

# Handbook of Contemporary Families: Considering the Past, Contemplating the Future

## Ambiguous Constructions: Development of a Childless or Child-Free Life Course

Contributors: Richard Bulcroft & Jay Teachman

Editors: Marilyn Coleman & Lawrence H. Ganong

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## Chapter 7: Ambiguous Constructions: Development of a Childless or Child-Free Life Course

Research and theory on childlessness date back to the 1930s. For the most part, early studies of childlessness treated the phenomenon as a deviance or abnormality, with the childless characterized as self-centered and infantile (Popenoe, 1936, 1954). Later, the focus shifted to a concern about the potentially negative demographic consequences of a move toward childlessness. In an attempt to predict whether childlessness would increase and threaten population replacement, researchers examined the motivations that men and women expressed for childlessness, giving special attention to the economic motivations for having children in a modern society (Blake, 1968; Blake & Davis, 1963; Easterlin, 1966; Hoffman & Hoffman, 1973). In the 1970s and early 1980s, however, studies of childlessness were increasingly conducted within the context of “alternative lifestyles,” with an emphasis placed on how men and women could construct marriages outside traditional norms. A product of the second wave of feminism, this primarily qualitative research attempted to demonstrate the viability of “child-free” families (Nason & Poloma, 1976; Veevers, 1973, 1975, 1980). Since 1990, however, considerable effort has been made to obtain quantitative data based on representative studies of childlessness as well as to further expand our understanding of those who live a life without parenting. In this chapter, we will use Houseknecht's (1987) review of the literature before 1987 as a starting point. Also, although there is a considerable literature on infertility and childlessness due to subfecundity, we will focus on those who do not have children for reasons other than reproductive incapacity. As we note later, however, this distinction is not always clear, and some issues confront all the childless regardless of cause.

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# Defining Childlessness

What is childlessness? Childlessness is most directly defined as the absence of children, either by intention (voluntary) or by circumstance (involuntary). However, trying to classify individuals and couples into types of childlessness is problematic. First, most researchers and theorists have conceptualized childlessness as an individual phenomenon, focusing most frequently on women. However, focusing only on women at the individual level of analysis obscures the issue of male childlessness as well as the dyadic processes involved in decisions to remain childless (Thomson, 1997).

Second, the distinction between childlessness by choice versus circumstance is blurred by the biological facts of infertility and subfecundity. Infertility is not always a definitive diagnosis. For most fertile couples, conception occurs within a year of trying, but for some it may take several years and significant interventions. Does a lack of motivation to continue trying or to undergo expensive and invasive treatments indicate biology or choice as a reason for childlessness (see Letherby, 1999)? Subfecundity occurs when couples delay childbearing to a point where conception becomes less probable. Are these couples childless by biological circumstance or by choice, especially when they delay with the knowledge that in doing so they may reduce their chances of having a child?

Third, even though we may be able to estimate infertility rates, other circumstances may bring about unintended childlessness. Therefore, there is a need to assess childbearing intentions as well as childbearing outcomes in studies of childlessness. Some authors (e.g., Houseknecht, 1987; Jacobson, Heaton, & Taylor, 1988) have argued that to be classified as voluntarily childless a person must both intend not to have a child and then fulfill that intention over his or her life course. However, classifying young adults in the early years of their childbearing capacity is problematic; as individuals age and make choices leading to the delay of childbearing, they frequently revise their expectations to fit their realities. In contrast, Rovi (1994) argued that it is the expression of childlessness intentions alone that is of significance; the intentions of individuals and couples to remain childless define their lifestyles regardless of future childbearing outcomes.

Fourth, when childlessness intentions are used to classify couples, one must determine the level of commitment to those intentions. Houseknecht (1987) distinguished between permanent and temporary childlessness; however, making such a distinction requires that the researcher wait until the individual exceeds childbearing age. Perhaps a more useful distinction is between early articulators and postponers (Houseknecht, 1987; Veevers, 1980) or active and passive deciders (Gillespie, 1999). As Veevers noted, early articulators appear to represent a unique group of individuals who formed commitments to childlessness in adolescence. Thus, factors affecting their choice and their experience of childlessness should be different from those of postponers.

