

# The Fertility Revolution



The July 19, 2010, issue of *Time* proclaimed the rise of the only child. The author of the featured article, Lauren Sandler, reveals that one in five American families have a single child. Still, many Americans express discomfort with this trend, identifying only children as spoiled and neurotic. According to Sandler, 46 percent of Americans believe two children is the perfect number. The fertility rate for the United States, currently 2.1, supports this ideal.

Sandler's article illuminates an ongoing transformation in American lives, the shift from high to low birth rates, also known as the demographic transition. In 1800, American families had an average of seven children. By 1900, the average number of children was 3.5. In her fascinating book, Susan Klepp traces the origins of the demographic transition to the American Revolution. Viewing land shortages, industrialization, urbanization, lower infant mortality rates, Victorian morality, and other explanations as inadequate, Klepp points to American women, who seized on revolutionary ideas of equality, reason, and virtue to control their reproductive lives. In doing so, they irrevocably changed the status of American women.

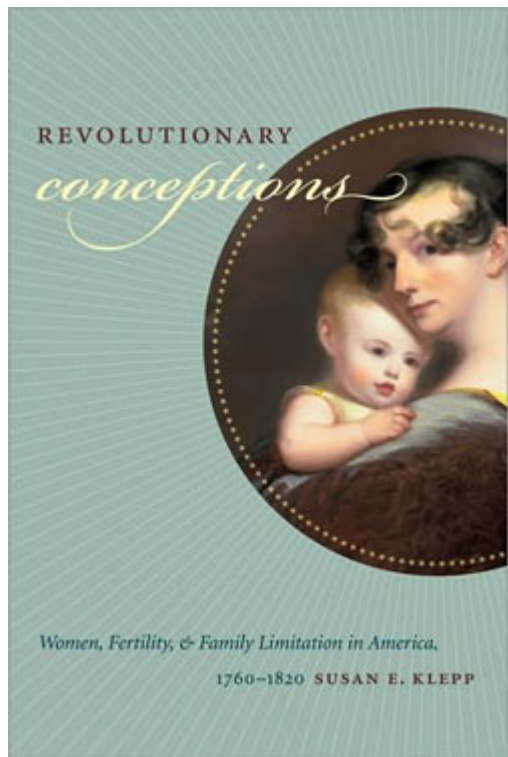
In colonial America, settlers celebrated the fertility of their women alongside the fertility of the land. Colonists used agricultural metaphors to describe pregnant women, including "flourishing," "breeding," and "fruitful" (64). Klepp offers an engaging analysis of women's pre-Revolutionary portraits, which pictured female subjects with their legs slightly parted and a basket of fruit on their laps, blatant symbols of sexuality and abundance. As Klepp notes, women were "the Sex," "ruled at bottom, not by reason, but by their procreative physiology" (61). Women were not merely objects of male colonists' desires; they also gloried in their reproductive abilities. American birth rates peaked from the 1740s to the 1760s, only to begin a steady decline soon after.

Klepp finds the explanation for this sudden, and at the time, unnoticed, change in the letters, diaries, and other writings of American women. Both Europeans and Americans were exposed to enlightenment values of liberty and equality, but only in the United States and France did fertility decline in the late eighteenth century (the rest of western Europe did not follow until the 1870s). Klepp argues that the American Revolution made new ideas about marriage, childrearing, individualism, and happiness more tangible. American women applied this language to their own lives, abandoning "the Sex" for self-controlled, sensible, and rational womanhood. They viewed large families as a self-indulgent and aristocratic luxury. American women also saw unrestrained fertility as an obstacle to egalitarian marriages, equal treatment of their male and female children, and their ability to control their bodies. American women turned to family planning, and their husbands and children followed.

The question is how, approximately a century before the diaphragm, and two centuries before the birth control pill, American women controlled their fertility. In her first chapter, Klepp includes the quantitative data on the demographic transition, and notes the various methods that demographers have used to study birthrates, including crude birthrates, child-woman ratios, and age-specific marital fertility rates (24). The age-specific marital fertility rates indicate some of the strategies women used to limit their family size, such as delaying marriage, increasing the intervals between births (often by breastfeeding), or stopping childbearing before menopause. As Klepp points out, demographers view stopping as “the only real evidence of deliberate family planning, because it implies that couples have agreed upon an ideal family size and planned accordingly” (48).

