

Do assumed parenting demands affect men and women differently?

May 22 2014, by Olivia Carter



'Mother With Two Children' by Frédérique Loutz. Credit: Frissiras Museum, CC BY-NC-SA

It is time to make a confession. I am pregnant and expecting my third baby in September.

Earlier this year, when my stomach looked less like a basketball, I found it interesting to observe both the response of others and my own feelings of apprehension that repeatedly made my announcement sound more

like a reluctant confession. It has been particularly fascinating to compare with my two previous pregnancies.

A questioning "three ... ?" has been the normal response in a tone of surprise or a need to seek confirmation that this was indeed the correct calculation.

Following a pause, one of the most common responses received from friends and colleagues – even my own mother – was something along the lines of "if you don't mind me asking was this intentional, or a little unexpected?"

I don't mind people asking – this current pregnancy was definitely planned. Preempting the next question, I normally also add "and definitely the last". It is funny though that not a single person asked this question when I announced I was pregnant with my second.

From the perspective of this column and the associated navel gazing about the impact of babies on my own [career](#) and those of family and friends, I have thought a lot about different aspects of parenting on career progression. Now that I am pregnant with my third I have found the issues arising from the assumptions and impressions of others to be particularly relevant.

There is no doubt that having [children](#) has impacted my capacity to work the same hours I did pre-kids, or the hours that I see peers without children or other carer responsibilities working. I guess this is not surprising given I generally worked until around 2am during my post-doc. Beyond the actual impact of having children, however, I also feel like there is a real impact that comes from the assumptions and stereotypes of others.

As I discussed in a previous piece, I think women can be particularly

vulnerable to the perception they may be less interested in "competing" for a research career.

Speaking with a male colleague, he made the point that men can suffer for the opposite reason. It is assumed that a mother's priorities and energies will shift away from work. On the flip side it is assumed that a father's priorities and energies will be unaffected by their children. So to the extent that men do take on family responsibilities it can be extremely hard for them to have the additional pressure on their time recognised by colleagues.

I agree completely that the reputational repercussions of having children are extremely gender specific. While women can suffer from assumed parenting demands, men can suffer for the absence of such assumed demands.

Assumptions made

From the female side I think the impact on reputation per child goes something like this:

First child: "Oh so your career clearly isn't *everything* to you." That means a few points are taken off for commitment and ambition, but it on the other hand it is reasonable that a female might want to have children and try to maintain an active career. So we won't totally write you off yet but understand there is a chance you will either come back all guns blazing or may want drop your career to focus on family.

Second child: "Fair enough." If you are going to have one, it makes logical sense that you might want to round off that number and have a second. If you have been actively working since your first, it is fair to assume you will come back with similar vigour (or lack there of) after your second.

Third child: "Surely two is enough ..." Particularly if you already have one of each sex, the obvious conclusion is you really must not be interested in your career.

Fourth child: "Not surprising!" This confirms initial suspicions that came with the third.

Fifth child: There is no coming back after five.

Overall, regardless of the help you have from family and friends, the assumption is that your commitment and interest in your career will reduce with each child.

Assumptions lacking

On the flip side, for men I think the greatest cost to career comes from the lack of assumptions being made, and plays out a little more like this

First to fifth child: "Ahh congratulations! Are you going to take the week off?...No problem – we can reschedule meetings till next week".

Regardless of how much men help at home, the assumption is that they aren't doing anything that would impact on their career or work-life. So any relative reduction in productivity or availability can be close to impossible to defend.

Decisions

For right or wrong, these impressions definitely weighed heavily on me when considering having my own children (both our first and third). My husband and I did not make the decision to have a third child lightly. Together we considered a lot of things from financial to social.

As a person that values my career and has ambitions to succeed in it, I must admit that it did matter to me that another baby might cause some to write me off. At the time, however, I had enough insight to realise this was a bad criteria for making an important life decision.

While I don't think these considerations should ever dictate the decision of whether or not to have children. I do believe there can be real consequences to the [assumptions](#) (or lack of them) made by others, particularly in the current extremely competitive academic environment.

Grant funding and the associated academic "success" is often impacted by arbitrary and subjective decisions made by others about your overall contribution to past research and likely capacity to fulfil future research promises.

Presumably the impact of *any* subjective judgements about ambition and commitment could limit the opportunities afforded to women and men irrespective of their specific field of career. Corroborating this view [it was reported](#) in The Australian today that 19% of men and 13% of women blame women's "lack of ambition" for the small numbers of women achieving leadership roles across industries. What is not clear from such a poll is what cost does an individual incur for an incorrect assessment of their career ambitions.

In terms of my own career, I do have a fear that I will be judged negatively for choosing to have a third [child](#). I guess that is one reason I have left it until I was nearly six months pregnant to mention in such a public forum. With my own grants under review, it is impossible to know whether anyone would actually take points off me. On the other hand, I am quite sure it is not the sort of news that is ever going to help someone's cause.

Unfortunately I could find no study that has actually looked at this

question directly. From discussions with friends I know that I am not alone in having these concerns, but I would love to hear the opinions of others.

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