## Demographics of Childlessness

What is the prevalence of childlessness in U.S. society, and how has it changed over time? One way to answer these questions is to assess childbearing outcomes for women who are at the end of their childbearing ages (40–44). In 2000, 19% of women were childless, doubling the 1980 percentage for this same age group of women (Bacu & O'Connell, 2000). Although this was a significant increase, the percentage of women in this age group who remained childless was similar or higher in previous historical periods. For example, Morgan (1991) reported [p. 118 ↓] rates of childlessness ranging from 15% in 1880 to 22% in 1940. He also found significant variation in childlessness around the end of the 19th century, with childlessness being highest in the Northeast (over 30%) and lowest in the South and Midwest (less than 10%).

There are two problems with using total fertility at age 40 as a measure of childlessness. First, it may not reflect childlessness rates for younger adults of childbearing age. Second, it does not inform as to whether the decision to remain childless was intentional or voluntary. Were the childless in 1910 childless by choice or by circumstance? Recent rates of infertility are estimated to be about 5% for those between ages 15 and 24 and 15% for all women at any given time, with 75% of infertile women capable of achieving a pregnancy through medical intervention (Mosher & Pratt, 1990). Are these rates comparable to past rates? It is impossible to know for certain, but Morgan (1991) has determined that most childlessness at the start of the 20th century (especially in the Northeast) was not due to sterility, poor health, or disease. Nevertheless, we do not have data on childbearing intentions to help us interpret the

past. Such measures do exist today, however, and can yield important insights into childlessness trends in the future.

Two methods have been developed for projecting childlessness rates for the future. The cohort approach (the Coale-McNeil model) used by Bloom and Trussell (1984) bases projections on how rates of childlessness at an early age predict later permanent childlessness for previous cohorts of women who have completed their fertility. The period approach uses current age-specific childlessness rates and then “ages” current cohorts of women through those rates to determine their likelihood of ever having a first birth. Although both approaches have potential drawbacks, Morgan and Chen (1992) showed that the period approach yields more accurate projections. Using this approach, they projected a childlessness rate of approximately 20% for white women and 4% for nonwhite women born in 1962.

Do these projected rates of childlessness reflect trends in the intentions to remain childless? Rovi (1994) found a general trend among married women of childbearing age between 1972 and 1988 for an increase in expressed desires to remain child-free (2.6% in 1972 vs. 6.4% in 1988) and to postpone parenthood (6.6% in 1972 vs. 16.3% in 1988). Thornton and Young-DeMarco (2001) also found little attitudinal support for a child-free life in their analysis of several large data sets. Areas where attitudinal change has been most significant include decreases in the perception that persons “ought to have children,” decreases in the perception that children interfere with personal life, and increases in the perception that fatherhood is fulfilling. These changes suggest an increase in the significance of parenting to couples, with a decreasing sense of obligation to reproduce. The needs and happiness of the parents as well as potential children have become paramount.

## Theories of Childlessness

Why do individuals and couples choose to remain childless or child-free? Theories of childlessness can be broadly categorized as (a) biological/evolutionary, (b) cultural, (c) rational choice and exchange, (d) family or life course development, and (e) feminist.

## Biological/Evolutionary Perspective

A single evolutionary theory of childlessness has not been clearly articulated, but several hypotheses have been proposed and tested on the basis of broad evolutionary principles. The earliest of these hypotheses was posed by Popenoe (1936), who argued that there [p. 119 ↓] is a *eugenic advantage* to childlessness, as indicated by higher rates among women who (a) are not suitable for marriage (divorcees) and (b) do not have strong family orientations (those who do not remarry). Early studies of parent-child attachment also stimulated thinking about childlessness from an evolutionary perspective. Bardwick (1974) argued that maternal predispositions to form attachments would create psychological need among women to bear children. Thus, childlessness was viewed as an abnormal condition that could create significant psychological distress. More recent theorizing from an evolutionary perspective has focused on how ecological conditions may suppress the need for childbearing and how this effect is adaptive. This *reproduction suppression* model identifies psychosocial stress as a mediating mechanism linking nonoptimal environmental conditions to decreased fertility and desire for childbearing (Wasser & Isenberg, 1986). Preliminary research by Edelmann and Golombok (1989) and Wasser (1994) suggests that stress is a factor in infertility, delayed childbearing, and voluntary childlessness.

