

Social Structure, Fertility and the Value of Children in Northwestern Nepal

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Accounts of fertility variations across cultures increasingly have come to be formulated in terms of the relative value of children to their parents. This value has been examined in diverse spheres of life and in different social environments, principally by economists and psychologists who are concerned to identify and measure specific benefits and costs entailed. The apparent attractiveness of the approach lies in its ability to bring together vast quantities of information within a single framework of explanation to account for fertility variations at both the aggregate and individual level and to provide standardized methodologies for investigations of the subject. In theory, the approach should offer considerable insight into cross-cultural variation. However, as yet little of that potential has been realized. I believe that one of the factors hindering the development of a more flexible, cross-culturally appropriate methodology has been narrow conceptions of "the family." This paper will consider this problem with reference to one group in northwestern Nepal.

The concerns of the principal contributors to the value of children literature -- economists and social psychologists -- have been surprisingly complementary. Social psychologists have responded to the earlier economic literature and have focussed the attention of their discipline on parents' perceptions of economic and psychological child costs and benefits and the relation of perceptions to behaviour. In turn, while economists themselves have not investigated the effects of preferences for children, satisfactions realized and ideals of family size, they have recognized the relevance of these factors (Easterlin 1978:67). More recently anthropologists have turned to the study of these issues and have begun to test measures of child value against reproductive behaviour. Notably they too have stressed economic influences on fertility decision-making.

Some anthropologists have been optimistic about the explanatory power of economists' analyses, perhaps more than is warranted (e.g., compare Nag et al. 1978 with Butz and Greenberg 1975:1 fn.). But their contributions have added valuable empirical data on rural peasantries in less developed regions. In so doing, they have refined the methods for measuring economic variables in such societies (Nag et al. 1978; White 1975). Additional studies can be expected to add to the literature and

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further develop this approach. But there is one potential pitfall: anthropologists who enter a field dominated by other disciplines risk being entrapped in the groundwork laid by those disciplines, thus overlooking issues relevant to them and the special contributions to be made by their own field. This is particularly unwarranted in studies which have a bearing upon domestic institutions, a topic anthropologists should be well equipped to consider. Carter and Merrill (n.d.) have shown how misconceptions about households in other disciplines have affected the general literature on economic development and population processes. It is my intent here to show how this is a problem in assumptions about the "value of children."

The case of the Nyinba, a Tibetan speaking people of northwestern Nepal, is especially relevant to an understanding of this issue. At the most basic level, their formulation of costs and benefits associated with children bears little resemblance to descriptions in the literature. First, economic considerations are minimized: there is little talk of the financial costs or rewards, in present or in future, involved in having children (compare also Arnold et al., 1975:105, 149). Second, where questions of value come into play, they are phrased in terms not of parents, but of the household as a constellation of individuals, kin and non-kin, and the needs of that household. Having children is a way of providing new household members who will contribute to the political strength of the household, who will expand kinship networks, as well as provide economic contributions when they are grown. Conversely the psychological needs or economic concerns of individual sets of parents are given far less attention.

The importance of the household, relations between its economy and management needs and the numbers of children raised has been recognized in the recent literature. Two notable examples are T.C. Smith for Japan (1977) and for India in Carter and Merrill's general review of the literature (n.d.). The effects of household structure on aggregate fertility has been described for Limi in northwestern Nepal (Goldstein, 1976, 1981). Here I will discuss the effects of household constraints on individual fertility; the role of the household in shaping Nyinba population patterns has been presented elsewhere (Levine 1977). I will begin with a description of the Nyinba social system, then turn to a discussion of their demography. Next, I will consider how household requisites affect attitudes toward male and female children and, finally, the evidence for conscious controls over childbearing.

The Nyinba: Economy and Social Structure

The Nyinba inhabit a set of adjoining southern valleys in Humla district. In 1973-75, when I conducted my field research, the population included approximately 1,200 individuals distributed across four major villages. The southern exposure of the land and adequate, if not ample, water supplies provide the basis for profitable agriculture. But acreage is limited, and agriculture alone is insufficient to support the Nyinba. People have to supplement their own crops with grains obtained in the

salt trade (see Füller-Haimendorf 1975) and with the returns from small-scale cattle herding, which adds protein to the diet.

The large size of Nyinba households and the polyandrous marital system encourages male specialization in one or another productive activities. Some men work primarily in agriculture, others are away much of the year herding and trading. The majority of the agricultural work, however, falls upon household women, so that a major portion of the household's economic success is dependent upon the number of its competent, adult women.

