

“Not Planned by Us”: Motive and Meaning Among Upper-Tail Birth-Rate Women

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Abstract: This paper asks whether the propensity to mate and form a family, manifested through gender norms, gives rise to forms of order that are discernible and spontaneous. I present evidence from women who take childbearing to be a rule of life, the highest good of the household, and the meaning of their gender. Narrative data is drawn from the first qualitative study of American women whose birth rates diverge from mainstream in both number and kind: in number, having five or more; in kind, entrusting their family size to God’s design and Providence, “not planned by us.” I describe the feature, “not planned by us,” as a particular family form predicated on childbearing having pride of place (as a rule, or propensity) among the goods sought by the domestic community. I proceed in three steps using two case studies. First, I present a narrative account of the subjective values reported by upper-tail birth rate women in relation to childbearing, invoking the rational-choice premise that women pursue goals that they value. Second, I present a description of upper-tail birth rates derived from the economic way of thinking, wherein women who see children as an expression of God’s Provident order, “not planned by us,” assess the subjective benefits of childbearing as relatively higher, and the subjective costs relatively lower, than their lower-birth-rate peers. Subjects did not always jettison careers, but they adjusted careers to fit a gender-identity of childbearing. Third and finally, I present self-reported accounts of domestic emergent order arising from the family form in which childbearing is valued so highly, as well as subjects’ speculations about the contribution of their family form to more complex higher-level social orders.

I think our culture really values the sort of very rigid perception of success and work and has started to devalue a mother’s contribution to society. And it’s almost like radical and feminist to say that my contribution is healthy, well-balanced children and that is a contribution. Like it’s not just about my music career or how much money we make or any of that, really. Those are all secondary to what you contribute to the world, which is the future of humanity.

— Leah, age 40, 5 kids.

One reason why economists are increasingly apt to forget about the constant small changes which make up the whole economic picture is probably their growing preoccupation with statistical aggregates, which show a very much greater stability than the movements of the detail. — F. A. Hayek, “The Use of Knowledge in Society” (1945).

I. INTRODUCTION: PROPENSITIES AND EMERGENT ORDER

Adam Smith's *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, postulated that prosperity arises unintentionally ("has in view no such extensive utility") from the division of labor that follows on a propensity in human nature (Smith 1976, I.ii). By unintentionally Smith meant that the favorable outcomes of markets were not the result of any directed plan or social design but rather emergent from the actions of individuals meeting their own needs through exchange. By propensity Smith meant a rule of human action that holds for the most part, manifesting itself through tradition or custom, that specifies a motive for action or inaction in a particular circumstance. The propensity to "truck, barter, and exchange," Smith submitted, is the rule that forms the basis for the "general opulence" of the market economy (Smith 1976, I.ii). Economists after Smith, especially those in the Austrian, London, and Chicago traditions, continued to develop insights into the role of individual propensities and rules of behavior on social order and governance more broadly, including noneconomic phenomena. This line of inquiry today comes to us under the heading of studies in emergent order, or "the study of spontaneous orders" (Hayek 1982, p. 36).

To inquire into the relationship between gender and emergent order, a natural starting place is the propensity in human nature most closely affiliated with gender: the propensity to mate, marry, and found a family. Indeed, gender commonly refers to the norms, customs, attitudes, and roles associated with being male or female (Merriam-Webster 2023), where male and female are demarcations of the human species relative to sexual reproduction. Therefore, variation in gender norms within and across cultures can be understood as manifestations of the propensity to mate and form a family. Following Smith and the study of emergent order, especially its application to noneconomic phenomena, one may ask whether the propensity to mate and form a family, expressed through gender, gives rise to forms of flourishing and order that are discernible and spontaneous. By discernible and spontaneous I mean that (i) there is a plausible path from an individual rule of behavior (viz. a manifestation of the propensity to mate) to characteristics of social order, and that (ii) individuals aim not at the social outcome directly, but rather follow as a principle of action a norm of the propensity. Such a line of inquiry in the emergent order tradition—from the propensity to mate and found a family to social flourishing via gender norms—has no precedent.

As a first effort, this paper examines women who adopt childbearing intentionally as a rule of life and a norm of their domestic community. I present evidence from the first qualitative study of American women whose birth rates diverge from mainstream in both number and kind: in number, having five or more; in kind, entrusting their family size to God's design and Providence, "not planned by us." I describe the latter feature, "not planned by us," as a particular family form predicated on childbearing having pride of place (as a rule, or propensity) among the goods sought by the domestic community. This group was chosen based on availability of the data. Future studies of this kind might evaluate women and men with different gender norms attached to their propensity to mate and form families, to see if other pathways might be traced out from the propensity to mate to emergent domestic and social orders.

I proceed in three steps using two case studies. First, I present a narrative account of the subjective values reported by upper-tail birth rate women in relation to childbearing, invoking the rational-choice premise that women pursue goals that they value.¹ Second, I suggest that women who see children as an expression of God's Provident order, "not planned by us," see childbearing as the highest good of the domestic community, and a gender norm of their propensity to mate. They assess the subjective benefits of childbearing as relatively higher, and the subjective costs relatively lower, than their lower-birth-rate peers, yielding to a calculus of childbearing in which additional births are more likely than in the general population. By their own account, subjective costs and benefits changed over time, with many reporting that that after three or four children the marginal cost of an additional child decreased, but marginal benefits—expected joys and an evaluation of the merits—increased, leading to a calculus in favor of the marginal child.

1 Self-reported goes without saying. I merely note here, and then move on. No attempt can be made in this paper to verify or externally validate the views of subjects of the study.

Subjects did not always jettison careers, but they adjusted careers to fit a gender-identity of childbearing, rather than adjusting childbearing to fit an identity of professional work. I explore the idea that expressions of the propensity to mate and marry can be used to identify family form according to gender norms. Third and finally, I present self-reported accounts of domestic emergent order arising from the family form in which childbearing is valued so highly, as well as subjects' speculations about the contribution of their family form to more complex higher-level social orders.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section II describes the phenomenon of upper-tail birth-rate women in the United States, and the puzzles associated with their choices, establishing this group of women as an object of research interest. Section III describes the study and method in greater detail. Section IV presents the findings from two case studies. Section V provides discussion and matter for further study.

