Weighing Identity in Procreative Decisions

Laura Wildemann Kane
Worcester State University
laura.kane@worcester.edu

Weighing Identity in Procreative Decisions
Laura Wildemann Kane

Abstract

The question of whether one should procreate is rarely cast as a *personal* choice in philosophical discourse; rather, it is presented as an ethical choice made against a backdrop of aggregate concerns. But justifications concerning procreation in popular culture regularly engage with the role that *identity* plays in making procreative decisions; specifically, how one's decision will affect *who they are* and *who they might be* in the future. Women in particular cite the *personally transformative aspects of becoming a parent*—personal circumstances, including socioeconomic status, age, health, and relationship status—as the most important considerations for the decision they make regarding possible parenthood, and *not* the more aggregate concerns that an ethics of procreation prioritizes. I highlight women because when women undergo a transformative experience related to parenthood, they do so in contexts where the social, economic, and emotional effects related to pregnancy and motherhood are extensive and impose greater effects on women than men. These harmful *material effects* threaten a woman's economic stability, career development, social relationships, and emotional health. Because of this, I argue that an ethics of procreation must engage with the ways in which women's identities are transformed through procreative decisions.

Keywords: procreative ethics, motherhood, parenthood, identity, reproductive rights, abortion, transformative experience

> "*He was born on New Year's Day, the year 2000. I got pregnant with him when I was 19, a month before I graduated from college. I was a brain; that was my identity. . . .*
> *. . . Facing an unplanned pregnancy when I was 19 led to a grappling with identity that forced me to choose between acknowledging complexity, failure and systemic injustice or living inauthentically, turned away from truth*."
> – Merritt Tierce in the *New York Times*

The question of whether one should procreate is rarely cast as a personal choice in philosophical discourse; rather, it is presented as an ethical choice made against a backdrop of aggregate concerns. Antinatalists argue that procreation contributes to overpopulation, to a deepening strain on natural resources, to a larger carbon footprint and a worsening global climate, and, especially in wealthy countries, to perpetuating global inequality. Justifications in favor of procreation stem largely from the understanding that procreation should be seen not as presumptively permissible in all circumstances but as something that must be morally justified (Lecce and Magnusson 2015, 155). Some argue that having children is an "intrinsically worthwhile" pursuit, while others argue that having children accords with "values such as the perpetuation of lineage, name, and property; the fulfillment of religious, marital, or familial duties; or the discharge of duties to the state" (Overall 2012, 211). In short, on either side of the debate, the considerations that are at play generally involve how one's procreative decision *affects the lives of others* in some important respect and rarely engage with the significance that one's own *identity* plays in procreative decisions. To put it another way, philosophical debates about procreation are largely about *the having of children* but not about how those decisions shape and are shaped by a potential procreator's self-conception and desires for their future self—specifically, whether to *be a parent* or to *not be a parent*.

By contrast, justifications concerning procreation in popular culture *do* engage with the central role that identity plays in making procreative decisions. The question, "Should I have a child?" is routinely discussed in opinion columns of various publications—recent musings can be found, for instance, in the *Atlantic* (Khazan 2017), the *Guardian* (Eustice 2020), *Time*, (Guido 2014) *Vox* (Davidman 2021), and the *New York Times* (Whyman 2021; Williams 2021). And while the authors of these pieces do weigh concerns about overpopulation and dwindling resources with considerations about various duties, they focus more centrally on the implications for *personal fulfillment*, *self-understanding*, and *closed possibilities* for oneself as a result of having or not having children. In short, when most individuals debate whether they ought to procreate, they often think about how the decision will affect *who they are* and *who they might be* in the future.

In this paper, I argue that any discussion about the effects of procreative decisions must engage with the ways in which one's *identity* is shaped through these decisions and must distinguish this aspect of procreative decision-making from both *aggregate concerns* and considerations about *the child that will be had*. Whether one chooses to procreate, whether one procreates willingly or against one's will, or whether one chooses not to procreate, important aspects of one's own identity are changed, transformed, or affirmed. In this vein, I want to suggest that the question, "Should I have a child?" is, on its own, insufficient to address all the social, political, and ethical concerns that potential procreators may have. We must also ask, "Do I

want to be a parent?" which (1) is more inclusive of the different paths individuals take to become parents, including adoption and (2) more accurately captures the concerns and considerations that individuals, and particularly women, weigh when they wonder about such things.

I highlight women here because it is largely women that are publicly having this debate, and they are doing so for a specific reason: the degree to which one's identity is affected by a decision regarding parenthood is unduly influenced by preexisting gender roles in a society. In popular culture, procreation is largely conflated with *motherhood* (and not with *parenthood* more generally). Women are expected to have children—to become *mothers*—and this expected identity shift shapes and, in some important respects, *binds* certain narratives about women's lives to individual women who either define themselves within this narrative or in opposition to this narrative.[1] Additionally, there are material effects imposed upon women who choose to become parents, and there are material effects imposed upon women who choose not to become parents. These material effects are social, emotional, and financial in nature, and, as I will suggest, may constitute harms for women in particular. As such, the procreation debate in popular culture has been primarily shaped by women—women justifying their decisions to become parents, women justifying their decisions not to become parents—with the expectations of motherhood and all that comes with it central in both narratives. Philosophical arguments in favor of, or in opposition to, procreation that omit these important considerations offer incomplete accounts of the social, political, and ethical effects of procreative decisions on existing women as well as future generations of women.

Before I begin, I'd like to clarify the scope of my argument, as it may at times seem that I am conflating notions of biological parenthood with parenthood more generally, given the many forms it may take. The arguments in this paper are primarily aimed at exposing, and subsequently filling in, the lacuna in procreative debates regarding concerns about how procreative decisions affect the identity of the person(s) making the decision. As such, these arguments draw attention to the ways in which *procreative decisions* bring about transformative experiences that can have both beneficial and harmful aspects for the person(s) undergoing the experience independently of the beneficial and harmful aspects that concern others.