The Nyinba population is subdivided internally into two endogamous social strata: numerically predominantly traditional landowners and descendants of former slaves, freed in 1926. Some of the latter have become well to do, but most still are very poor. Together with the socio-economic differences there are cultural differences between the two social strata which may have an effect on their fertility. For this reason, the two groups must be considered separately; in this paper only the demography of the dominant majority will be discussed.

Nyinba family formation and the household system are important for understanding their demography and their social structure as a whole. The household (trongba) acts as a corporate unit in political and economic affairs. Membership in a given household is the key to the individual's status in the community. Because the individual rises and falls with the group, we find household welfare to be the focus of much attention and concern. The identity or status it provides is seen as both justifying and necessitating member loyalty. Also, the remembrance of household genealogies, gives individuals a certain kind of social immortality.

Norms of patrilocal residence mold the household experiences of men and women in different ways. While men typically live their entire lives in their natal households, women change residence at least upon their first marriage and if they divorce additional times as well. There are exceptions: the rare cases when a household lacks male heirs and a daughter marries uxorilocally. Although her husband is adopted formally as the heir, she still holds certain special prerogatives in her natal home. But even a patrilocally married woman has security in her marital home, as protected by law. She cannot be forced out, or divorced against her will, although there certainly are stratagems to encourage a woman to leave. If divorce occurs, it is almost never after the birth of a child, for children not only bind husbands and wives together, they also unalterably fix the woman's position in her marital home. Thus there are practical as well as personal reasons for women to look forward to children, especially sons who will remain in the household for life.

Nyinba households form what have been termed, rather loosely, extended families. They are unusual, however, in their internal stem-type structure, based on the Tibetan "monomarital principle" (Goldstein 1971: 68). This is the rule that only a single marriage per household can

occur each generation. For the Nyinba, like other cultural Tibetans, this has involved fraternal polyandry. There long have been arguments for the economic advantages of polyandry, most notably that it is a means of avoiding land fragmentation in areas of scarce resources. A more recently cited advantage is that in restricting the numbers of women who will wed, it can reduce aggregate fertility (Goldstein 1981). The Nyinba too note the practical advantages of their marital system and attribute the non-proliferation of village households to it.

As with other polyandrous peoples, all "types" of marriage are found among the Nyinba and can be attributed to diverse developmental and demographic circumstances. For example, a lone brother weds monogamously, by default. Two or more brothers always marry polyandrously. Then if a woman fails to bear children, her husband(s) are encouraged to take a second wife, in polygyny or what I have called simple polygynous polyandry. It is also possible to add wives to already fertile unions. This is likelier when the sibling group is very large, or riven by dissension. The arrangement has vastly different consequences for marital relationships than the obligatory polygyny occasioned by infertility. It tends to produce exclusivity in sexual arrangements between the married partners, or situations of "mini-marriages" within the larger one. For this reason I have described the latter as conjoint marriage, to distinguish it from the simple polygynous polyandrous type of union (see Levine 1977). Table 1 illustrates the initial marital configurations for seventy-nine Nyinba marriages surveyed in 1973-75.

Table 1. Initial Marital Configurations for Nyinba Women.

Type of Marriage	Number of Women	Percent
Polyandry	41	51.9
Monogamy	22	27.8
Conjoint Marriage	12	15.1
Polygyny or Simple Polygynous Polyandry	4	5.2
Total	79	100.0

Men in polyandrous marriages say they want to have "their own children", that is, children for whom they are recognized as the genitor, and sons of their own in particular (see Levine 1980). Of course this is not always possible, and the larger a fraternal group, the less likely that each man can be the real father of one of a limited number of sons. It is thought that a man should accept his bad luck and subordinate his feelings for the household's good. Not all men do so, and the lack of sons is offered as an excuse for taking an additional wife in conjoint marriage. Although a recognized motivation, it is regarded as selfish and destructive, thus condemned by other community members. Instances

of conjoint marriage which do culminate in partition are held up as examples of the damage done by such failures in fraternal solidarity.

The Nyinba Demographic Regime

Generalizations about Nyinba demography have been drawn from statistical analyses of the fertility histories of eighty-nine women of the landholding stratum. These women comprise 34% of all living women aged eighteen and older. The sample was selected from women who provided detailed responses to questions about their marital and reproductive history and was stratified to reflect the distribution of women at different age groups in the population.