II. BACKGROUND: UPPER-TAIL BIRTH-RATE WOMEN AND CHILDBEARING AS A PROPENSITY

At the time of the American founding, when Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations* and shortly after the circulation of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, the total fertility rate of American women was 7 children per woman (Haines 2008). By 1900 this number had fallen in half, where it largely remained until 1960 (CDC 1999).² However, from 1960 to 2000, the total fertility rate halved again (Livingston 2018). The United States recorded its lowest total fertility rate on record in 2020, 1.64 lifetime expected births per woman (Hamilton, Martin and Osterman 2021).

The generally accepted explanation for the first decline is the economic shift away from agricultural and home-based work in which children are a net benefit to households, to non-home-based work where children are a net cost to households. Scholars debate whether the subsequent decline since the 1960s resulting in total fertility rates below replacement is part of the same overall trend, or instead a 'second' demographic transition in the west (Lesthaeghe 2010). But there is little debate that the mid-century slowing of birth rates resulted from a new set of costs and benefits centered on the experiences of women: the competition between work and family introduced by the 'contraceptive revolution' of the 1960s (Goldin and Katz 2002; Bailey 2010; Westoff and Ryder 2016). The birth control pill made it possible for women to postpone childbearing, invest in higher education, and pursue a career, all without delaying marriage or partnership. Between 1960 when the first contraceptive pill was approved and the end of the century, the share of women in the labor force surged from 37.9% to 60.0% in 2000 (BLS 2023). Labor economists report that "neither [the 1963 nor the 1973] cohort [of women] had as many children as 'desired', but their desires reflected trade-offs they were willing to make between family and career" (Goldin and Katz 2002, p. 752).

But this is not the whole story of American birth rates in the twentieth century and beyond. Statistical averages obscure a great deal of variation in the lives of actual women. A non-negligible portion of American women did not fall short of their desired birth rates, and still today a portion have families as large as their early American sisters. Largely hidden from popular view, these are women in the uppermost tail of the birth rate distribution. The US Census Bureau (Figure 1) estimates that five percent (4.3% + 0.7%) of women aged 40-44 have five or more children today (vs. 20 % in 1976), and nearly one percent (0.07%) today have seven or more (vs. 6.2% in 1976) (Census Bureau 2023).³

2 As the CDC puts it, "Family size declined between 1800 and 1900 from 7.0 to 3.5 children."

3 Author's own calculations, US Census Bureau, Current Population Survey 1970-2020.

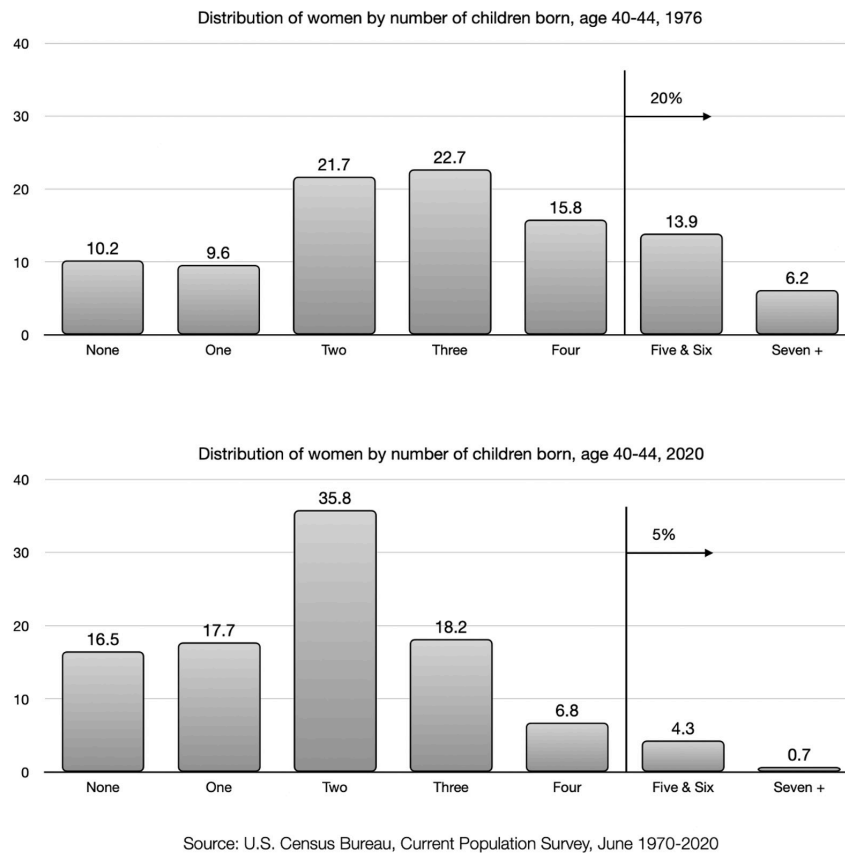


Figure 1.

Despite the large decline since 1976, the percentage of women having five or more has remained relatively constant since 1990 and has not continued to fall.⁴ Thus, some women continue to depart radically from the birth rate norm. Why they do this in a two-child world is as much of a puzzle as average birth rates plunging below replacement (Kearney, Levine and Pardue 2022).

One popular account asserts that women with large families are ignorant, under-educated, or lack alternative life choices. French President Emmanuel Macron has expressed this view at the United Nations saying that women who are “perfectly educated” will not go on to have families of “seven, eight, or nine children”⁵ (Iati 2018). This hypothesis likens women with upper-tail fertility to the hand-loom weavers of old, unwilling to modernize, and destined for extinction with time and education. While it presents a negative portrait of such women, it is not wholly without grounds. Education is one of the strongest correlates of declining birthrates (Martin 1995; Matthews and Ventura 1997). But education, however associated, can hardly be the causal factor. The evidence rather points to ‘career’ (or at least work outside the home) as the mediating co-causal variable. Education raises the opportunity cost of foregoing the labor market to have children—both financially and socially. *Ceteris paribus*, women with more education are more likely to be

4 Most of the change in birth rates since 1990 has been from the rising percentage of women having only one child (16.9% to 19.8%), and the falling proportion having three (19.4% to 17.3%). Childlessness has not risen substantially since 1990, though it rose from 10% to 16% from 1976 to 1990.

5 French President Emmanuel Macron at a Gates Foundation event said: “I always say: ‘Present me the woman who decided, being perfectly educated, to have seven, eight, or nine children.’”

in the labor market, squeezing out time for children, since time is a rival good. Ultimately, the thesis that high birth rate women are ignorant confuses correlation and causation.