Relatedly, my focus on women may at times call upon folk discourses that treat motherhood as a gendered and biological phenomenon, similarly conflating

---

[1] See, for instance, Diana Karklin's (2022) *Undo Motherhood,* which presents accounts from women all over the world who struggle with *motherhood* as a social role and all it entails; and Sarah LaChance Adams's (2014) *Mad Mothers, Bad Mothers, and What a "Good" Mother Would Do,* which presents accounts of maternal ambivalence in the face of the many competing expectations for mothers.

notions of biological mother/parenthood with parenthood generally. It is all too easy to slide between notions of wanting to be a parent and wanting to be a biological parent, and likewise between notions of pregnancy (and all that it entails) and motherhood, in folk discourses about having children. Often, these discourses omit important considerations about how identities are transformed through adoption, surrogacy, fostering, and legal guardianship. And while there are indeed important transformative aspects of pregnancy and birth, focusing exclusively on biological notions of parenthood obscures how significantly women's identities are transformed through a variety of parenting decisions, especially when considering the material effects those decisions bring about. As such, many of my arguments can and will be extended to include transformative aspects of adoption and parenthood more generally for women, since the material effects that are imposed upon women are commensurate for those who decide to procreate and those who decide to adopt.

Last, my understanding of *identity* here shapes the issues that I raise in this paper. Because I am focused on the social, emotional, and financial concerns that women in particular weigh when they are confronted with procreative decisions, my discussions largely focus on *social identity,* which recognizes the importance of social roles and group memberships in shaping one's sense of self through differing sets of expectations, rights, and obligations (Appiah 2018, 9). Judith Butler (2005, 25) notes that the norms by which we recognize others and ourselves are not ours alone; they exist in a realm of social normativity that directs our conduct, shapes our expectations for the conduct of others, and informs how we respond to one another. Narratives of *motherhood*—and all the expectations, rights, and obligations that accompany such narratives—shape how women in particular view possible identities, even if they do not endorse these identities themselves, because of the ways in which *others* come to respond to them as a result of these narratives. As Kwame Anthony Appiah (2018, 18) argues, identities can have both a subjective dimension and an objective dimension: "an identity cannot simply be imposed upon me . . . but neither is an identity simply up to me." As I will argue, procreative decisions transform identities in ways that are not entirely up to us, yet have profound implications for how we fit into the social world in ways that we are unable to fully control.

The Role of Identity in Current Procreation Debates

Parental identity appears to play a tangential role in some arguments made both for and against procreation. For instance, the antinatalist view that one has a duty not to create lives that are miserable, and also no duty to create lives that are not miserable, may allude to the ways in which potential procreators conceive of themselves (Benatar 2012, 133). This argument is premised on two claims: that any suffering is bad and should be avoided, and that it is far more likely to bring a child into the world that will experience some degree of suffering than to bring a child into

the world that will not experience suffering at all. When weighing these claims, a potential procreator may think to themselves, in considering the interests of the future child and their own responsibility in accounting for those interests, "What kind of person would I be to bring more suffering into the world?" and opt not to procreate. This introspective consideration departs from the ethical concerns at the center of this antinatalist view, but one's own role in bringing about suffering is undoubtedly drawn upon by those who take up this and similar positions (Harrison and Tanner 2011).[2] While we are likely to feel some degree of moral discomfort when thinking about a new life that will surely face suffering, we are also encouraged to think about our own responsibility in creating this new suffering and are therefore confronted with thoughts about what kind of person we would be if we were to bring more suffering into the world. But to imbue one's identity into these moral calculations of suffering in the world is to assume that one knows what the future holds and that one's identity is, to some degree, determined by that future. Even if the odds are in favor of procreation increasing suffering in one way or another, one's own role in producing that suffering (and hence, one's responsibility for it) is not something that can be known so certainly. Most importantly, if someone does weigh their identity as a factor in such calculations, they are not doing so from a place of personal desire or fulfillment or doing so to realize some life plan. Rather, one weighs *who they would be to do something like this to others*. In short, one's *social identity* is not a factor here so much as the quality of their *moral character*.[3] As such, important parts of one's own self-conception are omitted from these considerations.

Perhaps, though, there is some sense in which we can know something about a child we might have, such that we can know what it would be like to have that child and what it would mean for us to have that child. For instance, someone may justify a decision to procreate through a desire to reproduce family resemblances or to mix some aspect(s) of one's family with some aspect(s) of one's loved ones (Brake 2015, 141). Although this may characterize *having a child* as a vanity project, and so in some important sense involve one's conception of self as being an important factor in the decision to procreate, Elizabeth Brake argues that we should not necessarily see this justification purely in those terms. Brake argues that procreators could be motivated by a genuine belief, without any hint of narcissism, that reproducing their genes will benefit the world (143). Procreative partners may view themselves and/or their

---

[2] Gerald Harrison and Julia Tanner (2011, 114) argue that human beings have a responsibility to make efforts to curb our destructive behavior; one means of doing so is to limit the impact that (future) human beings have on the planet by refusing to procreate.

[3] While I am pointing to the distinction between moral identity and social identity here, these identities may overlap.

genetic families as possessing valuable traits—such as virtue, prudence, kindness, and so forth—that would be beneficial to pass on to future generations through genes or through upbringing (143). Since it may be possible to "cultivate" these supposed genetic qualities in an adopted child as well, Brake argues that the desired traits must be strictly genetic *and* the potential parent(s) must be justified in believing, optimistically, that there is a reasonable chance for their genetic offspring to inherit such traits (and not, for instance, other problematic traits that are also manifest in the same family) through procreation (143). The problems that arise with these criteria are multilayered, but I will note one important objection here.

In order to justify having a child for the betterment of the world (and compensating the procreative costs associated with bringing more children into the world), a parent must not only be reasonably sure their offspring will inherit the desired trait(s), but they must also be reasonably sure that the child will use said trait(s) to make a future contribution of a large enough magnitude to compensate for these procreative costs (Brake 2015, 143). To be reasonably sure of these things, potential procreators would need to know in advance what genes their child will inherit and how those genes will be expressed as their offspring grows. Since this knowledge cannot be attained without the child already existing, it seems that potential parents would never be reasonably sure enough to make the decision to procreate on this basis. In short, one cannot know whether one's offspring will share the important part(s) of one's identity.