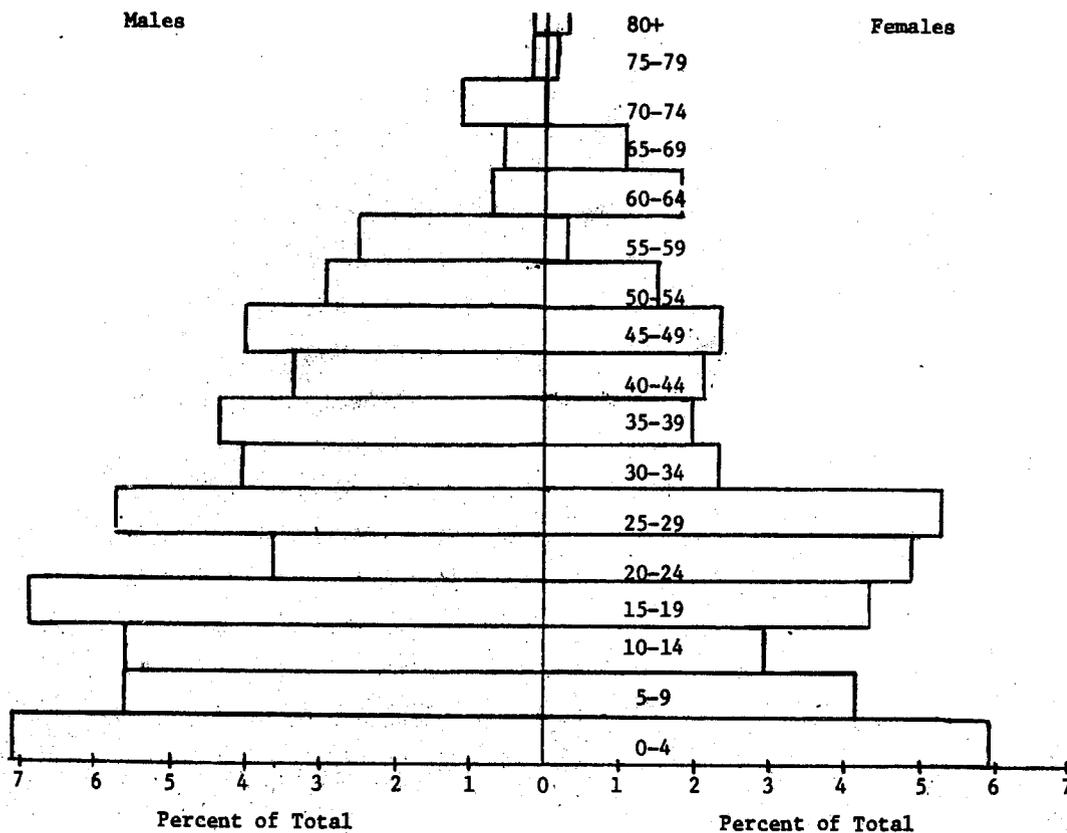
Features of Nyinba demography are quite similar to what is reported for other Tibetan groups in Nepal. As Goldstein (1980) has shown, there is remarkable equivalence in the fertility and number of surviving children among Humla Tibetans, who themselves seem to be comparable to the Tibetan speaking Sherpa (although there are conflicting data on the latter). Nor are the Nyinba notably different from the population of Nepal as a whole regarding completed marital fertility, patterns of age-specific fertility and so on (see the World Fertility Survey 1977).

To begin with, a Nyinba woman weds, on the average, at age 17.9. While this is higher than the average age at marriage for Nepalese Hindus by 2.9 years (World Fertility Survey 1977:36-37), it is lower than that of the Sherpa by 6.7 years (Weitz et al. 1978:192). 20.9 is the age at first pregnancy, again lower, by 2.7 years--than the Sherpa. The apparent discrepancy in Sherpa age at marriage and first birth is due to the prolonged Sherpa engagement and the occurrence of premarital pregnancy, which is not tolerated by the Nyinba. These relatively late dates at first pregnancy have been attributed to late age at menarche, which in turn has been attributed to biological effects of residence at high altitude (see Weitz et al. 1978:191).

One distinctive feature of Nyinba demography is the high sex ratio, apparent in the age-sex pyramid presented in Figure 1 below. As the diagram shows, children under the age of 15 make up 31% of the population. Males predominate among these children and, even more strikingly among adults. The reasons for this will become apparent in discussions to follow on fertility and child mortality in relation to son preference.

Nyinba married women report having borne from 6.2 to 6.6 children on the average during their reproductive years.² These two figures reflect the different estimates of women aged 45 plus and the more inclusive group of women aged 40 plus. That the number given by the latter is larger may be due to fluctuations in small samples, or to changing patterns in fertility. (Table 3, which follows, suggests that it is not due to any tendency to forget dead offspring, but rather to some peculiarity in the 40-44 age group). Table 2 summarizes reports of women's reproductive histories, including completed fertility, number of living

Fig. 1. Age-Sex Pyramid for Nyinba Landholders



children and number of children who have died by the time of the survey. Table 3 presents more detailed information on child mortality, and shows just how high it is. By the time a woman's reproductive career is at an end, she has lost nearly half her children.