Another common narrative is that women with upper-tail birth rates are irrational religious dupes, perhaps even victims of cults, cult-like practices, or patriarchal religious norms. On this account, women don't make up their own minds, but follow religious doctrines or leaders mindlessly (e.g., the Pope; religious elders; Rabbis, pastors, priests or husbands). Certain voyeuristic television shows (e.g., *The Duggars*, *Sister Wives*) continue to fuel this narrative, but it has long existed in American culture. Over time, however, Catholic and Mormon birth rates have followed the same declining trend as the American population at large (Westoff and Jones 1979; Mosher, Williams and Johnson 1982; Reiss 2019a). For instance, "among non-Hispanic whites in the 1980s, Catholic total fertility rates were about one-quarter of a child *lower* than Protestant rates (1.64 vs. 1.91)" (Mosher, Williams and Johnson 1982, p. 1; emphasis mine). Reiss reports that Mormons were still having "an extra kid and a half: a 3.31 fertility rate" in the 1980s when Catholic fertility had already dipped below average, but today are having about 2.42 children, "about 7/10 of a child higher than is typical of Americans as a whole" (Reiss 2019b). Utah birth rates bear this out. The Utah birth rate declined by over 40% from 2007-2014 alone (Hamilton et al. 2015). Nevertheless, the popular association about Catholic and Mormon birth rates remains. Other variants of the religious 'dupe' explanation include being victim of patriarchal marriages or churches that apply soft forms of coercion or peer pressure against women's personal preferences or desires. Ultimately, the hypothesis that 'high-birth-rate women are irrational' depends upon lower levels of personal agency and responsibility. Notably too, this explanation (like the first) depends in part on a confusion between correlation and causation. Religiosity itself is highly correlated with total fertility, but not obviously causal (Hayford and Morgan 2008). Unfortunately, this explanation also trades on another causal mistake: while departures from personal agency and responsibility may be found among some religious people, religion alone is not the causal story.

Therefore, puzzles remain as to the existence, persistence, and stability of upper-tail birth-rate women. There is no unified scholarly view of the matter, nor any generally accepted description of their motives. Moreover, beyond inherent research interest, upper-tail birth rate women constitute a natural subject for gender study. Feminist thought has concerned itself deeply with claims about female rationality, agency, education, and opportunity. Since upper-tail birth rate women are at least popularly associated with deficiencies in exactly these areas, their stories may offer clues needed for a more complete picture of the status of women in the contemporary West.

The economic way of thinking in the emergent order tradition provides a salutary approach for the study of upper-tail birth-rate women. First, it supposes that such women, like all other individuals, pursue ends that they value. Discovering these purposes and motives, descriptions can be formed of the norms and behaviors affiliated with the propensity to mate and form a family. These descriptions form the basis of rules of action (or inaction) from which an emergent order may arise.

Second, upper-tail birth-rate women are usually embedded in strong local communities where spontaneous orders, pre-political by nature, are highly developed (Skarbek 2011). Even among ordinary birth-rate families, the household itself and the domestic community is obscured from view and *unconnected* to formal governance. That is, order within the family belongs to the realm of individual freedom and private norms. For this reason, there is a long tradition that identifies the family as a seedbed of virtue, the bedrock of civil society, and a mediating force between individuals and the state (Wollstonecraft 1790; Burke 1790; Tocqueville 1840; Hall 2014).

What remains to be done is to trace out a plausible path from one type of gender norm to domestic emergent order (what happens *inside the family*) and from this to broader social orders (*outside the family*). The contribution of this paper is to introduce evidence of this path from upper-tail birth-rate women for whom childbearing is taken to be the meaning of their gender and the chief manifestation of their propensity to mate and form a family.

III. METHOD: THE NARRATIVE IS THE DATA

Women were recruited in ten American locations⁶ following established practices for human subjects research.⁷ Selection criteria included: (1) female; (2) born in the United States; (3) college-educated (Bachelor's degree or equivalent); (4) Married; (5) Five or more children with a current partner; (6) Would describe their family size as purposeful.⁸ All interviews were conducted by qualified scholars (PI, or co-PI) who met the same selection criteria as the subjects.⁹ The use of two interviewers served as a robustness check and identical interview guides were used. Interviews were conducted mostly in the homes of the subjects, but occasionally in a quiet public location such as a library. The open-ended interviews lasted from 90-120 minutes. Since the women recruited for the study did not constitute a representative sample, it may be said that each subject is herself, $N=1$.

While economics has largely abandoned the interview as a source of data in favor of quantitative methods and causal inference, many questions cannot be fruitfully addressed without this more primitive form of observation. Although interviews do not yield population statistics, “what open-ended interviews do yield, and yield consistently,” according to economist Michael Piore, “are stories the respondents tell. The story is the ‘observation’. The stories are basically narratives. The question is thus what to do with the stories. Typically, stories are not analyzed as statistical data; stories are ‘interpreted’... The stories [act] not as data points but to suggest particular revisions in theory” (Piore 2006, p. 18).

The primary interpretive lens for the stories is the rational choice framework: first, people pursue ends that they value and act for a purpose; second, ends are pursued through a rational ordering of values. That is, incentives matter. Individuals compare the expected (subjective) value of a choice against subjective costs, especially the opportunity cost of the most valuable choice not chosen. Following Buchanan, cost is understood to be “that which the decision-taker sacrifices or gives up when he makes a decision. It consists in his own evaluation of the enjoyment or utility that he anticipates having to forego as a result of selection among alternative courses of action” (Buchanan 1999, p. 41). Following Mises, costs are understood to be “a phenomenon of valuation,” (Mises 1949, p. 393) such that “costs are equal to the value attached to the satisfaction which one must forego in order to attain the end aimed at” (Mises 1949, p. 97). The consequence of this is that a calculus of choice which provides insight into purposes can be rendered in two equivalent ways: as a comparison of subjective value (of a choice) with subjective cost (the value of the next best choice); or as a straightforward ranking of goods of different values, e.g. this is most important, this is second, etc. The latter rendering is not as recognizable as the economic way of thinking; nevertheless, the logic of choice developed especially in the Austrian tradition insists on their analytical equivalency (Buchanan 1999). At the same time, the ranking of goods recommends itself more highly to noneconomic phenomena where choices cannot be presented in terms of (simultaneous) commodity prices.