Alternatively, someone may desire to relay stories and values to one's progeny by acknowledging shared genetic traits that have been "passed down" over several generations, such as the prevalence of a certain skill, trade, or line of work that (1) is seemingly tied to some genetic trait and that (2) many close and distant genetic relations participated in (professional musicians, artists, masons, and so on). Under such circumstances, the relationship between one's genetic traits and the cause(s) behind such traits may serve to deepen one's bond with, or affinity for, one's family and create a profound sense of identity that arises directly from this relationship. However, this consideration of *identity* attaches to the identity of the *relationship itself* rather than to the identity of the parent.[4]

Value sharing contributes to a meaningful relationship between a parent and child *not* because of some shared genetic connection but because of the vulnerability involved in being able to express oneself, as a parent, so that one's child can come to see them in a more nuanced light (Brighouse and Swift 2016, 152; Kane 2019, 73). In

---

[4] For instance, one may view a craft or talent that is central to their identity as rooted within their relationships, as when someone with musical interest and aptitude points to the musically talented members of their family as (directly or indirectly) being a cause for their interest and aptitude.

this sense, those who choose to have a child to satisfy this desire are setting out to create a *relationship*—a relationship that is valuable for its own sake by giving "a particular meaning to one's own life and to the life of the being that is created" (Overall 2012, 217). Christine Overall argues that by setting out to have a child, one sets out to create a mutually enriching and enhancing love that comes with a parent-child relationship. In doing so, one also creates the *person* with whom one has this relationship, a unique aspect of this kind of relationship (217). Understood this way, one's reason for procreating would be to establish a *caring relationship* with another person—but not just *any* other person and not just *any* kind of caring relationship. Rather, one seeks to create a specific kind of caring relationship—a parent-child relationship—with a person created by oneself.

It may be possible to create a relationship for its own sake, but Claudia Mills argues that to be in a relationship purely for the sake of the relationship is to remove one's own personal desire from the reason for wanting the relationship (Mills 2005, 4). With this in mind, Mills argues that it is morally permissible for potential procreators to be selfish in wanting to experience the parent-child relationship. And this selfish reason is the most gratifying to the other party in the relationship—we *want* to be in this relationship because of how it positively affects our lives; we are not merely participating in this relationship out of a feeling of duty (4).[5]

The notion of *selfishness* is interesting; in the context just discussed, it captures a reason for wanting to procreate that incorporates identity more centrally than other arguments discussed: one decides to procreate because one wants this relationship *for themselves* because they *see themselves* in this kind of relationship.[6] This reasoning also extends to prospective adoptive parents: one wants to adopt a child because one wants a parent-child relationship for themselves because one *sees themselves* as being in this relationship. What's more, one may also desire to communicate something to others about who they see themselves being—*a parent*—because they also desire to change the nature of their role(s) in other parts of life. Becoming a parent affects not only one's relationship with their future child but also one's relationship(s) with friends, parents, siblings, colleagues, and community. In this sense, deciding whether or not to procreate or adopt has profound implications for how we conceive of ourselves and how others conceive of us.

---

[5] Held (2006) and others argue that the care provided in relationships is more beneficial when it also involves feelings of love and care.

[6] It is important to note that, at the same time, women who choose not to have children are often labeled "selfish" for their decision as well, as though their decision communicates something about *who they are*.

To Be or Not to Be (a Parent)

Mills's argument shows us that a potential parent's *desire* is an important factor in procreative and adoptive decisions and that it might communicate something about who the person making the decision wants to be. Individuals hold within themselves many *possible selves* that reflect the beliefs about what role(s) they hope to fill in the future, shaped by ideals (what they would like to become), realities (what they actually could become), and fears (what they do not want to become) (Adamsons 2013, 247). These "hoped-for" selves motivate decisions and behaviors about what to do (to achieve an ideal or possibility) and what not to do (to avoid what is fearful). Those who desire to procreate or adopt will develop a possible self as a parent (a *possible parental self*) that represents the goals and expectations associated with the parental role that one wants to fill (Kaźmierczak and Karasiewicz 2019, 2). That is, there is a desire to *be a parent* that is independent of the desire to form a relationship with one's child, as well as the desire to have a particular child ("this" child) or a (biological) child of one's own. Overall (2012, 210) provides a fitting analogy here when she argues that having children can be expressive of the kind of person that one wants to be and that to deny someone this opportunity would be akin to denying musicians the ability to make music. It is not the *product* of this desire that is the focus here but the fulfillment or *realization* of what one wants to be: a *musician*, regardless of the kind of music one plays. Interfering with someone's ability to fulfill that role for themselves is, therefore, interfering with someone's ability to realize their sense of self.

As noted earlier, a potential procreator cannot know who their child will be or what the relationship with this child will eventually consist in. What they can know is that, should some procreative activity result in a pregnancy and (though not necessarily) a birth, a possible parental self has been *realized*. Similarly for adoption, a potential adoptive parent cannot know who their child will be or what the relationship with this child will eventually consist in. What they can know is that, in initiating the adoption process, a possible parental self has been *realized*.

A transition to a parental self is associated with a process of self-definition as well as a commitment to and value-boosting of a particular life sphere (Kaźmierczak and Karasiewicz 2019, 2). The transformation of self that transpires does not occur in a vacuum, though—one must also redefine themselves as a parent in the context of one's existing social and professional roles, as well as one's desired roles in those contexts. We see these considerations in folk discourses about potential parenthood:

> I have friends with kids who continue to live fun, fulfilled lives. They seem tired, sure, but they're still the same people I knew and loved. I also have friends whose lives seem to have become smaller, and this is where Frances Kissling's advice starts to come to life. If I do this, I'll lose

freedoms, but by being deliberate about the way I want to bring up a family, perhaps it's not impossible to set my own terms. – Kerry Eustice (2020) in the *Guardian*

Frank had always said he wanted lots of kids. Caliva, who was in her early 30s, thought maybe one or two would be nice, but she was mostly undecided. . . .

      At times, she wondered if her lack of baby fever should be cause for concern. She took her worries to the internet, where she came across a post on the *Rumpus'*s "Dear Sugar" advice column titled, "The Ghost Ship that Didn't Carry Us." . . . Cheryl Strayed, the author of the column, wrote back that each person has a life and a "sister life" they'll never know—the "ghost ship" of the title. "The clear desire for a baby isn't an accurate gauge for you," she wrote. Instead, she recommended "thinking deeply about your choices and actions from the stance of your future self." In other words, think about what you'll regret later. – Olga Khazan (2017) in the *Atlantic*

I'm a 41-year-old mother of two who spent my entire adult life telling myself that children were my destiny. . . .

      . . . My mother made it clear that we were her reason for living. There was never a time I didn't feel loved by my mother. But there was also a latent message that became clear after my father left: *I am not alone because I have children. If it weren't for you two I would be falling apart*.