Two variables that could be linked more directly to a biological/evolutionary perspective are age and gender. Although age reduces the ability of women to realize childbearing intentions due to reduced fecundity (Krishnan, 1993; Myers, 1997), Schlesinger and Schlesinger (1989) argued that age increases the desire to have children among the childless because childbearing is a biological imperative. Research on the effects of age on birth intentions has been mixed, however. One study of women aged 18 to 30 showed increased intentions to have children with age (Taris, 1998). However, studies that have included wider (and older) ranges of age have found positive relationships between age and intentional childlessness (Heaton, Jacobson, & Holland, 1999; Jacobson et al., 1988; Ory, 1978; Rovi, 1994; Seccombe, 1991).

With respect to gender, parental investment theory (Buss, 1999; Geary, 1998) would predict that women are less likely to desire childlessness than men and are more concerned about caregiving issues in deciding when or whether to have a child.

Accordingly, men will value childbearing less and be more focused on economic concerns. Contrary to these predictions, however, researchers have found that men are more pronatalistic in their assessments of the value of children (Seccombe, 1991; Taris, 1998), although they express more economic concerns. Women are more concerned about age, stress, worry, and later caregiving in their musings over childbearing.

## Cultural Norms Perspective

Cultural theories propose that childlessness is a function of normative pressures and socialization experiences that shape fertility preferences either specifically or more generally. Gillespie (1999) identified two processes leading to a weakening of pronatalistic norms linked to the development of a modern capitalistic economy. The first involves individuals making rational choices in an economic context that has increasingly made nonfamily career options open to women. The second process involves a more fundamental shift in the social definition of marriage and family life from one that emphasizes traditional ties that bind to one that emphasizes choice and companionship, goals that may also be less consistent with childbearing. A third process, identified by Nock (1987), involves a shift toward a worldview premised on a belief in gender equality (Luker, 1986) that excludes motherhood as an important identity for women. Trends toward greater childlessness in more modern societies support the cultural explanation, as does contemporary research on childlessness across cultural subgroups.

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One variable that reflects the impact of culture on childlessness in the United States is race. U.S. census and other survey data have shown that whites are significantly more likely to choose childlessness (Jacobson et al., 1988; Rovi, 1994), be childless (Chen & Morgan, 1991), and delay childbearing (Bloom & Trussell, 1984; Myers, 1997). Some of these effects, however, appear to be related to socioeconomic status (Jacobson & Heaton, 1991). As Heaton et al. (1999) showed, blacks are more likely than whites to intend to bear children and fulfill their childbearing intentions, less likely to postpone intended childbearing, less likely to switch to a childless intent, and less likely to fulfill childlessness intentions. These findings suggest that compared to white



women, black women form their childbearing intentions earlier in life and have greater opportunities and/or pressures to fulfill childbearing intentions or to have a child in spite of intentions. One possible explanation for these effects is a strong pronatalistic value in the African American culture derived from a matrifocal cultural heritage or, as May (1995) suggested, from the experiences of slavery.

Religion and religiosity represent another cultural force in decisions to remain childless. Although broad religious groups (e.g., Catholics vs. Protestants vs. Jews) do not differ significantly in childlessness, those without any religious affiliation are more likely to be childless (Houseknecht, 1987; Jacobson et al., 1988; Jacobson & Heaton, 1991; Krishnan, 1993; Poston, 1990; Rovi, 1994). These findings are consistent with the reduced significance of religious denomination and the more consistent effects of religiosity as a determinant of family outcomes noted by Dollahite and colleagues (see [Chapter 24](#) of this book).