The mode of interpretation in this paper invokes the entire legacy of the Smithian paradigm, in which people pursue ends that they value *cooperatively*, on account of which formal and informal institutions

6 Locations: (1) Spokane, WA; Seattle, WA; (2) Los Angeles, CA; Long Beach, CA; (3) Salt Lake City, UT; Provo, UT; (4) Denver-Aurora, CO; (5) Houston, TX; (6) Greenville, SC; (7) Washington DC; Arlington, VA; Rockville, MD; (8) Philadelphia, PA; Wilmington, DE; (9) Boston, MA; Hartford, CT; Providence, RI; (10) Chicago, IL; Milwaukee, WI; Des Moines, IA.

7 IRB Approval was obtained in Fall of 2018; recruitment took place in spring of 2019; and interviews were conducted in summer of 2019.

8 We wanted to recruit women who could tell us about their purposes. Our sample therefore is not representative of all women with five or more children. However, unintended (‘non-purposeful’) pregnancies are less common among college-educated women (Musik et al. 2009).

9 The author of this article was the PI and primary interviewer (80% of interviews). Emily Reynolds, co-PI, conducted the remaining interviews. Investigators who fit the selection criteria for the sample were chosen to reduce feelings of negative judgment or stigma, to facilitate greater freedom and openness in responses.

emerge to protect distinct human goods, such as children (marriage), provisions (markets), and safety (governance). In the Smithian paradigm, the motives of individuals—for instance, to form families, to make provision for themselves, to seek safety—springing from basic human propensities, are not problems to be solved but clues as to the character of resulting social orders, institutions, and modes of governance: “The important point is that the regularity of the conduct of the elements will determine the general character of the resulting order but not all the detail of its particular manifestation” (Hayek 1982, p. 40). Regularity in conduct is observed by marking the motives and values that guide human action in the face of certain choices. These regularities (as customs, norms, or traditions) are manifestations of basic propensities.

My empirical approach to interpretation of the narratives (only a fragment of which can be included in this manuscript) involves identifying three types of expressions in the speech of the subjects, often but not always separable as data in the narratives:

- 1) *Expressions of subjective value embedded in the narratives.* What ends do my subjects report valuing and pursuing? What motives do they describe? What meanings do they attach to their decisions? Did these motives and meanings change over time?
- 2) *Expressions of explicit or implicit ranking of goods, or costs and benefits.* How do they describe the opportunity costs of childbearing? What do they perceive as the merits and rewards of childbearing?
- 3) *Expressions of emergent order arising from choices consequent upon (1) and/or (2).*
 - a. Within the family. What characteristics of the marriage itself do subjects speculate result from entrusting family size to God’s design and Providence? What characteristics of the siblings? Of the domestic community itself?
 - b. Outside the family. What features of civil society and social order do subjects speculate might be traced to the family form reflected by upper-tail birth rates?

For elements of (3) to correspond to Hayek’s statement of emergent order, they should be purpose-independent in the sense that they are distinct from the purposes stated in (1) and (2), and *in an important sense* unintended. “The order rests,” Hayek insists, “on the purposive action of its elements,” (Hayek 1982, p. 39) but even if aware of the (desired or undesired) consequences of their purposes, the elements (decision makers) are unable to ‘intend’ the character of the emergent order, since it is not the product of any one decision maker.

In Hayek’s sense, the family is clearly ordered as a ‘society’ and not as a ‘government’ (Hayek 1982, p. 48). “The formation of spontaneous orders,” he writes, “is the result of their elements following certain rules in their responses to their immediate environment” (Hayek 1982, p. 43). Later he writes that “Rule in this context means simply a propensity or disposition to act or not act in a certain manner, which will manifest itself in what we call a *practice*, or custom” (Hayek 1982, p. 75). Members of a family follow rules in this sense, practices, or customs, consciously (or subconsciously) adopted by those who establish the household. Rules may not be the same for all members but correspond to roles (Hayek 1982, p. 49).

Returning to the subject and method of this paper, open-ended interviews yield exactly the sort of insights necessary to connect family form to emergent domestic and social orders. Mapping family onto the Hayekian notion of *cosmos*, let ‘family form’ be the set of ‘rules’ or ‘propensities’ that are adopted or ‘obeyed’ by the members of a domestic community. Expressions of subjective value provide an accounting of the distinct human goods sought by the principals of a domestic community, the purposive action of the individuals described as rules or propensities. Expressions of relative valuation or rankings of goods manifest how the rules (tend to) work in various circumstances. In this case, subjects report adopting childbearing as a rule or propensity. Expressions of emergent order describe the ‘character’ of the domestic society resulting from the rules and propensities (or purposes), as described by the individuals inhabiting them.

III. FINDINGS: “BEARING GOODNESS AND LIGHT”

Fifty-five women were recruited into the study from ten US locations (see footnote 6). Women ranged in age from 32 (born in 1987) to 71 (born in 1948). The number of children ranged from five (lower bound on selection) to fifteen with an average of seven across the sample. Seventy-five percent (41/55) of the sample reported white/Caucasian as race or ethnicity, while the remaining twenty-five percent (14/55) reported identifying with a racial minority, including black (1), Hispanic (2), Asian (2), Filipino (1), Jewish (5), and mixed races or other (3). Women in the sample reported belonging to the following religious traditions: Christian, Baptist; Christian, Evangelical; Christian, non-denominational; Christian, Presbyterian; Church of Jesus Christ (LDS/Mormon); Jewish (‘Observant’; Orthodox; or Hasidic); and Roman Catholic.¹⁰ Fewer than half of the sample, forty-five percent (25/55), came from families of origin large enough to fit the study sample (five or more children), while fifty-five percent (30/55) came from smaller families. A full twenty-five percent (14/55) grew up with no siblings (4/55) or just one sibling (10/55).

In what follows, I present two case studies, preserving as much of the original voice as possible given space constraints. Names have been changed. Other identifying information has been removed. Quotes were chosen to indicate: (1) subjective values; (2) ordering or ranking of values (or relative subjective costs and benefits); and (3) aspects of emergent order.

Case 1. Leah, age 40, 5 kids, Jewish.