      Before I hit adolescence, I decided that children were the only things that could fulfill me when I grew older." – Maria Guido (2014) in *Time*

"Any adult who has passed 35 without having children will know the chasm that opens between you and your friends with kids. It's there in the irritation in your voice when you demand to know why they can't meet you at the pub after work, and the irritation in their voice that you don't understand how childcare works. The child-free adult wearies of having to plan a social life around other people's nursery schedules; the parent is just flat-out weary." – Hadley Freeman (2015) in the *Guardian*

While these authors do discuss environmental concerns and concerns for the welfare of future generations in their pieces, as well as visions about what their

relationships with children might look like, they specifically draw attention to the ways in which a decision to have a child would *shape or transform the lives they have envisioned for themselves*. The gravity of this decision is underscored by an awareness that once a parental self is realized, it is very difficult to *unrealize:* even at the paperwork or pregnancy stage, one takes on new roles involving increased responsibilities (for personal health, financial health, employment stability) and new or changed relationships with others (physicians, case workers, partners, friends) that impact one's life and identity. And while becoming a parent can be transformative for both men and women, the social environment in which women become parents contributes to a larger degree of transformation than the kind felt by men. An awareness of how this decision transforms the lives and identities of women more significantly than men raises the stakes for women in particular when they consider parenthood for themselves.

Transformative Experiences and the Motherhood Penalty

L. A. Paul (2020, 17) argues that a *transformative experience* is both personally and epistemically transformative because it reshapes the priorities, preferences, and self-conception of the person undergoing the experience to the extent that the person could not fully understand what it would be like to be that person without having undergone the experience. When one undergoes a transformative experience, one becomes irrevocably changed: one has acquired knowledge about what it is like to experience something that shapes how they understand themselves both in that experience and as a result of having had that experience.

The degree to which some decision or experience is transformative is contingent upon several factors, including the particular psychological makeup of the person undergoing the experience or making the decision, as well as the wider social environment and circumstances in which the experience occurs or the decision is being made (Barnes 2015, 172). Elizabeth Barnes argues that existing social norms and structures make it possible to undergo transformative experiences because they make certain ways of interpreting or thinking about ourselves possible in the first place (185). The self-conceptions that are most salient and readily available to us are those that are already salient in our culture as social norms and stereotypes (or as responses to those norms and stereotypes). For instance, *selfless mother, career-oriented, tiger mom,* and the like prescribe not just a role to fill but a set of behavioral expectations and possibilities for those who are considering what it might be like to become a parent and how that choice will affect their own identity. As potential parents adopt these roles for themselves and identify with them, they reproduce these norms and stereotypes, making them available for others (Butler 1988, 524; Haslanger 2012, 10).

Barnes also notes that a social or cultural context can make a particular kind of transformative experience *constitute a harm*, such as a cultural context where some members of society are expected to rearrange their own priorities, preferences, and self-conceptions to align with the needs and wants of more powerful members. She gives an example of a woman becoming a wife in a society with strict gender norms and stereotypes: marriage in such a context was *supposed to be* a transformative experience for women—and women only—because when someone becomes a *wife* in such a context, she is expected to "rearrange her priorities, her desires, and her projects to cohere with an conform to her husband's. Being *her husband's wife* should be her primary role, and her primary self-conception" (Barnes 2015, 180).

I suggest that parenthood for women, colloquially understood as *motherhood,* may be the kind of transformative experience that constitutes a harm for women in many current cultural contexts, including the United States, because of the *material effects* that accompany such a transformation.[7] Procreative and adoptive decisions for women are shaped by differences in power, prestige, and future prospects for economic security (Overall 2012, 9). Women are still defined socially and economically by their relationship to children; they must evaluate how their autonomy, occupation, physical appearance and sexuality, and their relationship(s) to others will be impacted by parenthood (Laney et al. 2015, 127). Because women are so greatly impacted in these various ways, women tend to weigh these concerns at various stages of their lives, often well before they seriously intend to procreate or adopt, whereas men typically begin to weigh these considerations only after they are on the path to fatherhood (Adamsons 2013, 247).[8] These concerns are borne out by recent data regarding the gender wage gap, which have revealed that it is no longer women in general that feel the harshest sting of underpayment but mothers in particular, leading researchers to refer to this disparity as the *motherhood penalty* (Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007).

Correll, Benard, and Paik (2007, 1301) argue that motherhood is a "status characteristic"—a personal attribute (such as race or gender) or role (such as mother or manager) that is shaped by social norms and cultural beliefs that attribute greater status, worthiness, competence, and the like to some categories of people but not to others. This status characteristic assigns a lower status to mothers in the workplace

---

[7] I am not suggesting that motherhood *itself* is harmful; rather, I suggest that the material effects that accompany motherhood are typically harmful for women in many cultural contexts.

[8] Adamsons (2013, 246) notes that fathers take longer to adjust to the idea of being a parent, "often not fully acknowledging or engaging with a pregnancy until well into the second or third trimester."

through biased evaluations of competence and commitment. *Motherhood* affects perceptions of competence and commitment because of the cultural belief that mothers should prioritize the needs of their children above all else, including career demands, that distinguishes the role of "ideal mother" from "ideal worker" (1306–07). As a result, mothers are evaluated as less competent, are expected to be less committed to their jobs, are offered lower wages for the same work, and are subject to higher performance expectations than nonmothers (1299).[9] This extends to visibly pregnant women as well, who are judged by coworkers to be less dependable and less committed to their jobs, while simultaneously more emotional and more irrational than women who are not visibly pregnant (Halpert, Wilson, and Hickman 1993, 650).

By contrast, the role of *fatherhood* is not seen as being incompatible with the role of "ideal worker" and often works to the benefit of fathers. Culturally, being a good father *and* a good employee are defining features of what it means to be a man; this means that being a parent does *not* generally lead to lower workplace performance evaluations for fathers and may in fact boost earnings in the form of a "family wage" bonus awarded to perceived (male) breadwinners (Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007, 1307; Orloff 1996, 53). In an important respect, then, being perceived as a "father" is something that men have *going for them*, while conversely, being perceived as a "mother" marks one as a target for certain forms of treatment that result in lower wages, fewer raises, and fewer employment opportunities (Frye 2000, 16; Haslanger 2000, 41).

Additionally, grappling with motherhood as an identity involves integrating societal ideals about how women *ought* to mother (including the belief that mothers should only feel positively toward their children and toward their role as mothers) with what individual women want motherhood to be *for themselves*. Johnston and Swanson (2003) argue that ideologies about motherhood are built on myths. The most dominant myth, the *myth of maternal bliss*, promotes the idea that "motherhood is the joyful fruition of every woman's aspiration, [which] perpetuates systems of patriarchy by attributing any maternal unhappiness and dissatisfaction to failure of the mother (Johnston and Swanson 2003, 22). In response to this myth, feminists shaped new narratives for justifying ideal motherhood that rejected patriarchal ideals yet also created competing ideologies that have spurred folk debates about motherhood that persist today: "I am a better mother if I work"; "I am

---

[9] Correll, Benard, and Paik (2007, 1297) note that the wage gap between mothers and nonmothers is larger than the wage gap between men and women for those under age thirty-five. Juhn and McCue (2017, 183) show that, although women and men begin their careers with similar earnings, a substantial gap arises over time and widens fastest when children arrive.

resisting the dominant culture and exercising my free choice and power as a woman to stay home with my children" (Johnston and Swanson 2003, 23). Dawn Marie Dow (2016, 181) notes that women account for their decisions to "opt out" of careers or motherhood or to opt in to "working motherhood" in response to these competing ideologies, and that the meanings that mothers attach to their decision often determine how they experience motherhood itself.