Klepp also examines the various technologies to limit or stop childbearing. Her evidence demonstrates that women used emmenagogues, or medicines for regulating the menstrual cycle, such as savin, juniper, rue, aloe, pennyroyal, and snakeroot, as abortifacients. Klepp also finds prescriptions for vigorous physical exercise like horseback riding or jumping rope. Late eighteenth-century medicine defined amenorrhea, or absent menstruation, as a symptom of illness as well as pregnancy, so there was no social condemnation of its treatment. And, though most of these methods seem to be dubious ways to end a pregnancy, Klepp notes some success. The records of the Philadelphia Dispensary show that 80 percent of the women treated for amenorrhea were “cured” using potions made with some of the above ingredients (199).

This other American Revolution created new opportunities for middle-class women. Liberated from constant pregnancies, early nineteenth-century women expanded their involvement in churches and voluntary societies. They joined campaigns to end prostitution (prostitutes used less respectable methods like *coitus interruptus* or condoms to limit fertility), slavery, intemperance, and war. Instead of devoting their lives to childbearing, women emphasized their status as mothers, essential to the health, education, and welfare of their children. Finally, as Klepp writes, “family limitation and feminism were intertwined” (284). As these virtuous women and sensible mothers expanded their presence in the public sphere, they made additional demands for equality.



Susan Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760-1820*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2009. 328 pp., \$24.95

Klepp also considers the exceptions to this transformation in American households. The very wealthy, including slaveholders, were slower to limit their family size than middling and poorer classes. Their large families demonstrated their commitment to patriarchy as well as hierarchy. High birth rates continued among enslaved Americans. In addition to owners' pressure on enslaved women to reproduce, Klepp argues that slaves may have found value and meaning in their families, however insecure, which countered the brutality of slavery. After emancipation, former slaves followed the practice of northern free blacks in limiting their fertility. Meanwhile, some sources, like Susanna Rowson's bestselling seduction novel *Charlotte Temple*, implicitly criticized only children, who, like the female protagonist, might cast aside parental guidance and sexual virtue, run away with a rakish soldier, and die in childbirth.

Despite her mention of *Charlotte Temple*, Klepp does not discuss another important phenomenon in Revolutionary America: premarital pregnancy rates approaching 30 to 40 percent. Historians argue that changing sexual mores, a highly mobile population, the breakdown of community and familial controls on courtship, and new priorities of individual choice and romantic love influenced the large numbers of premarital pregnancies. Spiking premarital pregnancy rates and falling birthrates may not be incompatible, but they do suggest another way Americans may have resisted rational womanhood and limited families.

Women also lost something in the demographic transition. The passionless Victorian replaced the intensely physical experience of "the Sex." Women increasingly ceded control over pregnancy and childbirth to male doctors. The

new values associated with family planning stigmatized those who did not conform. As many Americans celebrated the virtues of small, rational families, they began to criticize large families. Unsurprisingly, enslaved women's higher birth rates became another justification for their bondage. By the end of the nineteenth century, Americans associated large families with poverty and lack of self-control. Moral reformers argued that access to abortion and contraception only encouraged the promiscuous habits of immigrants, African Americans, and the poor. As Klepp observes: "So it was that the birthrate fell at the same time that large segments of the population embraced the goal of sharply restricted fertility, and yet voters, clergymen, doctors, judges, and legislators demanded more and more restrictions on contraception and abortion" (263). Shaped in the first century of the demographic transition, the ideal of the small nuclear family continues to influence American policy on immigration, welfare, education, and health care. Unfortunately, Klepp notes, prejudice against those who do not control their fertility is a regular feature of these policy debates.

Klepp offers an exciting new interpretation of women in Revolutionary America, and she presents her quantitative and qualitative evidence in an accessible and elegant manner. Though women did not gain legal or political equality, they took control of their bodies and their families, with lasting consequences for female citizenship. Women made a conscious effort to limit their fertility, balancing childrearing with their expansive religious, intellectual, and political interests.

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