and mothers...they have a special bond in the sense that they can talk with each other and that all mothers want to have a daughter to do them up prettily, nicely, dress them up, tie their hair (Paul, age 32, a son and a daughter).

Parents also considered the gendered quality of sibling relationships:

...a bit of a personal thing for me is that a boy coming after a girl I think can really shape boys very nicely, shapes their relationship skills and empathy...(Darren, age 35, a daughter and a son).

Respondents did not express different expectations along gender lines for their children's future education, career prospects or societal role, however a number spoke in very traditional terms about boys' and girls' gender traits and their psychological roles within the family.

This paper further explores how gender shapes parents' decisions to have a third child and the contemporary setting in which gender roles are less sharply delineated, but perceived gender characteristics exert influence on fertility decisions and experiences of family.

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<http://demography.anu.edu.au/havingkids/index.php>

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