Third, region and residence should predict childlessness to the extent that these variables are related to norms governing childbearing behavior. In regions of the country where profamily norms are expected to be weaker (e.g., the western United States), women are more likely to be childless (Jacobson et al., 1988). In areas of greater modernity and lower social solidarity (e.g., urban environments), women are more likely to intend to remain child-free or postpone childbearing (Rovi, 1994). Urban residence, however, is not related to actual childlessness (Jacobson et al., 1988), perhaps due to the greater concentration of African Americans and greater likelihood of nonmarital childbearing in urban areas.

Finally, research on gender role ideology provides the most direct evidence of a link between culture and childlessness. Research has consistently found a negative relationship between childlessness and women's traditional family values and gender role beliefs (Houseknecht, 1987; Jacobson & Heaton, 1991; Kaufman, 2000). The shift away from traditional gender roles, however, has contradictory effects on men and women, with nontraditional men desiring children more than traditional men (Kaufman, 2000).

## Rational Choice and Exchange Perspective

In rational choice theory, children are evaluated as having direct costs and benefits (e.g., time and money investments, energy demands, caregiving in later life), indirect costs and benefits (e.g., social sanctions, stigma, increased marital stability), and opportunity costs (e.g., forgone leisure time, employment, or occupational advancement). Accordingly, individuals (or couples) will choose to remain childless when (a) the costs of children are high relative to their rewards; (b) the benefits of a childless lifestyle are high relative to the costs of such a lifestyle; and/or (c) alternatives to childbearing are available and the opportunity costs of childbearing are high.

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Rational choice theories differ from exchange theories in their concern for explaining aggregate fertility behavior and their corresponding emphasis on values of childbearing that have universal and fungible characteristics. They seek predictors of childbearing that have immanent value (Myers, 1997): that is, predictors that do not vary from one individual to another on the basis of subjective values but instead have predictive power by virtue of their ability to make the achievement of other subjective values possible. One such predictor could be wealth, but attempts to explain societal change in fertility on the basis of changes in wealth alone have largely failed. Another is the underlying value of children for reducing life course uncertainty (Friedman, Hechter, & Kanazawa, 1994), although this aspect of fertility has been challenged on theoretical, conceptual, and empirical grounds (Lehrer, Grossbard-Schechtman, & Leasure, 1996; Myers, 1997). More recently, Schoen, Young, Nathanson, Fields, and Astone (1997) have argued that aggregate change in fertility can be explained by variation in the value of children for creating and maintaining social bonds essential to survival. Thus, childlessness remains low even in modern societies because it retains this immanent value.

At the micro level, work and occupational status, career orientation, education, and income have been predicted to increase the opportunity costs of children and thereby to increase childlessness. These variables have been found to consistently predict childlessness and childlessness intentions in both qualitative studies (Houseknecht,

1987) and quantitative studies (Heaton et al., 1999; Hodge & Ogawa, 1991; Jacobson et al., 1988; Jacobson & Heaton, 1991; Kiernan, 1989; Krishnan, 1993; Myers, 1997; Rovi, 1994). There have been important exceptions in this research (Seccombe, 1991), however, and some results suggest that women's income and education may not undermine the desire for children as much as they create both opportunities and new conditions for fulfilling fertility intentions (Heaton et al., 1999).

## Life Course Perspective

The life course perspective sees childlessness as a function of individuals' reactions to circumstance and social expectations. At the most basic level, this perspective holds that the desire for children will change with age and marital status due to societal norms linked to these life changes. As has been noted, however, this perspective goes beyond simple age norms and considers the impact of time, developmental readiness, and past life events on future trajectories (Nichols & Pace-Nichols, 2000; White & Klein, 2002).

Determinants of childlessness can be found in early life course experiences in the family, such as parental socioeconomic status and birth order. Higher parental socioeconomic status has been found to be related to less coercive parenting styles with moderate to high levels of parental warmth, greater independence training, and a greater emphasis on achievement: all predictors of childlessness (Houseknecht, 1987). These parenting styles are likely to foster greater independence and autonomy in children and the early development of an achievement identity versus a mothering identity, also found to predict childlessness (Houseknecht, 1987). Results from research on the effects of parental socioeconomic status, however, have been mixed. Although some researchers have found that higher parental status is more strongly correlated with delayed childbearing and childlessness (Blossfeld & Jaenichen, 1992; McLaughlin & Micklin, 1983), others have found no relationship (Jacobson et al., 1988). Birth order has shown more consistent effects (Houseknecht, 1987), with the presence of siblings increasing the likelihood of later childbearing (Rovi, [p. 122 ↓ ] 1994). Finally, disruption of the early life course (e.g., by parental divorce) also increases the likelihood of childlessness (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991) and negatively affects young adults' attitudes toward parenthood (Axinn & Thornton, 1996).