We met Leah in her home in the Northeast on a quiet Sunday morning. Leah was expecting her fifth child when we visited. She told us she:

had graduated college and had attended a religious women’s yeshiva for 8 months. And we got married. I knew going into marriage that our intention was to start a family right away. Like we weren’t getting married to wait. ...I was in a very intentional mindset when I got married. ...And [my son] was born 10 months after we got married basically.

She continued, highlighting the importance of her religious turn:

I think I always knew that I wanted to have children, but I never had a preconceived notion of, ‘I want to have x amount of kids.’ I just knew that I wanted to be a mom and I knew that I wanted to have a family. But I didn’t grow up with a lot of siblings and I didn’t have that experience and I didn’t grow up super religious. ...I grew up in a reformed congregation which is basically completely secular except you do token Jewish things. And now, we’ve chosen a different life where we are much more intentionally practicing religion and the traditional.

For Leah and her husband, having children was part of marriage, and both were linked with a sense of mission and purpose in relation to God’s plan for them. Leah recalls that at the time, as a young mom, it was incredibly hard:

to go through another pregnancy and everything and not having really slept through the night very much, but I mean, I just really saw it as divine providence and God’s will for me. And I really felt like it was a blessing.

Expressions of the blessing of children, as a statement of value, overwhelmed our narrative data. Esther [age 38, 9 kids], another Jewish subject, said “God’s not out to trick us and send us trouble. He really wants to

10 Muslim women and atheist women were sought but not located for this study.

send us blessings. Yes, things don't always turn out exactly the way you might have expected it, but children are a great source of blessing. And God wants us to have more blessings and more healthy children and we should definitely ask for that."

Regarding personal identity in relation to her choice to have a large family, Leah described how her values and the ordering of priorities had evolved over time:

Like I think that when I had my first 2, I was hyper-committed to my goals. I still was recording full-length CD's and playing in concerts and having rehearsals late at night. I had more energy and stamina, and the will, and the drive. I think that has definitely been affected by having a large family, and I think that after having the third and fourth, I think there are identity challenges.

It's not as easy to pursue personal dreams and pursuits right now as it once was. It's a sacrifice that I've made because I value having a large family, and I value every child as a gift. But I wouldn't be honest if I said it wasn't a struggle. And also, even on a financial level, feeling like after I had my fourth, instead of doing my music, I'm now working 9am-1pm every day to help support our family. So that's been really hard, feeling like I care a lot about being able to provide for my family. And I think I've had to sacrifice some of my own interests and pursuits at this time.

I don't think they're on hold forever. But I also think that creatively, there's only so much that a person has at any given time. I think as a mother of a large family, you have to understand sometimes things are on a back burner. It doesn't mean the burner is off. It means you're rotating priorities as needed, and I've done a lot of that.

I think our culture really values the sort of very rigid perception of success and work and has started to devalue a mother's contribution to society. And it's almost like radical and feminist to say that my contribution is healthy, well-balanced children and that is a contribution. Like it's not just about my music career or how much money we make or any of that, really. Those are all secondary to what you contribute to the world, which is the future of humanity.

Leah expressed a thematic pattern that emerged in many interviews. With the first couple of children, the 'old self' hangs on, and inevitably gets 'balanced' with motherhood. But this takes a level of "energy, stamina" that cannot be sustained. Eventually—if you keep having children—Leah says, some things practically go on the back burner, but your identity changes. There is a melding, or a settling, or a 'shift' as Leah called it: "I think that part of your identity just evolves into motherhood being a really big tenet of who you are and what you're giving to the world, like a shift..." One interpretation of this is that the tension between the mom-self and the old-self resolves when you're no longer balancing them: at the end there is 'one-self', herself, for whom motherhood becomes deeply who she is and what she gives to the world.

This appears to be the meaning of the passage about culture. Leah argues that it is customary to assign 'contribution' to professional work and career, but to motherhood rather something like 'consumption' in the way economists use the term—something which is chosen and consumed for personal benefit, as Gary Becker modeled children for the household (Becker 1991). In contrast, Leah's view is that children are a positive externality, if not more—a critical contribution to society. She concluded by saying:

... literally the future is about good people being in the world. People that will go on to raise their own, healthy, happy families and contribute positively. And yeah, coming from a divorced family, that was a big motivation for me in choosing this life, I think. Like valuing children first. The family unit being the priority above career and personal identity.

Following this portion of our conversation, Leah remarked, in another statement of values ordering gains:

It has gone by way too fast, honestly, even though it is hard and there are times that I feel really overwhelmed and like this is a really big responsibility I am bringing on my shoulders, bringing another child, starting from square one at age 40. I could be doing this another 18 years. I could be on the beach drinking margaritas. But that's just not what my life is about. And I just didn't build my life around sitting back and relaxing. I built my life around working really really really hard and bringing goodness and light into the world.

At this point Leah shifted and began connecting her values and choices to characteristics of her household, what I take to be an expression of domestic emergent order.

... if anything, children are light. Every child brings a divine gift into the world that nobody else can bring. Nobody else can do what that person is here to do. And yes, it takes so much self-sacrifice, but I ultimately feel like my husband and I are really happy. We are really really happy and fulfilled even though we have had to work really really really hard, to the breaking point at times. For sure, I mean, sleepless nights, endlessly. Both of us working. Both of us parenting. Putting aside some of our personal pursuits. But ultimately, yeah, we went out for our 16-year anniversary this past March and those moments are really really special. We appreciate them more, I think, because they're rare.

In this single passage Leah articulated three things: (1) the extraordinarily high value she places on children—each one is unrepeatable, irreplaceable, and divine; (2) the assertion that the opportunity cost of personal pursuits is well compensated for by that high value; (3) her marriage is stronger because of the shared project of raising a large family. In an adjacent passage she related:

... there are times when I'll be supporting my husband, for example, when he was getting his graduate degree, I was pregnant with my fourth. So that kind of had to take priority during that time. So we kind of support each other. There have been times where he really supported me with my music and things like that. So we kind of work hand in hand.

She elaborated on the connection between their shared project and the quality of their marriage, identifying growth in virtue as a part of that story:

What creates tenacity in a relationship, ultimately really? Because yeah, we have so many household duties. It really is overwhelming. The dishes and the laundry and the parenting. All of that is like... and yet you grow so much as a person. Your capacity grows. What I was capable of with one kid almost seems like probably looking back a vacation when you have five. And it seemed really hard at the time. Because my capacity as a person has grown so tremendously. And my tolerance and my ability to field stressful experiences and manage them differently—so, I think we grew a lot. We have a lot to give because we've learned how to manage a very full life.