Yet the core element of the maternal bliss myth—that motherhood should be joyful, exciting, and fulfilling—persists, and it continues to shape how women experience motherhood. Specifically, women who do not feel joyful, excited, or fulfilled by the experience of motherhood believe that they are doing something wrong, or that they have wronged their child, or that they are somehow not "good enough" at being a mother (Sacks 2017). For instance, writing in the *New York Times*, Merritt Tierce reflects:

> I don't think I was a very good mom when my kids were young. . . . I wasn't available the way I would have wanted to be. I wasn't loving the way I would have wanted to be. I was shut down and withdrawn and in pain and exhausted. I tried to hold it away from them. I didn't let it out on them as anger or criticism. But I know what it means to be present, what that feels like. I know what it means to be available and invested and magical, and that's not how I was with them, my only children, during their only childhood. (Tierce 2021)

When women do not conform to their own vision of what motherhood should be, they may experience guilt or shame, and they may blame themselves for not fulfilling this role as society sees it being filled (Laney et al. 2015, 127).[10]

Women may also feel "ambivalence" toward the demands of motherhood. Sarah LaChance Adams (2014, 36) characterizes "maternal ambivalence" as a simultaneous desire for intimacy and distance in relation to her child, "when she feels the impulses to both harm and protect, to both abandon and nurture. . . . At these moments a woman can feel most displaced by motherhood, as she simultaneously loses and finds herself in relation to her child." Even when mothers have strong

---

[10] We might think here about the overlap of social and moral character. Beyond grappling with the potential identity of "mother" on its own, women such as Tierce also grapple with identifying as a "good" mother or a "bad" mother, at times as a direct result of their *situation*. Being situated as a "teen mother," "single mother," "undocumented mother," "working mother," and the like may contribute to the sense that one simply cannot live up to the idealized norms of "good" motherhood, imbuing one's identity with a sense of moral failure.

desires to care for their children and find such care meaningful, the loss of freedom of movement, the lack of guilt-free time for work and recreation, and the limits on adult interactions and alone time can constitute a serious deprivation that drives women into despair (45). The conflict in maternal ambivalence, then, is not just a fissure between a woman and her child but within the woman herself, "between her own competing desires, between equally valued parts of herself" (53).[11] The recent upswing in research on "matrescence," which is the anthropological term for the process of becoming a mother, is working to address these complicated and conflicting aspects of the motherhood experience that are, despite myths to the contrary, actually quite common (Sacks 2017).

Women also find themselves in a position to feel shame or guilt if they choose *not* to become a parent. For instance, in many South Asian societies, childlessness is perceived as a curse for women (Bhambhani and Inbanathan 2018, 160). Women who are childless due to circumstances beyond their control are stigmatized for not being able to "fulfill their reproductive function," while women who choose to remain childless are seen as defying social norms (160). Pressure from pronatalist social values may drive women to seek assisted reproduction technologies—many of which are costly and potentially risky for one's health—with no guarantee of success. In some cases, the pressure for women to "fulfill" their reproductive role is so great that women undergo invasive treatments, such as in vitro fertilization, to remedy infertility that would otherwise not bother them, or even when it is their partner who requires treatment (Purdy 2009, 182). In such cases, "giving up" means that women are perceived as responsible for their infertility (182).

In the United States, voluntarily childless women have been conceived as desiring to "be like men" by devoting more time to their careers and prioritizing "productive" work over "reproductive" work, at times being labeled "psychologically disturbed" as a result (Hird and Abshoff 2000, 348). More recently, sociologists have found that women who opt not to become parents are more often stereotyped as lacking leadership abilities because they are "too masculine" (yet not as successfully masculine as men) and so lack the "communal, relational" leadership traits expected of women who do have parental experience (Youn 2022; Merluzzi and Phillips 2022). And we might again think back to the notion of *selfishness,* although this time as it is directed at women who choose not to become parents for career ambitions, lifestyle

---

[11] LaChance Adams (2014, 70) argues that attention to material ambivalence can bring to light not just the contradictory emotional responses of mothers but the lack of support for and emphasis on the well-being of caretakers. Maternal ambivalence can show us how certain situations—specifically, society's high expectations of mothers, coupled with limited resources to support their caretaking and self-care activities— can be harmful to mothers and their children.

ambitions, or any other ambition that might be had that does not involve parenting. Women are routinely judged by their families, their peers, and even their friends (with children) about their decision not to become a parent, with the overall sentiment being that those with children just "don't understand" the choice to be child-free (Tucker 2014).

Relatedly, women who choose not to become parents because they recognize that they cannot take responsibility for the care of a child may feel other conflicting emotions in response to the judgments they expect to receive from others. Carol Gilligan (1982, 70) argues that the "dilemma of choice" regarding abortion may bring women privately into conflict with the conventions of femininity, which equates goodness with self-sacrifice. By refusing to be self-sacrificing, women who opt to abort may feel constrained by the idea that there is a "right thing to do" or a "right way" to decide about abortion, and they may struggle to identify what that "right" thing may be (75). Gilligan notes that the dilemma presents itself more as a problem of *relationship* than as a problem of rights, where *taking responsibility* and *avoiding hurt*—even if there must be some hurt—might mean ending a pregnancy as a form of *taking care* of oneself (80). Women in such situations might find themselves in conflict about their own ideas of selfishness, responsibility, care, and sacrifice (85). Such conflict highlights the pressure women feel to conform to ideals of *motherhood-as-femininity*, even if they ultimately decide not to become mothers.[12]

Taken together, these considerations about *motherhood* as an identity signal an enormous transformation in one's self-conception as well as an enormous transition in how one's identity is perceived, understood, and responded to by others. Some aspects of this transformation may be positive: motherhood may offer new opportunities for building community or for strengthening the community in which one is already a member; motherhood may provide one with a sense of purpose when other options are foreclosed; and motherhood may deepen one's existing relationship with others, including one's co-parents, extended family, or friends who are having similar parenthood experiences. Yet many aspects of this transformation may be detrimental to a woman's financial stability, independence, and emotional well-being. That being said, there are differences in the degree to which one's transformation into motherhood may be felt. For instance, Barnes (2015) notes that conditions and expectations surrounding parenthood for wealthy, educated women in Western societies undoubtedly influences how transformative an experience new parenthood is for those women, versus the experience that new parenthood might bring to those in other cultures (or even in other times) where parenthood confers

---

[12] Similarly, women may grapple here, too, with the ideal of "good" motherhood and the feeling that, due to one's situation, one simply cannot achieve that ideal.

less meaning on someone's life or imparts less of an economic impact.[13] Regardless, what must be underscored is that when women in particular do have this epistemically and personally transformative experience, they do so in contexts where the social, economic, and emotional effects related to pregnancy and motherhood are extensive.