In addition to the effects of early life course experiences on childlessness, this perspective highlights the influence of development norms on childlessness. Two family development norms in our society are that marriage should precede parenthood and that parenthood should occur early in marriage (White, 1991). Although marriage reduces the likelihood of childlessness (Jacobson et al., 1988; Jacobson & Heaton, 1991), results from Heaton et al. (1999) suggest that both marriage and cohabitation act as catalysts to establish initial childbearing or childlessness intentions rather than elicit such intentions. Research supports the prediction that being off-time in one's family life course increases childlessness. Couples in their second marriage are less likely than those in first marriages to have a child in the near future (Myers, 1997), and childlessness is more likely among those who are older at the time of marriage (Hodge & Ogawa, 1991; Kiernan, 1989; Krishnan, 1993). Duration of marriage also puts couples at risk of childlessness (Hodge & Ogawa, 1991; Myers, 1997; Tomes, 1985), although in the early years of marriage duration is positively related to the perceived profitability of having children (Taris, 1998).

Finally, current family life conditions can influence childbearing/childlessness intentions. The likelihood of childlessness increases with egalitarian role relationships and wife income contributions. Childlessness decreases with marital role differentiation, traditional gender roles, and husband decision making (Myers, 1997; Walter, 1986). In addition, Taris (1998) found that a positive evaluation of one's current state of childlessness decreases the perceived profitability of having a child as well as the intention to have a child. Nationally representative longitudinal studies in the United States, however, have shown a negative relationship between marital satisfaction/stability and childlessness (Lillard & Waite, 1993; Myers, 1997).

## Feminist Perspectives

Feminist approaches (Ferguson, 1989; Gillespie, 2000, 2001; Hird & Abshoff, 2000; May, 1995; Morell, 1994, 2000; Phoenix & Woollett, 1991) have been less concerned about the determinants of childlessness, focusing instead on gendered cultural narratives that shape perceptions and experiences of childbearing and childlessness. It is argued that one means by which cultural and symbolic forms shape and reinforce gender inequalities is through the fostering of a gender identity linked to motherhood.

In one of the most influential studies of childlessness from this perspective, Veevers (1980) linked childlessness with the extent to which women reject the “mystique” of motherhood. A decade later, Gillespie (1999) further articulated this linkage:

Motherhood as fixed, unchanging, natural, fulfilling and central to feminine identity is a deeply embedded concept in Western culture.... [N]urturance of children has historically been seen to be what women do, and mothers have been seen to be what women are, constituting the central core of the self or feminine identity.... Women's natural instincts as well as their bodies are seen to be ideally suited to reproduction, and failing to fulfill this bodily imperative can denote a deficiency or be seen as “unnatural.” (p. 44)

For a review of how the emphasis on motherhood has changed historically and the diversity of contemporary views of motherhood, see [Chapter 12](#) of this book.

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From this perspective, the term *childless* conveys a meaning of absence that goes beyond the objective condition and implies a deficiency that characterizes women primarily and exerts a pressure on women to bear children. During the second wave of feminism, a movement was made away from this term and toward the term *child-free* in an effort to neutralize the negative connotations of not having children. In more recent decades, however, feminism has moved to a position that once again emphasizes the centrality of motherhood as a defining experience that distinguishes women from men and therefore is a central element in women's identity (Hird & Abshoff, 2000). This maternal feminism (Bulbeck, 1998, as cited in Morell, 2000) seeks to empower women in and through their childbearing capacities rather than to reject or deny an element to their existence that has long been devalued. As Morell (2000) noted, this movement has given voice to women's experiences and perspectives but has also overshadowed the voices of women without children. This renewed emphasis on childbearing has been termed the new pronatalism, and it exerts as strong a cultural force on women's lives as the old, with the added component of racial and class-based differences in those expectations (May, 1995).