Leah envisions the job of raising five kids as a thirty plus-year mission that she and her husband are committed to carrying through together, thick or thin. Her oldest is 15 and she says it will be at least another 18 years until her baby is launched. She thinks that the mission helps to create 'tenacity' or strength as a couple since they grow and become better and have more to offer each other.

Finally, Leah talked about her children, her teenagers, and reflected on how a household oriented to childbearing might provide benefits for the broader social order. This was a theme that came up often in our interviews:

I think it's interesting to think about "How will this influence the future?" I think there's a lot of value in being raised in a large family. ... My older kids are really learning about independence and responsibility and how to contribute and they already at 13 and 15 know that life isn't all about them and their self-fulfillment. They understand that life is about responsibility, give and take, giving back basically. It's not just take, take, take. And I feel like a lot of kids that grow up in a smaller family end up with the message that, "It is about me and what I want, and I get it". They don't learn how to give back in the same ways.

One of our subjects, getting at the same idea, called the large family a 'natural school of virtue'. The idea was that growing up with many siblings provided an organic—unintended—training in desirable character traits. Few subjects were as blunt as Leah, saying that smaller families couldn't achieve the same. But all who commented on it believed that large families had a strong natural advantage in producing children who had learned how to share, were tolerant of differences, had taken on responsibility from a young age, and were radically connected to others. This latter idea came up often—with many of the women commenting that their teens seemed happier—and easier—than expected. Leah continued:

Oh, it's so good. I think it really tempers [teenagers'] experience of the natural separation that takes place as a teenager ... And I can say for my son, he's having a radically different experience than I had at his age. He's living a much more wholesome life. He's spending Friday nights at home with a family meal and Saturdays in the synagogue with the community praying doing a prayer service. ... But family comes first. And also, that there's a community looking after him. He knows that he's accountable, whereas I think a lot of teenagers live in their own world and they're not accountable to a community. So, it's definitely good. And just the experience of contributing with the care of younger siblings is huge, learning how to be a caretaker. Not like a parent, just someone who is looked up to and influences.

I mean, I feel that my teenagers have never been easier, more independent, and self-sufficient. I mean, if anything, they've become so much easier with age. Of course, they say, "Bigger kids, bigger problems." The stuff on their minds is big, but who they are as people, how they behave is exemplary.

Leah's case study provides a narrative response to the research questions that motivated this study. Expecting her fifth baby at age 40, Leah describes a profound religious turn as a young woman (shared with her husband) and they are active in a local orthodox synagogue. She places a very high value on childbearing, which she describes as "bringing goodness and light to the world," with roots in her religious faith, and in her experience of family loss (divorce) as a child. She believes that children are blessings from God and a substantial contribution that a woman can make to society, "like radical and feminist to say that my contribution is healthy, well-balanced children." Childbearing is the manifestation of her propensity to mate and form a family, so that all things being equal, another child is desired despite the difficulties. Second, she articulates very clearly her subjective relative valuations, and how she weighs things in the balance. "I built my life ... around bringing goodness and light into the world ... the future of humanity." None of her personal pursuits (which she intends to pick up again as soon as she can), nor the effort and personal costs, outweigh the value she places on motherhood and the opportunity to bring "a divine gift into the world that nobody else can bring." Finally, she believes that there are characteristics of her marriage and of her children that discernibly correspond to having a large family—but were unintended by her, a 'domestic' emergent order. She further supposes that these characteristics are good for social order more broadly yielding stronger marriages, and children with prosocial civic virtues: independence, responsibility, tolerance, and connectedness.

Case 2. Angela, age 44, 5 kids, Catholic.

Angela welcomed us into her university office on a warm, early fall day. She taught at a liberal arts college, and her office, piled with stacks of books and papers, featured a child-sized table squeezed to one side, with tiny chairs and a plethora of tiny ‘masterpieces’ taped to the walls. Early in our conversation she described the challenges of balancing her work as a tenured professor with her lifestyle of openness to having children:

[Between my fourth and fifth] I just needed a break. But I think—I don’t think that’s the children. I think it’s because I work. I honestly think it’s work and children. I had four of the five on the tenure track. And it’s difficult, as you well know. And it’s—for me I think there’s so much stress going on here that that’s the real delay for us.

The stresses of work and a full house had caused her to wait longer between kids, she thought, than she might otherwise have done. But her family life had taken a toll on her professional work too, something she readily described in terms of trade-offs or relative values:

... Let’s be honest. I don’t have a published book. That’s not happening. I don’t care. But it’s not happening, actually. For some it’s fine. I’m not that person. Would I be a better scholar if I didn’t have children? For sure. For sure. Honestly. I mean, I used to work all the time before I had my children. So, for sure I would. Am I following all my passions? ... No. I’m not. Ok. I can live with that.

... This really is true. If you make a choice, you’re giving up one thing for another. But five-year-olds understand that ... If you can only have a choice between the chocolate and the Skittles, you’re not having chocolate and Skittles.

Reflecting on the fact that she was probably done having kids, she told us how sorry she’d be not to have another one:

Well, you know, I’m actually sad. Believe it or not, it’s ridiculous. I know I’m forty-four and the average forty-four year-old is not having another child. But nothing has wound down yet. I love children. And [my son] won’t have a sibling close in age. So, I’d love to have one more, just so he could have a little friend. I would. So, I’m not going to lie. I would enjoy that immensely ...

It’s just such a beautiful gift, I just never could have imagined. I said I did not grow up a baby person. I did not grow up around children. ... But it’s such a joy. Oh my gosh. Having children is such a joy that I do feel like it’s something God is doing for me. It seems like such a tremendous gift, and I can’t believe that I get to have it.

Later, when Angela elaborated on giving up some of her ‘passions’ for the sake of her children, her conversation naturally worked its way back to a statement of her values.

Well, if you think that career and passions are the only way that a woman can fully flourish, then obviously you’re going to think children are an impediment. Because your career will be diminished unless you rely on an army of other people. Which, if you have the capacity, more power to you. But most people do not have those economic means. ... It’s just, what do you value? So, I just think that our values are more for individual self-fulfillment than they are for anything collective.