Table 2. Completed Marital Fertility for Nyinba Women.

	Mean Number of Boys	Mean Number of Girls	Total Children	Number of Women ^a
Total Children Born	3.3 (3.6) ^b	2.9 (3.0)	6.2 (6.6)	23 (29)
Children Currently Surviving	1.9 (2.1)	1.9 (1.9) ^c	3.8 (4.0)	30 (41)
Reported Mortality	1.8 (1.8)	1.1 (1.1)	2.9 (2.9)	22 (28)

^aNote that the columns do not always add up, due to the different number of respondents to each set of questions.

^bThe first number given is for women aged forty-five and older, the second, in parentheses, is for women aged forty and above.

^cThis parity in male and female children for women forty-five and up may be the product of random fluctuations, as all other measures point to an excess of males over females, children and adults.

Table 3. Mortality of Own Children Over Time.

Age of Mother	Reported Mortality of Children		Number of Women ^a
	Numbers	Percent	
20-24	.45	22.7	11
25-29	1.09	27.4	11
30-34	1.50	27.4	8
35-39	1.66	35.9	6
40-44	3.16	37.8	6
45+	2.86	43.6	22
Mean Child Mortality	1.89	33.9	
Total Women			64

^aThis excludes women in the sample who have never had children. (There are seven such women, all younger than thirty-five).

The data on Nyinba fertility in Table 2 are, as noted above, quite similar to that of other Tibetan speaking ethnic groups in Humla. The completed fertility recorded for Dzinga and Limi, two communities north of the Nyinba is 6.7 and 6.3 respectively for all women, 7.4 for married women in both groups. The number of surviving children is 3.7 and 3.6. The Sherpas of Khumbu and Helambu seem to exhibit a similar pattern of fertility and survivorship, giving birth to 6.2 and 7.2 children respectively, with 3.3 and 3.5 surviving (cf. Goldstein, 1981).

The difference between the Nyinba and other Tibetan speakers in Humla is the slightly lower number of children ever born to Nyinba married women. This low number may be due in part to an under reportage of female births. As can be seen in Table 2, mothers on the average report having given birth to 3.3 (3.6) boys and 2.9 (3.0) girls. If the Nyinba had a normal sex ratio of 105 at birth, there would be approximately 3.2 (3.4) girls or a total of 6.5 (7.0) children born to these women, numbers closer to other Humla Tibetans' experiences. As I shall show, the Nyinba sex ratio cannot be attributed solely to chance or to some biological cause. It seems to be part of a larger pattern, one which also results in higher female mortality throughout childhood and relates to the cultural preference for males in the household.

Data on child mortality can be obtained from women's retrospective fertility histories alone, as there are no vital statistics on Humla populations. These histories show a reported sex ratio at birth at 117. But for children surviving to age four, the sex ratio rises to 124. And in the general population, among individuals age fifteen and over, the sex ratio is 138. While there is somewhat greater emigration of adult women than men, numbers of migrants are too small to account for this startlingly high figure. The only explanation that accounts for the steady rise in the sex ratio over time is a greater mortality of females, particularly in the early years. As I will show, this is consistent with Nyinba attitudes towards children in the context of household requirements, and is not necessarily due to any set of personal preferences or negative attitudes towards females. For the Nyinba do seem to love their children, male and female alike, although they note that sons will bring more substantial satisfactions to them in their lifetimes.

Sons are given greater valuation primarily in their role as household members. As kin, males and females are of equal importance, both creating alliances with other kin groups and households. But the rules of household organization place an emphasis on males as heads and successors. The household needs sons to carry on its name and to continue to work for its prosperity, a daughter's husband is seen as a poor substitute, a last recourse. And the household needs more than one son. If at least two survive to adulthood, they can divide up the male tasks of trading, herding and agriculture, tasks which together provide the foundation of household prosperity and simply cannot be accomplished by one man alone. Women accordingly tend to prefer polyandry, and ideally two husbands, for this reason. Three husbands also are acceptable, four less so, because of the threat of partition; one is less preferred, because

of the threat of widowhood. The same logic concerning household welfare is expressed regarding numbers of sons: two or three are desirable, because they can attract a good wife and can maintain an estimable living standard.

The preference for some seems to be most intense in the early years of marriage. At least this is what the distribution of males and females in early and late births suggests, as Table 4 shows.

Table 4. Proportion of Males at Different Birth Orders Among Children Aged Four and Older.

Birth Order	Percent Male Children	Sex Ratio	Numbers of Children
1	59.2 ²	145	76
2	52.7	112	55
3	50.0	100	42
4	51.4	106	35
5-10	51.2	105	41

^aThe differences in male and female children in this and the following birth orders is not statistically significant.