The Specter of Choice in Procreative Decisions

Earlier I noted that once a parental self is realized, it is very difficult to *unrealize.* I want to clarify what I mean by this now, first in the context of procreative decision-making, and then for parenthood experiences more generally. I'm highlighting procreative decision-making here because an ethics of procreation is premised on *choice:* we can consider the ethical implications of our procreative decision *because we have a choice to procreate or not*. But this premise belies the fact that nearly half of all pregnancies are unintended (UNFPA 2022, 4).[14] And while not all unintended pregnancies are unwanted, a significant number of them are for one reason or another (it is estimated that more than 60 percent of unintended pregnancies end in abortion), suggesting that the "choice" of procreating or not at a given time is often made in urgent circumstances for women all over the world (UNFPA 2022, 4).[15] When faced with such an imminently transformative experience, women who opt to terminate their pregnancies do so for reasons related to their personal circumstances, including their socioeconomic status, age, health, and marital and relationship status (Biggs, Gould, and Foster 2013; Karklin 2022). These findings suggest that the most salient reasons that women consider in these situations are the personally transformative aspects of becoming a parent and *not* the more aggregate concerns that philosophical procreative debates prioritize.

Crucially, it is essential to recognize that an identity transformation to *motherhood* is not always voluntary for women or even in accordance with a woman's desires. In cases of pregnancy that results from rape or from practices where women lack control over their reproductive lives, an identity transformation may occur absent *any* corresponding desire. In cases where there is an unintended pregnancy, the

---

[13] An experience can also be more or less transformative for the same person over time: consider the difference between having one's first child and then having one's second child.

[14] Finer and Zolna (2016) found that roughly 45 percent of pregnancies in the United States in 2011 were unintended pregnancies, down from 51 percent in 2008.

[15] I want to note that, despite my focus on women here, not only women and girls can become pregnant. Transgender men and nonbinary individuals may also become pregnant and may face similar or even more complicated dilemmas. My focus on women is not meant to dismiss these experiences or render them less urgent.

pregnant person is forced to consider what will happen to their body, their physical and emotional well-being, their career, their financial situation, and their relationships *in a matter of months*. They will contemplate whether motherhood (or parenthood more generally) is something they want to take on—whether they can, will, and/or want to realize a *parental self*—right then and there. Further, the sense of self they had before being forced into this situation will be irreversibly changed as the result of having this experience.

Transformative experiences are *epistemically transformative*: they transform what one knows or understands (Paul 2020, 17). In the case of unintended pregnancy, one's knowledge of what it is like to be pregnant—*at this time in one's life, in this place, in these circumstances*—crystalizes, compelling a reckoning of one's preferences, desires, and values that could not be undertaken in the same way before having this knowledge. For those who do not want to reorganize their priorities, preferences, or sense of self by carrying a pregnancy to term and/or realizing a parental self, obtaining an abortion is essential for realizing the identity that one *does* want for themselves (namely, a nonparental self). Because abortion access plays such a crucial role in such situations, restricted access to abortion should be understood as a means of forcing an undesired identity upon a pregnant person. This is one reason why the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* ruling,[16] wherein the Supreme Court of the United States overturned the constitutional right to abortion set by *Roe v. Wade* forty-nine years prior, is so dangerous: those who are prevented from obtaining abortions lose more than the freedom to control what happens in and to their bodies—they lose the freedom to determine *who they are*.[17]

At the same time, even if one is able to obtain an abortion, one's self-conception has likely transformed to some degree. Paul (2020, 17) notes that actually living through an experience "teaches you something you couldn't know ahead of time, and in the process, it changes who you are." Upon obtaining an abortion, one might reaffirm their preferences and priorities, or one might learn more clearly what those preferences and priorities really are; one might even be surprised by what they learn. Rather than speculate about what one *might* do in this situation, they now

---

[16] Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, No. 19-1392, 597 U.S. LEXIS 3057 (2022).

[17] The Turnaway Study, which followed two sets of women (those who were able to obtain an abortion when needed, and those who were not), found that women who are denied abortions scale back many of their life plans and suffer economic hardships for years compared to those who successfully obtained an abortion (Foster 2020, 251).

know what they did do, and this knowledge shapes part of the narrative of *who they are*.[18]

Relatedly, those who suggest adoption as an alternative to abortion fail to recognize that carrying a pregnancy to term may in itself have profound transformative implications for one's self-conception, even if a *parental self* is rejected. We might see this, for instance, in closed adoption cases where someone specifically requests that they do not want to be contacted later in life by biological offspring that have been put up for adoption. Despite the physical process of carrying a pregnancy to term, *parenthood* does not align with their self-conception. But this is not enough to *unrealize* a transformation in their identity; they must take steps to ensure that others, too, do not form conceptions of them as a parent.

Additionally, the challenge of unrealizing a transformative self also captures cases where someone does wish to take on a parental self. Many women, for instance, understand miscarriage, stillbirth, and late-term abortion for wanted pregnancies as the loss of their child for which they had already taken on a parental role. For those who wish to realize a parental self, one may take on the identity of *parental self* even in these situations where one has lost a child prebirth. Still, one may struggle to represent that parental self to others who expect a parental self to be accompanied by a living child (Forde 2018).

Other expectations about parental selves stem from kinship narratives that privilege features of biological relatedness over other aspects of parenting. For instance, Shelly Park (2005, 176) argues that notions of family belonging have been heavily premised on birth and genetic mirroring, which has had a profound effect on adoptive relationships. Adopted children may declare, "You're not my *real* mom," or outsiders may not consider an adopted child to be one's "real" child if that child was not born to them. These sentiments may make it more difficult to realize a wanted parental self in the way one desires *for themselves.* It may also make it difficult to realize one's parental self in the eyes of others, regardless of how one conceives of themselves.[19]

---

[18] The abortion-decision study Carol Gilligan (1982, 92) references in her book *In A Different Voice,* and the accounts offered by the participants of the study (see, for instance, Sarah's story), demonstrate how such decisions become part of the narrative of someone's life.