# Rationales for and Interpretations of Childlessness

Researchers have attempted to understand the causes of childlessness by assessing individuals' expressed motivations for their childlessness. Although these data may reflect true motivations, it is equally likely that they are constructions or rationales based on dominant cultural narratives and attempts by the childless to deflect negative stereotypes by explaining their choices within socially accepted frames or value systems (Gillespie, 1999; Morell, 2000). According to Houseknecht (1987), reasons given to researchers will be presented within "an acceptable vocabulary of motives previously established by the historical epoch and the social structures in which one lives" (p. 376). In her review of the research, she found the following rank order of reasons given for remaining childless: (a) freedom and self-fulfillment; (b) marital quality; (c) career and monetary considerations; (d) concern for population growth (women) and dislike for children (men); (e) early socialization experiences and doubts about ability to parent (women); (f) concern about childbirth and recovery (women); and (g) concern about raising children under unstable or negative world conditions (women).

More recent research by Gillespie (1999) confirms Houseknecht's (1987) conclusions but qualifies them by the type of childlessness. Most of the childless women in her qualitative study had made *active* choices, usually early in life, and the basis for their decision was often the rejection of motherhood as a life course option. In some cases, these women had had previous experiences (e.g., witnessing the breakup of a close relative's marriage after having a child; experiencing an unplanned pregnancy terminated through abortion) that either shifted their values or directed their identity formation processes in a different direction than the prevailing norms. The *passive* deciders showed low commitment to motherhood and greater openness to alternative identities from the very beginning. Their reasons were often couched within the framework of life decisions premised on ongoing assessments of values, inclinations, abilities, and life circumstances.

For both the active and passive deciders, Gillespie (1999) found that the "pull of childlessness often co-existed with a push away from motherhood" (p. 44). For many

[p. 124 ↓ ] of these childless women, children were not appealing, and motherhood was perceived to be “uninteresting, dreary and too hard” (p. 45), even though the women were often involved in other caregiving activities.

Other reasons for childlessness reported by individuals over the age of 55 (Connidis & McMullin, 1996) included responsibilities for parents and others in their family of orientation, difficulties in establishing themselves to support a family, fate, self-actualization, altruism, yielding to the preferences or situations of one's spouse, practical concerns (e.g., finances, mobility), sexual orientation, and poor well-being. Several individuals reported childhoods in which they experienced alcoholism, violence, being orphaned, or having parenting responsibilities thrust upon them as children. Interestingly, among the ever-married, the most common reasons for childlessness given were physiological factors and age, although 80% said that their decision was a choice rather than due to circumstances.

Men's reasons for childlessness were more likely than women's to reflect instrumental concerns having to do with career and work focus, traveling and adventure, lack of neighborhood supports, and negative early childhood experiences (poverty and abuse) (Lunneborg, 1999). Men saw freedom to work as a more important reason to remain childless than did women, and their emphasis on work, travel, and so on seemed tied to concerns about fulfilling developmental goals and maintaining responsible control over their lives. These men seemed to have developed an early concern for fulfilling male role expectations in the areas of financial responsibility, and they could articulate clear work and career patterns from an early age. Men in Lunneborg's study expressed little concern for their relationships as a factor in their desire for childlessness, and they tended to acquiesce to their spouse's desires or find a spouse who shared their desire for childlessness.

They did not express a fear of mistakes or later disappointments in child outcomes, although more than half said that they found children distressing and out of control. They also expressed difficulty with being responsible for another person as much as they would have to be for a child.