When the birth orders of surviving adults (aged fifteen and over) is examined, the overrepresentation of males in the first three birth orders is even more pronounced. This, together with the gradual increase in the sex ratio, suggests not a systematic culling of females so much as the unsystematic poorer treatment of girls which eventually takes its toll on the female population. A similar situation seems to exist in North India, wherein boys are given better food, clothing and medical care and, accordingly, have a better chance of survival in childhood (Wyon and Gordon 1971:195).³

For the Nyinba, the demand for sons thus seems to be most acute in the early portion of a woman's reproductive career. Later on, should additional children be born, there apparently is less concern that they be males, or alternatively, then the desire for girls can be fulfilled, and better care apparently is taken of them to ensure their survival. The need for boys is urgent and immediate, the need for girls somewhat less immediate. At first glance this seems curious, for girls provide considerable help around the house and in the fields. But shortly after they reach adulthood and their full capabilities, economic and otherwise, they are married off to another house. This practical loss is compensated only by the alliances and ramifying kinship links that women create through these marriages.

Nyinba Fertility and Fertility Control

In all conventional measures, the Nyinba resemble populations characterized by natural fertility, or reproductive behaviour in the absence of deliberate birth control and targeted family size (Henry 1961). Parity progression ratios (not presented here), albeit irregular due to the small sample, are convex in shape. In contrast populations which practice contraception show a concave shape, the curve dropping as women cease having children around some ideal number. There is no evidence that Nyinba women who have a certain number of children, or a number of either sex, cease childbearing, nor does the survival of children have any measurable effects on subsequent fertility (see Preston 1978). Such patterns may exist, obscured by fluctuations in the sample or by the sort of sub-patterns of variation I will be discussing later. The point is that the existence of voluntary controls over numbers of births is impossible to demonstrate by any of the customary measures with the data at hand.

Despite an apparent lack of control over numbers of children, there are social practices which lower fertility beyond its potential maximum. These include the relatively late age of marriage (late for South Asia, at least) and a prohibition on pregnancy outside marriage, as noted above. In addition to this, early marital problems lead to divorce for 26% of women, and imbalances created by polyandry can create a delay of a year or more before these women marry again.⁴ The result is that many women spend a portion of their fertile years outside of marriage and thus are prevented from having children during that time. Attempts to construct age-specific fertility rates suggest that the peak in fertility is reached at ages 25-29, closely followed by ages 30-34.

These practices are followed irrespective of their consequences for childbearing. However certain features of Nyinba reproductive behaviour seem to be tantamount to a kind of "family planning." This does not seem to involve planning for certain numbers of offspring, so much as suppressing maximum fertility in some contexts, or lessening survival probabilities in others. Most notable is the differential treatment of children of different sex a practice which changes directions during a woman's reproductive career. More subtle an indication of voluntary controls over fertility can be found in the measurable effects of different types of marital union. I have discussed the first subject in the context of analyses of child mortality. Now I will turn to the second topic, the apparent effects of conjoint marriage on fertility.

The anthropological literature contains numerous discussions of possible links between forms of polygamy and fertility. All available evidence has indicated that polyandry has no effect on women's fertility, and this is as true for Humla Tibetans as for those few other groups in which the marital form is found (Goldstein 1976). This conclusion is offered further support by the Nyinba data. Women over forty who have spent their entire lives in polyandrous unions have 4.50 living children, while those who have always been monogamous have 4.56 children.⁵ The possible effects of polygyny on fertility have received far more attention

in the literature than has polyandry, no doubt because polygyny is more commonly found. Also there is a certain logic to the notion that polygyny might reduce fertility at the individual level. Nag (1975) has reviewed the literature and has found severe methodological problems in previous studies, contributing to a lack of unambiguous evidence for the postulated negative relationship. The large number of factors involved must be controlled for before a direct relationship be demonstrated (see also Isaac 1980).

For the Nyinba, polygyny tends to occur only in special circumstances --when the first wife has failed to bear children, when the children have all died, or sometimes, but not necessarily, when there are only daughters. It is inconceivable that a single man would engage in non-obligatory polygyny (although uxorilocally resident sisters have been known to share a husband). But there are cases, as noted above, when men in fertile polyandrous unions take an optional, additional wife, thus forming a polygynous polyandrous conjoint union. And this form of marriage is associated with a marked reduction in the individual wives' completed family size. To explain this apparent phenomenon, I must review the relevant constraints operative in the Nyinba household system.