[19] We might also add here instances where someone conceives of themselves as being a parental self but perhaps does not take on the role responsibilities of parenting (for example, an *estranged father*), or conversely, where someone does not conceive of themselves as being a parental self but does take on the role responsibilities of parenting (for example, a sibling, an uncle or aunt, a legal guardian, or the like).

Judith Butler (2005, 35) notes, "The norms by which I seek to make myself recognizable are not fully mine." The considerations presented above demonstrate that the realization or unrealization of a parental self is not determined entirely by the subject of that self. The social and cultural context in which one decides to realize or unrealize a parental self substantially impacts how transformative such a decision may be. Because one's identity is perceived, understood, and responded to by others—sometimes in agreement with one's self-conception and sometimes in conflict with one's self-conception—the ability to *choose* whether to realize a parental self is not as linear as some may think. Given the material effects that accompany decisions about parenthood for women in particular, as well as the limitations that are sometimes placed upon women's abilities to act on their preferences regarding possible parenthood, philosophical arguments about procreation that omit these important considerations are failing to capture the most pressing concerns for existing women and future generations of women.

Making Room for Identity

As I noted earlier, ethical debates regarding procreation are premised on *choice:* we can consider the ethical implications of our procreative decision *because we have a choice to procreate or not*. But as we have seen, nearly half of all procreative decisions are made *after* someone has already become pregnant, and the ability to act on one's procreative preference is not always guaranteed. Women who are confronting such an imminent transformation to a parental self cite personal circumstances, including their socioeconomic status, age, health, and relationship status, as the most important considerations for the decision they make regarding possible parenthood. That is, when women decide whether to procreate or not, the *personally transformative aspects of becoming a parent* are most salient, *not* the more aggregate concerns that an ethics of procreation prioritizes.

Complicating matters further, when women in particular undergo a transformative experience related to parenthood, they do so in contexts where the social, economic, and emotional effects related to pregnancy and motherhood are extensive. Realizing a parental self or realizing a nonparental self often produces harmful material effects that threaten economic stability, career development, social relationships, and emotional health. Because parenthood decisions transform the lives and identities of women more significantly than men, the stakes are raised for women when they consider parenthood for themselves.

The material effects that accompany a woman's transformative parental experience underscores the need to incorporate the social and cultural context in which one makes procreative decisions into an ethics of procreation. Women making procreative decisions must grapple with the transformative experience that parenthood will bring that will significantly alter the course of their lives, *right then*

and there. Philosophical arguments that omit these important considerations offer incomplete accounts of the social, political, and ethical effects of procreative decisions on existing women as well as future generations of women. These effects are more immediately and comprehensively felt by women than are more aggregate concerns, and they intersect with the myriad ways in which women are oppressed in matters of health care, economic stability, self-determination, and bodily autonomy. An ethics of procreation must engage with the ways in which women's identities are transformed through procreative decisions, else risk incompleteness and irrelevance.

Works Cited

Adamsons, Kari. 2013. "Possible Selves and Prenatal Father Involvement." *Fathering* 11 (3): 245–55.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 2018. *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity, Creed, Country, Color, Class, Culture*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corp.

Barnes, Elizabeth. 2015. "Social Identities and Transformative Experience." *Res Philosophica* 92, no. 2 (April): 171–87. https://doi.org/10.11612/resphil.2015 .92.2.3.

Benatar, David. 2012. "Every Conceivable Harm: A Further Defense of Anti-Natalism." *South African Journal of Philosophy* 31 (1): 128–64. https://doi.org/10.1080/0 2580136.2012.10751773.

Bhambhani, Chandni, and Anand Inbanathan. 2018. "Not a Mother, Yet a Woman: Exploring Experiences of Women Opting Out of Motherhood in India." *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 24 (2): 159–82. https://doi.org/10.1080/1225927 6.2018.1462932.

Biggs, M. Antonia , Heather Gould, and Diana Greene Foster. 2013. "Understanding Why Women Seek Abortions in the US" *BMC Women's Health*, 13 (29). https://doi.org/10.1186/1472-6874-13-29.

Brake, Elizabeth. 2015. "Creation Theory: Do Genetic Ties Matter?" In *Permissible Progeny? The Morality of Procreation and Parenting*, edited by Sarah Hannan, Samantha Brennan, and Richard Vernon, 129–49. New York: Oxford University Press.

Brighouse, Harry, and Adam Swift. 2016. *Family Values: The Ethics of Parent-Child Relationships*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Butler, Judith. 1988. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December): 519–31.

———. 2005. *Giving an Account of Oneself.* New York: Fordham University Press.

Correll, Shelly J., Stephen Benard, and In Paik. 2007. "Getting a Job: Is There a Motherhood Penalty?" *American Journal of Sociology* 112, no. 5 (March): 1297–339. https://doi.org/10.1086/511799.

Davidman, Ann. 2021. "I Help People Decide If They Want to Have Kids. Here's My Advice." *Vox,* April 26, 2021. https://www.vox.com/first-person/22370250/ should-i-have-kids-a-baby-decide-start-family-parenthood-kids-childfree.

Dow, Dawn Marie. 2016. "Integrated Motherhood: Beyond Hegemonic Ideologies of Motherhood." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 78, no. 1 (February): 180–96. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12264.

Eustice, Kerry. 2020. "Don't Know If You Want a Baby? This Is How I Found My Answer." *Guardian,* July 7, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle /2020/jul/07/dont-know-if-you-want-a-baby-this-is-how-i-found-my-answer.

Finer, Lawrence B., and Mia R. Zolna. 2016. "Declines in Unintended Pregnancies in the United States, 2008–2011." *New England Journal of Medicine* 374, no. 9 (March 3): 843–52. https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMsa1506575.

Forde, Kaelyn. 2018. "What Women Who Have Experienced Loss Want to Hear on Mother's Day." *Glamour,* May 10, 2018. https://www.glamour.com/story/wh at-mothers-day-means-after-pregnancy-infant-loss.

Foster, Diana Greene. 2020. *The Turnaway Study:* T*en Years, a Thousand Women, and the Consequences of Having—or Being Denied—an Abortion.* New York: Scribner.