## Decision-Making Processes

Few studies have examined the process individuals go through in making their decision to remain childless. Although dated, Veevers (1980) provides the most systematic analysis of this process. The sequence that characterized most of her couples was one that started with a decision to postpone childbearing for a definite period of time while the couple tended to other life course transitions and tasks. This initial decision established the effective use of birth control and established an inertia level requiring greater conviction to decide to have a child. Following the initial period of postponement, a second decision was made to indefinitely postpone childbearing due to the discovery of unanticipated rewards from childlessness or to the existence of new contingencies in their relationship or in their social situation that made childbearing less certain. Some couples noted an increased awareness of the demands of child rearing and revised their estimation of what was necessary to have in place before childbearing so as to optimize child outcomes and parenting experiences. Couples also often experienced a third stage in their decision making: the delineation of the pros and cons of parenthood. During this delineation, no firm decision was made regarding childlessness. Couples still felt they were capable of having children (with most being aware of the effects of age on fecundity), and husbands frequently took the role of devil's advocate in an effort to help their wives make a final decision regarding having children. Finally, [p. 125 ↓ ] as a result of this weighing of pros and cons and a consideration of their life situations, couples came to accept their condition as a permanent one based on their choice.

Although Veevers (1980) and Lunneborg (1999) noted the role of spouses as devil's advocates in the decision-making process, little is known about how men and women negotiate and make joint decisions or passive decisions about having children. Some studies have shown that when disagreements occur, the likelihood of childlessness falls somewhere between joint intenders and joint nonintenders (Thomson, McDonald, & Bumpass, 1990), although other studies have shown that disagreements increase contraception use (Thomson, 1989) and inhibit pregnancy-seeking behaviors (Miller & Pasta, 1996). With respect to whose desires or intentions are more significant among disagreeing couples, the evidence is less clear. One possible outcome is that the more



powerful partner makes the final decision. Alternatively, the husband may acquiesce to his wife because she will be more responsible for care of the child after it is born (what Thomson, 1997, calls the “sphere-of-influence argument”; p. 343).

## Experiences of Childlessness

Living without children, whether intentionally or not, creates challenges that must be confronted. Childlessness is stigmatized (Miall, 1994), and as a result, childless individuals must either cope with stigma or construct symbolic communities that support their chosen identities without children.

## Stigmatization

Before 1990, research had documented widespread stigmatization of the childless (Ganong, Coleman, & Mapes, 1990; Houseknecht, 1987). Public perceptions of the childless emphasized their psychological deficiency, immorality, and disadvantage. Although most of this research focused on women, some included men and found them to be equally stigmatized. In their meta-analysis of the research before 1990, however, Ganong et al. (1990) did not find that the involuntarily childless received the same degree of stigmatization.

Since these two reviews, studies have shown that people still have biases about voluntarily childless individuals. More recent studies have shown that both women and men are assigned more negative traits when they do not have children and that the assigned traits may vary by gender. For example, childless women today are perceived to have “agency” (LaMastro, 2001) but are also seen as less driven, less caring, less emotionally healthy, low in warmth, and possessing more negative emotional traits (LaMastro, 2001; Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995). They are also rated as living lives that are less rewarding, less fulfilling, more unhappy in later life, and more instrumental (Mueller & Yoder, 1997, 1999). Childless men are rated as significantly less driven, less agentic, and lower in warmth and caring (Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995; LaMastro, 2001).

# Coping with Stigma and Transforming Identities

Given widespread negative societal reactions to the childless, how do the involuntarily childless cope with stigmatization, and how do the voluntarily childless come to choose a stigmatized lifestyle? Ireland (1993) identified three types of childless women and their coping styles: traditional, transitional, and transformative child-free. The traditional childless (i.e., the infertile) needed to mourn the loss of a significant identity [p. 126 ↓ ] (motherhood) before they could cope effectively. Traditional childless women attempted to sustain the illusion that they could conceive but that circumstances had prevented it. This illusion was critical to their ability to maintain a definition of self as feminine that was linked to their biological capacities in reproduction. They could not sustain this illusion indefinitely, however, and at some point they had to uncouple motherhood from their definition of femininity. One method for doing so was to alter their definition of the situation from “I can't have a child” to “I didn't want to have children.” To do so, however, required a high degree of flexibility on the part of both the woman and her spouse and was facilitated by feminist ideologies and discourses that provided alternative models of femininity. Other important strategies for coping included increased investments in careers, increased investments in and reconceptualizations of marriage (e.g., egalitarianism), the restructuring of friendship networks, and/or the assumption of alternative family or child care roles.