Household Needs and Fertility: Polygynous Unions

Thus far I have stated that it is of utmost importance to have sons as household successors and heirs. I have not, however, discussed women's special motivations for so doing. First of all it is the woman who is held responsible for the failure to have sons. What these women fear about childlessness is not community disapprobation, ostracism or ritual exclusion such as barren Nepali Hindus suffer (see Stone 1978:8). Rather they fear disappointing their marital household, having to cope with the second wife their husbands will surely bring and having to take second place themselves when their co-wives' sons are grown. The entire membership of households wait expectantly till the new daughter-in-law has proved her fertility and are particularly pleased if a son is born. If not, the wait will continue until the next child. Households, especially prosperous ones, who are having trouble producing heirs hold a small party to receive congratulations from neighbours and friends after a son is finally born. Then the problem is keeping the child healthy--quite a task in an area of such high infant mortality.

Although ordinarily the weight of a woman's concern is on having sons and keeping them well through maturity, this is only part of her interest in achieving a workable household composition, one more likely to provide the foundation for household harmony and continuity. We have focussed on the problem of an insufficiency of sons, for that is the commoner predicament. Among women forty-five and over, a full twenty percent lacked surviving sons, another thirty percent had just one son, while only seventeen percent had four sons or more. But the excess of sons can be equally problematic, although the consequences are not felt immediately. Too many men to share tasks and to cooperate easily prompts dissension within the household. This can lead to a conjoint union in

the next generation. Here the problem is amplified if there are two wives. They both can produce sons whose upbringing lays the ground for even greater dissension.⁶ The fear here is of eventual household partition, the loss of household identity, subdivision of resources, diminished wealth and lessened prestige within the community. And women are as concerned about this possibility as men, for they have an equal stake in the household's future. To put it simply, the household's resources must be carefully conserved through management of personnel. Marriage is an easy means of controlling numbers and sex of personnel, but reproduction is under far less control. Several Nyinba women spoke to me of being unable to have sufficient children--roughly two or even three sons and two daughters--or of having more than they bargained for.⁷ Family size ideals thus are recognized, even if they are seen to be subject to only incomplete control.

Again one must reiterate that when the Nyinba discuss in general terms such matters as family size ideals, the problems of childlessness, the dangers of too many sons and the risks of conjoint marriage, the discussion is framed in terms of household needs. Furthermore they consider not only the needs of the group in the present, but future needs as well; for the household is conceptualized abstractly as linking the past and present to the future. Personal needs and desires are not discussed explicitly, except in particular cases when a problematic situation has arisen. As Mamdani argues for India, people are expected to place family needs above their own personal needs (1972:139). Although the Nyinba recognize the very real problems that barrenness or sonlessness can pose for individual women and the disappointment of not having children of their own for individual men, these pale in comparison with the threat posed to everyone else in the household in present and future. Similarly an excess of sons can be a nuisance to those who have to rear them, but the weight of concern is for the future of a household that may be strained to the breaking point by their numbers.

For these sorts of reasons, polygynous polyandry in conjoint marriages tends to be condemned as selfishness on the part of men who cannot amicably share a wife. In view of these societal attitudes and the supposed risk of partition, I had often wondered why the rate of conjoint marriage was so high. As Table 1 indicates, 15.1% of women initially entered into such unions. But in fact, as I found out, such marriages did not necessarily entail a large number of children for the next generation. (Nor necessarily do they last for the woman's entire life: only 6% of marriages are conjoint at the present time, due to divorces as well as partitions). Women who lived their lives in such unions had fewer children than their polyandrously and monogamously married sisters, as Table 5 shows.

Table 5. Marital Type and Fertility.

	Total Living Children	Total Living Sons	Total Living Daughters	Numbers of Women ^a
Women in Conjoint Unions	2.8 ^b	1.5 ^c	1.3 ^b	28 ^d
Women in Other Types of Unions	4.0	2.0	2.0	24

^aThese all are women aged 45 years and older.

^bThe difference in the two groups of women is significant at the .05 level (one-tailed test).

^cThe difference is significant at the .01 level (one-tailed test).

^dThis includes an expanded sample of women, virtually every woman in the population who either entered initially into a conjoint union, or whose marriage became conjoint within three years and remained so until she was 45.

Not only do the women in conjoint unions have fewer children, but significantly fewer children (at the 95% confidence level). Thus such a form of marriage doesn't necessarily pose an immediate danger to household solidarity. Households with two fertile wives produce on the average three living sons to a monogamous or polyandrous household's two. However a third of conjoint unions contain three wives who will have produced an average of 4.5 sons surviving to the end of their reproductive years, a potential source of future trouble. Conjoint marriage is the first step towards partition, meeting a necessary condition for the creation of two separate households, but not leading irrevocably to this (see also Levine 1977). In fact households can remain in a state of chronic, pre-partition indecision for two or three generations before they make the split.⁸ There are two possible reasons for this phenomenon. One is that the lower fertility of conjointly married women contributes to the long period of indecision, i.e., there are too few sons to ensure the creation and successful continuation of two new households in the first generation. The other is that ambivalent household attitudes toward partition influences the women's reproductive behaviour. These two interpretations are not mutually exclusive, but the second can imply a degree of conscious or unconscious fertility control.