Regarding reconciling her personal identity with having five children, she stressed that she didn't feel the presence of her children as a challenge to her sense of self:

I often wonder if I don't have a problem with this because I am African American. I mean, I'm obviously Western. But I wonder if it's not a little bit of a cultural difference... we're sort of overrun with a misbegotten sense of autonomy. And ... autonomy is not the first thing I would think of as the characteristic of the self. If it were, then I imagine that this would look absolutely dreadful. Because I don't have any time for myself. I can't exactly say that I'm a paragon of self-care. That is not happening right now. It can when you have a kid who's three, but it can't when you have a one-year-old. That's just reality. But since autonomy is not my primary value, it doesn't matter. People are actually my primary value. Persons are my primary value, and I have a home rich with persons.

Continuing along the same lines she related:

But I do think that deeply embedded in black culture is a sense of other people, a sense of interdependence. I do think that. There's no shame in sharing yourself with people, and reliance on other people.

People matter. People matter. And they also—my sense of identity is sort of co-related to all those other people. ... I have found that I'm most myself with my family—more myself than I ever even knew I could be with my family than I would be apart from them.

At this point, Angela began to lean into her religious values to explain her point of view:

I would most definitely make a connection between the culture of hospitality and children. If you have an openness to the other you have an openness to the other. And you don't have to fear the loss of yourself in the openness to the other. ... We are most ourselves when we give ourselves away—it's the paradox of the Cross, though ... That is, Christianity, I mean, that really is the Cross. That's just the paradox of the Cross. So, I do think that's a mystery.

Angela's appeal to what she called the mystery of Christianity contained an implicit ranking of goods, not dissimilar from Leah's. Children matter, above other things and even above personal pursuits, career interests, and personal comfort, because children—and people in general—are part of a divine plan to “prosper you, and not to harm you” as one of our subjects put it, quoting the prophet Jeremiah. Leah referred to children as “bringing goodness and light.” And Angela connected children with the salvation of the world.

Finally, Angela, like Leah and many of our subjects, believed that her rule, or propensity, to be open to children—an open home, an open table—had affected her marriage for the better, and her children too. I took these as expressions of domestic emergent order. She didn't have children *in order to* have a better marriage, or for the sake of virtues in her children, but she was convinced her decision to have five kids, and to be open to more, had produced those salutary effects. Like Leah, she thought her family size had improved her and her husband, and that growth in virtue had in turn improved their marriage.

I think we were used to doing what we wanted to do in the time frame that we wanted to do it. And in that sense, you are self-referential, even together. Children force you out of yourself. You cannot be selfish with a child.

In the same way, Angela believed that children in a large family effectively help to mature the other children as well as their parents.

...my five children certainly have their predominant faults. And I think the other children work on it. [...] someone described the family as a novitiate. The family is a novitiate. It is a proving ground, and a training ground where you learn how to be a decent human being. Actually. Truly. And a preparation for heaven even ...

She went on to describe how her nine-year-old son “has grown tremendously by having to live with other people” and how her eight-year-old daughter was learning to give up being the “center of attention.”

Before concluding our interview, Angela chuckled at the problem with answering typical questionnaires in medical offices and surveys: *Is this a wanted or an unwanted pregnancy? Planned or unplanned?* “Oh my gosh, it’s so irritating,” she said, “and I don’t even know how to answer the question. Well, of course they’re wanted. Well, was this all planned? What do you mean by planned? Planned by God.” Another subject, Moira, had retorted: “Three of our five kids weren’t planned by us. And every time we had a baby that wasn’t planned by us, there’s the faith that I didn’t plan this but that doesn’t mean someone else didn’t plan this. So, there’s that openness we were talking about, like the stewardship of your life. Your life isn’t yours to begin with...” Angela, as if she had heard this comment, added with a laugh: “some Protestant preacher said in a book sometime, I can’t tell you the name of the book, but I thought it was hilarious. But ‘it’s not your show. It’s not your show. You know you’re in it, but this is not your show.’”

Angela’s case study provides additional narrative support for the findings in Leah’s story. Angela places an exceedingly high value on childbearing, understood as a lifestyle of radical openness to the other, and intentional interdependence. Children are a great joy for her, and a gift from God. Like Leah, she talks about trade-offs or relative values. She hasn’t had as many children as she would have liked, and that’s because she also works as a college professor. But her subjective evaluation of the relative costs and benefits led her to choose a much larger family than most of her peers. Finally, she believes that her decision to make childbearing the identifying propensity of her family led to a stronger marriage and children who are less self-centered. None of this was related to her *purpose* in having children, but she counts it as an expression of God’s provident plan for her family. She believes that “human elements act according to secondary causality” in a “supernatural order” of things.

IV. DISCUSSION: DOMESTIC EMERGENT ORDER AND SOCIAL ORDER

Minimally, this paper aims to provide initial evidence of an intelligible path from the propensity to mate and form a family to elements of emergent domestic order and social order more broadly. The propensity to mate and form a family is manifested through diverse gender norms, customs, and traditions. This study examines the pathway for just one group of women: those who share ideals and customs in which childbearing is pursued as a purpose, a rule of life, the highest good of the domestic community, and the lived meaning of their gender.

Although these women constitute only the uppermost five percent of the birth-rate distribution, they are frequently misunderstood and caricatured in ways that threaten a normative social vision of female rationality, agency, education, and opportunity. Extensive transcript evidence from fifty-five interviews demonstrates that there indeed exists a narrative in which upper-tail birth rates can be explained on the same terms as declining ones, namely as the outcome of perceived tradeoffs between work and family, where the scales were tipped by their emergent sense of personal identity as mothers and evolving relationships with God. The data offered a picture of women with the same agency and rational purpose as lower birth-rate peers, but with a distinct scale of values. In general, across the interviews, childbearing took pride of place not because careers had relatively less value to the women in the study. Indeed, all women interviewed had finished college, many had graduate degrees, and a sizable portion were working full or part time. Rather, relative valuation tipped in favor of childbearing so often because children were described as having eternal value, as being a ‘divine’ gift, and a blessing from God.