Freeman, Hadley. 2015. "Why Do We Still Have to Justify the Choice to be Child-Free?" *Guardian,* April 8, 2015. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015 /apr/08/why-justify-decision-child-free-culture-war-parenting?CMP=gu_com.

Frye, Marilyn. 2000. "Oppression." In *Gender Basics: Feminist Perspectives on Women and Men,* 2nd ed., edited by Anne Minas, 10–16. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Press.

Gilligan, Carol. 1982. *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Guido, Maria. 2014. "Why Having Kids Won't Fulfill You." *Time,* December 19, 2014. https://time.com/3640988/jennifer-aniston-woman-kids-fulfill-you/.

Halpert, Jane A., Midge L. Wilson, and Julia L. Hickman. 1993. "Pregnancy as a Source of Bias in Performance Appraisals." *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 14, no. 7 (December): 649–63. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.4030140704.

Harrison, Gerald, and Julia Tanner. 2011. "Better Not to Have Children." *Think* 10, no. 27 (Spring): 113–21. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175610000436.

Haslanger, Sally. 2000. "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?" *Nous* 34, no. 1 (March): 31–55. https://doi.org/10.1111/0029-4624.00201.

———. 2012. *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Held, Virginia. 2006. *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, And Global*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hird, Myra J., and Kimberly Abshoff. 2000. "Women without Children: A Contradiction in Terms?" *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 31, no. 3 (Summer): 347–66. https://doi.org/10.3138/jcfs.31.3.347.

Johnston, Deirdre D., and Debra H. Swanson. 2003. "Invisible Mothers: A Content Analysis of Motherhood Ideologies and Myths in Magazines." *Sex Roles* 49, no. 1–2 (July), 21–33. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023905518500.

Juhn, Chinhui, and Kristin McCue. 2017. "Specialization Then and Now: Marriage, Children, and the Gender Earnings Gap across Cohorts." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31 (1): 183–204. https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.31.1.183.

Kane, Laura Wildemann. 2019. "What Is a Family? Considerations on Purpose, Biology, and Sociality." *Public Affairs Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (January): 65–88.

Karklin, Diana. 2022. *Undo Motherhood.* Translated by Jonathan Bridges. Amsterdam: Schilt Publishing.

Kaźmierczak, Maria, and Karol Karasiewicz. 2019. "Making Space for a New Role—Gender Differences in Identity Changes in Couples Transitioning to Parenthood." *Journal of Gender Studies* 28 (3): 271–87. https://doi.org/10.10 80/09589236.2018.1441015.

Khazan, Olga. 2017. "How People Decide Whether to Have Children: A Guide for Those on the Fence." *Atlantic*, May 22, 2017. https://www.theatlantic.com/health/ archive/2017/05/how-people-decide-whether-to-have-children/527520/.

LaChance Adams, Sarah. 2014. *Mad Mothers, Bad Mothers, and What a "Good" Mother Would Do: The Ethics of Ambivalence*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Laney, Elizabeth K., M. Elizabeth Lewis Hall, Tamara L. Anderson, and Michele M. Willingham. 2015. "Becoming a Mother: The Influence of Motherhood on Women's Identity Development." *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research* 15 (2): 126–45. https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2015 .1023440.

Lecce, Steven, and Erik Magnusson. 2015. "Do Motives Matter? On the Political Relevance of Procreative Reasons." In *Permissible Progeny? The Morality of*

Procreation and Parenting, edited by Sarah Hannan, Samantha Brennan, and Richard Vernon, 150–69. New York: Oxford University Press.

Merluzzi, Jennifer, and Damon J. Phillips. 2022. "Early Career Leadership Advancement: Evidence of Incongruity Penalties toward Young, Single Women Professionals." *Organization Studies* 43, no. 11 (November): 1719–43. https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406221081619.

Mills, Claudia. 2005. "Are There Morally Problematic Reasons for Having Children?" *Philosophy and Public Policy Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (Fall): 2–9.

Orloff, Ann. 1996. "Gender in the Welfare State." *Annual Review of Sociology* 22: 51–78. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.22.1.51.

Overall, Christine. 2012. *Why Have Children? The Ethical Debate.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Park, Shelley. 2005. "Real (M)othering: The Metaphysics of Maternity in Children's Literature." In *Adoption Matters: Philosophical and Feminist Essays,* edited by Sally Haslanger and Charlotte Witt, 171–94. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Paul, L. A. 2020. "Who Will I Become?" In *Becoming Someone New: Essays on Transformative Experience, Choice, and Change,* edited by Enoch Lambert and John Schwenkler, 16–36. New York: Oxford University Press.

Purdy, Laura M. 2009. "Assisted Reproduction, Prenatal Testing, and Sex Selection." In *A Companion to Bioethics*, 2nd ed., edited by Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer, 178–92. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Sacks, Alexandra. 2017. "The Birth of a Mother." *New York Times,* May 8, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/08/well/family/the-birth-of-a-mother.html.

Tierce, Merritt. 2021. "The Abortion I Didn't Have." *New York Times Magazine,* December 2, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/02/magazine/abortion-parent-mother-child.html.

Tucker, Eleanor. 2014. "I Used to Judge Childfree Women." *Guardian,* November 8, 2014. https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/nov/08/i-used-to-judge-childfree-women.

UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund). 2022. *State of World Population 2022 Report: Seeing the Unseen; The Case for Action in the Neglected Crisis of Unintended Pregnancy*. New York: UNFPA.

Whyman, Tom. 2021. "Why, Despite Everything, You Should Have Kids (If You Want Them)." *New York Times,* April 13, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/13/opinion/baby-bust-covid-philosophy-natalism.html.

Williams, Alex. 2021. "To Breed or Not to Breed?" *New York Times,* December 2, 2021; last modified June 22, 2023. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/20/style/breed-children-climate-change.html.

Youn, Soo. 2022. "These Single Women Say They Face a Workplace Penalty, Too." *Washington Post,* April 21, 2022. https://www.washingtonpost.com/business /2022/04/21/single-women-workplace-penalty.

LAURA WILDEMANN KANE is an assistant professor of philosophy at Worcester State University, a faculty fellow for the Clemente Course in the Humanities (Worcester branch), and a member of the editorial collective of the *Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy.* Her research explores social phenomena such as families, states, and social media networks through a feminist lens. Specifically, she examines the many relationships that we have in social, political, and digital contexts to identify both relational goods and responsibilities that we owe to one another. Recent work has appeared in the *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, the *Journal of Social Philosophy*, *Public Affairs Quarterly*, and *Interdisciplinary Digital Engagement in Arts & Humanities* (*IDEAH*).