Support for the hypothesis of an intentional reduction of child numbers can be found in the pattern of fertility of conjointly married women. For one thing, there simply seems to be no normative or statistically common social structural practices associated with conjoint unions which indirectly lower the women's fertility. Most (71%) of these unions currently have more or as many husbands as wives, so differences in pat-

terns of conjugal relations, a possible factor in polygynous unions (see Isaac 1980:307), are not implicated here. Age at marriage is not a factor either. Women who enter conjoint unions seem to wed at roughly the same age as other women. One must treat these comparisons with caution because of the small sample of women in these unions. However the equivalence in marital age seems reasonable because, although being a co-wife in a conjoint marriage is less desirable, these marriages often involve wealthy families. Girls who marry into wealthy families in monogamy or polyandry do so at an age of 16.6, versus 18.6 when the family is of lesser means. Despite the equivalent ages of marriage, women who enter conjoint unions bear their first child later, and, most notably, stop bearing children significantly sooner. Table 6 sums up these data.

Table 6. The Effects of Conjoint Marriage on Fertility

	Conjoint Marriage Mean (No. of Women)	Other Types of Unions Mean (No. of Women)
Age at Marriage	17.8 (5)	18.0 (38)
Age at First Birth	22.0 (5)	20.8 (32)
Age at Last Living Child's Birth ^a	32.5 (6)	37.6 (29)

^aIn some cases there may have been an additional child, born later on who did not survive and was not reported to me.

The table above shows the slight delay in beginning childbearing and the shortened reproductive career of conjointly married women. Such a woman will bear her first child 4.2 years after she weds, as opposed to the 2.8 years for a woman in other types of marriage. In the latter situation and under ordinary circumstances, a lapse of over four years in proving one's fecundity would be highly worrisome to the woman and her household.

The delay in childbearing, its short duration and the reduction in numbers of children born, all prompt questions as to the factors responsible, whether they are under intentional control and whether this is consciously recognized. As noted above, no institutional factors, i.e., those derived from social structural rules, seem to be involved. Nor is there any evidence that men deliberately select women of lower fecundity for such marriages, and, in fact, the early age at marriage would seem to preclude such decisions. Although I have no evidence that fertility control is an explicitly articulated aim, there does seem to be some mechanism or mechanisms of fertility regulation under voluntary control. And the most likely mechanism would seem to be voluntary abstinence. Let us examine the limited evidence for this interpretation.

Within the average Nyinba marriage, abstinence is considered unnatural and unhealthy, particularly for the young. It is unacceptable for a woman to turn her husband away, exceptional for a husband to appear disinterested. The situation changes when the couple get older and their children embark upon their own marriages. When the son or sons bring their new bride into the marital home they have no assigned special sleeping place at first and tend to sleep separately, arranging brief meetings late at night, on the roof or in the barn. But sooner or later, and I am not sure how this transition is effected, the young couple replaces the older one inside the hearth room, the main living quarters. At that time, the older couple begins curtailing their sexual relations; and it is said frequently of men and women past retirement that they have turned their attention from worldly things and live ascetic lives (see also Ortner 1978:58). While most women are well past forty by the time their sons have married and have begun their own family, some are not. These latter are said to voluntarily restrict their sexual activities, so as to avoid the shame of having children at the same time as their daughters-in-law living within the same household. The unmarried are, of course, abstinent too, by necessity. Thus we can see that abstinence is acceptable in certain parts of the life cycle. It is not inconceivable that women wishing to limit their children will abstain from sex within marriage. There is less cause to do so within polyandry and monogamy, and in circumstances where there is a single wife this may be a less popular decision. If it is a more acceptable course of action within conjoint marriage--and the evidence does point in that direction--household constraints are a likelier cause than are any individual desires of couples in conjoint "mini-marriages" to forego having more of their own children.

To suggest that fertility is under voluntary control in some contexts introduces the larger question of whether voluntary constraints are operative in the more prevalent marriage arrangements as well. As noted above, statistical tests fail to reveal any consistent practices of target fertility behaviour, but this may well be the outcome of having only a small sample for which certain relevant data are lacking and because of the varied circumstances affecting individuals. Perhaps the limitations are also difficult to measure because of the large numbers of children wanted and because of the complications introduced by high child mortality. Clearly more research is needed to ascertain the mechanisms involved in fertility regulation and the motivations for it.

