

Full House

City Talk

/ Interview / The Social Order

Mar 18 2024

Catherine Pakaluk is an associate professor of social research and economic thought in the Busch School of Business at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., mother to eight children, and author of *Hannah's Children: The Women Quietly Defying the Birth Dearth*. She spoke with *City Journal* associate editor **Daniel Kennelly**.

Tell us about your book, your research, and what you consider its most important finding?

Birth rates are cratering across the globe, in rich countries and poor ones, countries with greater social support and less. Against this backdrop, my research set out to discover: Who is still having babies, and why? I traveled to ten American regions and interviewed college-educated women with five or more kids. *Hannah's Children* presents a narrative account of my findings. What emerges is a portrait of an overlooked group of women whose motives and experiences have profound relevance for the crisis of low birth rates, as well as for the deeper public dialogue about who we are as a people.

The narrative approach revealed that women with large families may be outliers, but their behavior fits a normal framework of rational choice. Women had reasons for what they were up to—reasons that often dealt in higher things, like meaning and purpose. Their stories help explain why pro-natalist policies haven't worked in the past. You can't pay people enough to take on the life-altering costs of having children beyond their own level of demand for a child. Nations that want to turn the tide will have to do the harder work of freeing up the religious communities that nurture belief in the intrinsic value of children. I profile one case where a high demand for children was unrelated to biblical tenets. But for the rest, high demand for children was experienced initially as a religious conviction: children were the purpose of marriage and a blessing from God. If we want to see more children born in the future, we'll need more women and men with such convictions.

What does your narrative approach reveal that a more traditional approach to demographics—massive datasets and statistical analyses, for example—may not?

What qualitative interviews provide is stories that suggest revisions in theory or help us choose between competing theories. Families don't demand children in the way that consumers demand goods and services; they are both demanders and suppliers of the same good. What is wanted, if it is wanted, is a child

of one's own. The upshot of this is that it's hard to know whether falling birth rates are more of a demand shift, with fewer children wanted, or more of a supply shift, with fewer children produced.

My findings pointed to falling birth rates being more of a demand problem than a supply problem. The women I interviewed, at every level of engagement with paid work and every income, had additional children because they valued children more than other things they could do with their time, talents, and money. The relevant obstacle to choosing a child, they said, was the cost of missing out. They talked about sleepless nights and giving up comforts, plans, hobbies, status, income, a clean house. Giving up alone time. Giving up freedom. These costs were big and consequential, they conceded. But they had a reason to pay the price. This isn't a story about it being easy to have kids—it's a story about having a reason to do "the most hard thing you've ever done" more than once.

Could you talk about your viral #postcardsforMacron tweet and the reaction to it?

Early in the planning stages of this research, I noticed that French president Emmanuel Macron had declared in a UN speech that "perfectly educated" women would not have large families. I [quote-tweeted a story about it, and playfully wrote](#): "Macron says: 'Present me the woman who decided, being perfectly educated, to have seven, eight or nine children.' Very well then! The subject of my current research. I'll consider this an invite to send you a copy of the manuscript when done." Then, as an afterthought, I posted a [picture of me with six of my kids](#) at my doctoral graduation and tagged it #postcardsforMacron. I urged other women to follow. I hardly had any followers—I was an infrequent Twitter user. I was astounded to wake up the next day to hundreds of thousands of impressions, and more than 20,000 engagements on Twitter alone. The hashtag was picked up on Facebook and Instagram. Women around the world posted proud pictures of their children. The phenomenon stayed 99 percent positive, almost a miracle in the social media world.

Maybe I should follow through now and send a copy of *Hannah's Children* to Macron? He's been talking about the [need to raise birth rates in France](#)—making people angry while he's at it.

What do you plan to research next?

Two things are high on my list. Talking to the dads of many children in a similar exploration of motive and meaning—what tradeoffs do they identify? What obstacles? What rewards? I discovered that research into the fertility desires and experiences of men and fathers has been woefully neglected—not a huge surprise, given the progressive commitments of the academy. A second thing I'm considering is a study of really young married couples (under 25). Too often, our "get married" discourse speaks to the concerns of middle-aged adults (who also happen to be the researchers). But what drives the young people who beat the odds and get married young?

Overall, this project has given witness to the fruits of learning from people who model key aspects of civilizational health. Social science is obsessed with dysfunction. But the intellectual and moral habits of well-being are not simply the negation of bad habits.

Do you have a favorite novel that depicts the dynamics of large families?

My favorite novel is *Kristin Lavransdatter* by Sigrid Undset. Thanks to Undset's brilliance, the reader is treated to the inner thoughts of her heroine as she transitions from maiden to mother, and then to manager of a large estate—with the ups and downs of an imperfect marriage, traumatic childbirths, child loss, and the rewards (and sufferings) of watching her children mature in their different ways. Her fictional life story captures many of the dynamics of motherhood and self-identity that emerge in my narratives—especially that the gains and losses can't be assessed in the short run. Having children proves itself over time in ways that evade human design and expectation. And like Undset's account: motherhood is rewarding in a gritty, hardscrabble way. There's no sugarcoating in *Kristin Lavransdatter*.

Photo: Halfpoint Images/Moment via Getty Images

/ Donate

City Journal is a publication of the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research (MI), a leading free-market think tank. Are you interested in supporting the magazine? As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, donations in support of MI and *City Journal* are fully tax-deductible as provided by law (EIN #13-2912529).