Some might object that bringing a ‘supernatural’ or transcendent scale of values into a calculus of choice is to reject the rational choice framework. But this is not so. Subjective values are always immaterial, in the realm of the spirit and not easily measured except by what we are willing to give up to get them. The pure theory of rational choice does not require commensurability of goods in the objective function, but merely that agents can rank the goods in a meaningful way that guides choice. In this way human action is said to be purposeful. The women in this study provided a clear articulation of being motivated by perceived costs and expected benefits, and an explicit (or implicit) ranked valuation of goods. I did not find evidence of ignorance or religious irrationality. Moreover, the lone subject who described her husband as the driving force behind her family size (“he wants nine”) was the *least* religious subject that we interviewed—and one of the most well-educated (a PhD married to a PhD). Rather, the accounting of motives and action across our sample seemed consistent with what could be appreciated by any outside observer (intelligibility); an observer might not share their values, but it would be hard to say they had no reasons or behaved irrationally with respect to their stated values.

A further note about the role of religion is warranted. While religious zealotry¹¹ was not observed in these transcripts, what provided a scale of values in which childbearing was so highly valued was in all but one case (54/55) correlated with religious conviction not unique to any one creed. Women of every faith in the sample articulated a strikingly similar view of the supernatural value of children and the choice to make childbearing a lifestyle, or a rule, around which other, lesser goods (such as career) were adjusted. The commonality across faiths of childbearing as a lifestyle and not a limited phase of life invoked the notion of something like ‘mere motherhood’ in the way that C. S. Lewis wrote about mere Christianity (Lewis 1952). The women in my sample spoke of choosing or discovering a way of life which would certainly be described as ‘traditional’ in terms of gender norms, in which children are welcomed somewhat liberally, without a direct plan, but not haphazardly—‘not planned by us’. Women described the acceptance of children as accepting a gift (from God), but they felt securely in control of when the next child would come using the language of ‘readiness’.¹²

There were also tremendous similarities in how they thought about readiness for a next child (e.g. not being ready but praying to become ready, looking for signs of God’s will, using health as a sign to have more, spiritual peace as a marker, etc.) But they rejected almost categorically the language of being ‘done’. One subject said she personally felt done (holding her seventh baby) but knew that God might change her heart to feel ready again someday. “Am I really in charge?” she asked rhetorically. “I am not the planner of all plans,” she concluded. Another subject described three of her children as “not planned by us.” And Angela had invoked the preacher who said of this life “it’s not your show; you’re in it, but it’s not your show.” She also said, “What do you mean planned? Planned by God.” At the same time, when probed, the women in my sample rejected religious ‘natalism’—they didn’t think of themselves as having children *for God* or *for the church*. Rather, children were something that God was doing *for them*. They themselves were the primary beneficiaries—and the primary decision makers—even if they were “secondary elements” in a plan beyond their intention or control.

This paper can be only a preliminary statement of findings in service of the attempt to connect gender and emergent order. The language of “not planned by us,” uncovered in this data, provides an opportunity to outline hypotheses about the causality between family and civil society long articulated in the classical liberal tradition (Wollstonecraft 1790; Burke 1790; Tocqueville 1840; Hall 2014). The women in this study robustly and consistently connected their individual choices to an unplanned, or unintended order, emergent in the domestic community. This order included, in part, the ultimate size of their families; but it also included the character of their marriages, and the nature of the development of personality and virtue in

11 What I mean by zealotry here would be the tendency to neglect all comparisons of costs and benefits; to say, for instance, there are no competing goods or costs.

12 Subjects reported using a wide variety of methods of family planning to postpone a next child until they felt ‘ready’.

themselves and in their children. Subjects explicitly connected their choice to have many children to marital tenacity, personal growth, domestic tranquility, rootedness, connectedness, and the organic development of prosocial virtues in their children, especially independence, responsibility, tolerance, and selflessness. The effects upon their children arose, they said, because a big family has more the character of a small society, with greater division of labor, exchange, spontaneous governance, and so forth. One respondent called the large family a “natural school of virtue.”

Hayek took the principle of motion in a grown (emergent) order to be the “rule or propensity” governing human action in a society always or for the most part. In some cases, he argued, human elements (decision makers) may not even be aware of the rule they are following; what matters is that the rule or propensity provides information about the resulting social order. In a market society, economic order (prosperity) arises from the propensity of each member to ‘truck, barter, and exchange’ to meet his or her needs socially. The form of the society can be identified by finding the basic rule, or propensity—or the principle of motion providing a rationale for the pieces on the “great chessboard of human society” (Hayek 1982, p. 35). We might then define the form of the family, or ‘family form’, as the principle of motion for a domestic community: the relative ranking of goods sought by the principals of the household. The hypothesis generated by the subjects in this study is twofold: first, that domestic and social orders are emergent orders—‘not planned by us’—arising from family form; second, that family form has a more primitive expression than legal or political definitions, characterized by the rules or propensities that a family takes to be their reason for coming together. For women with upper-tail birth rates, childbearing itself, motherhood as a way of life, was the rule or propensity of the family, the highest valued good of the domestic community.

Such a hypothesis about family form, gender, and emergent order suggests the beginning of a research program and not the end, as many testable ideas manifest in this single hypothesis. To begin, what are the dominant variations in family form, the gender norms arising from the propensity to mate and form a family? If childbearing, or lifestyle motherhood, is one, what other forms might be identified? Observed variation in family form will be required to make strong arguments about the path from gender norms to types of domestic and social emergent order.

Regarding domestic emergent orders, women in this study connected a childbearing propensity to marriages with greater resilience and children who were better connected to parents and siblings. Regarding the emergent social order more broadly, testimonies of women in this study suggested that children from larger families might be more self-reliant (because parents focus on each child less), more tolerant (because of exposure to many personalities in the household), more generous or communitarian (because accustomed to sharing necessities), less lonely (because more family connections), and less likely to experience mental health problems related to loneliness (Cacioppo and Cacioppo 2018) such as depression and anxiety. In terms of present social dilemmas, each of these suggestions from study participants can be reformulated as a testable hypothesis relating the experience of larger families of origin to observables such as labor force participation, social or political polarization, prosocial behaviors, addictions and deaths of despair. These provide ample work for future study, validation or refutation.

In closing, if family form as defined in this paper gives rise to domestic and social emergent orders, it does so because the principle of motion—the ranking of goods sought by the domestic community—involves a rule or propensity about the meaning of gender in relation to the family. If this is true, then variation in lived rules (or propensities) about gender gives rise to the most basic pre-political order in society, the domestic community. Thus, as the basis of the family, gender may be understood to serve as the well-spring of the complex social orders derivative upon the domestic society and its goods.

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