Conclusion

Nyinba landholders all live in corporate households of identical structure and, despite considerable variations in wealth, all exhibit a characteristic pattern of fertility.⁹ People phrase and, as far as can be known, conceptualize their reproductive goals in terms of household benefits and needs. Those needs are simple and unambiguous: approximately two sons to carry on the household intact through the next generation. Approximately two daughters are wanted as well, although they are less 'necessary.' Daughters are valuable household members before they marry and are kin; through their marriages they create ties between different households.

Thus although parents may love their children and want them for personal reasons, these reasons have far lesser weight than the demands or needs of the household in which they are members. These needs, it must be reiterated, are not solely or predominantly economic, but equally involve kinship and political considerations. When personal and household desires come into conflict, the latter automatically have a certain priority. Needless to say, decisions made by and for the group are not always followed, and individuals may come to act in their own and against household interests. The resulting community disapproval rests on practical as much as normative grounds, and it is not uncommon to find various problems created by self-seeking, independent action. The principal example of this cited here was conjoint marriage which by setting the stage for household partition can result in lesser wealth and diminished prestige for everyone involved.

For these reasons, it would be misleading to presume that individual sets of parents guide reproductive decisions by personal considerations alone. If they consider economic and social factors in deciding whether to devote special energies to a child, those factors are gauged by household considerations. This focus on household needs should not be construed as 'altruism', for here individual welfare is coterminous with group welfare, and the future of the group affects oneself as one's children. To measure the costs and benefits of children to the parents alone can be less than profitable when the 'parents' include up to seven husbands and four wives who live together with the husbands' parents. Even when a Nyinba household resembles, due to demographic and developmental circumstance, a simple nuclear family the mode in which child value is calculated is bound to differ from that of societies in which nuclear families are more than a passing phase. For studies of the effects of child value on fertility to have greater cross-cultural validity they must expand their frameworks for research and analysis. A first step is developing a broader conception of domestic groups, one that can take account of the structural implications of polygynous and polyandrous marriage, extended family residential arrangements and so on. This cannot fail to offer greater insight into the various complex considerations guiding reproductive decisions within such households.

NOTES

1. Fieldwork among the Nyinba was carried out during eighteen months in 1973-75. Thanks are due to the National Science Foundation and the National Institute of Mental Health who supported the research and to Tshewang B. Lama who has served as my research assistant while in Humla and to the present.
2. These data concern married women only. All women, with the exception of a few nuns, eventually either marry or emigrate. Very few divorcees do not remarry eventually. While there were three very long-term divorcees, all were younger than 40 at the time of the survey and automatically were excluded from these calculations.

3. Another possible cause of higher female infant mortality among the Nyinba is an earlier cessation of breastfeeding for girls.
4. Some women remarry immediately, while others cannot. Unfortunately I lack data on the delays experienced, which may vary over time. For single women in 1973-75 too there were the possibilities only of a later marriage into a conjoint union, marriage to widowers or divorced men.
5. There are nine such monogamous women and ten polyandrous women over forty. The sample here is restricted by the exclusion of cases in which households have experienced developmental shifts (i.e., from monogamy to polyandry, etc). If we expand our pool of women by considering final marital arrangements alone, we get similar results: twenty-one monogamous women have an average 4.14 surviving children, while thirteen polyandrous women have 4.08. In neither case is the difference significant, but, of course, the sample size is too small to regard these as anything but suggestive results.
6. Despite the different mothers, these sons are considered brothers (pun) and expected to unite in fraternal polyandry, just as the sons of polyandrously married fathers do. However, while having different fathers poses little if any problem for fraternal solidarity, different mothers, even those who are sisters, quarrel over their children and thus reinforce their separateness.
7. The latter statements usually preceded a request to bring them birth control pills from one of my visits to Kathmandu.
8. It would be difficult to estimate the rate of partition among households which have become conjoint, because those which have not partitioned may do so at any moment, and those which did not partition in the previous generation may do so in the next. For obvious reasons, it is similarly impossible to speak of a rate of eventual partition. To count the number of generations it took to partition also can be misleading, because it counts only those households who have done so and excludes the "holdouts." All I can say is that in 1975, among 11 households who had had conjoint marriages, five had partitioned and six had not.
9. In fact poor women do bear somewhat (approximately 0.7) more children, but since they experience a higher child mortality, they are left with somewhat (approximately 0.6) fewer offspring at the end of their reproductive careers. It is impossible to tell if the slightly higher fertility is due to biological factors (i.e., the higher mortality and shortened period of lactation), or if it is pursued intentionally (i.e., to compensate for the higher mortality).

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