In contrast, the transitional child-free and childless were not initially committed to motherhood as central to their feminine identity but were open to the possibility. They were mostly ambivalent about having children and were often willing to leave the outcome to chance or their partners. Early in their adult life course, they experienced little pressure to have children, but with age and time those pressures increased, many times resulting in feelings of deviance. The coping strategies that these women employed included avoidance of marital commitments that increased pressures to have children, focus on creative expression at work, and the creative merging of traditional male and female traits into a synthesis that disassociated femininity from motherhood and incorporated many of the traits of motherhood into other roles.

Finally, transformative child-free women were the least likely to feel the pressures of social stigma. These women rejected the “motherhood mystique” early in life and developed gender identities that incorporated a high degree of autonomy and independence. They had high levels of self-esteem and self-confidence and found it easier to deflect negative societal reactions and resist pressures, although they still expressed a need for continued affirmation of their nonmother identities through the construction of sympathetic networks and identification with feminist ideology. These women were strongly committed to childlessness early in life and tended to seek out intimate partners and friends who shared their values and could be “sojourners” with them through life.

## Consequences of Childlessness

How does childlessness affect couples and individuals throughout the life course? Two areas of concern have been the effects of childlessness on marriage and the long-term effects of childlessness on the quality of life on old age.

### Effects on Marriage

There are no specific studies of how voluntarily childless couples construct alternative marital lifestyles, although there is significant research showing that children have a negative impact on marital quality and satisfaction (Callan, 1986; Crohan, 1996; Glenn & McLanahan, 1982; Lawson, 1988; Lupri & Frideres, 1981; Olson et al., 1983; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrer, 2000; Somers, 1993) and have a positive effect on marital stability (Andersson, 1995, 1997; Waite & Lillard, 1991; Wineberg, 1990). When divorce does occur, however, the [p. 127 ↓ ] childless experience fewer problems and lower levels of stress (Barnet, 1990). On the other hand, more specific studies have been done on how coping with infertility affects marriage and marital interaction processes.

The few studies of the effects of involuntary childlessness on marriage show mixed results. Many of these couples make adjustments and manage highly rewarding marriages; others experience more negative effects (Chandra et al., 1991; Monach, 1993; Ulbrich, Coyle, & Llabre, 1990). For example, the stress and invasiveness of

fertility treatments can have negative effects on marital adjustment and satisfaction (Ulbrich et al., 1990). In general, however, infertile couples display changes in sexual activity and marital satisfaction over time that are similar to those of fertile couples (Slade, Raval, Buck, & Lieberman, 1992). An important aspect of the marital life course of involuntarily childless couples is how they manage and experience time in their relationship. Martin-Mathews and Mathews (2001) discussed the importance of three types of timetables in the developmental life course of infertile couples: family and societal timetables, body timetables, and treatment timetables. All three timetables shape the experiences of these childless couples and thereby shape a life course without children.

## Later-Life Consequences

Often, reactions of others to the childless are couched in cautionary tales about the long-term negative consequences of their choice not to have children. However, these negative cautions are more perceived than real. In one study, older couples that remained childless by choice were more likely to perceive advantages than disadvantages in not having children. Perceived advantages were fewer worries and problems, less financial stress, and greater freedoms. Among the perceived disadvantages were lack of companionship, greater loneliness, missed experiences and completeness, and lack of support and care. These latter perceptions, however, did not reflect their more positive life evaluations (Connidis & McMullin, 1999).

Related to these perceptions is the potential for experiencing regrets in later life that could negatively affect well-being. As Morell (2000) noted, cultural narratives of regret derive from pronatalist ideologies and frame women's experiences such that normal life reflections on paths not taken are exaggerated. Women have expressed regrets about not meeting the societal expectations for one's life course and specifically feminine identity, about how not having children left them lacking a sense of continuity of self and family after death, and about feelings of marginalization stemming from nonparticipation in a world structured around pronatalism (Alexander, Rubinstein, Goodman, & Luborsky, 1992). It is important to keep in mind, however, that no link has been established between these regrets and psychological well-being.

Although regrets are a potential negative influence on well-being, most predictions of lower well-being in later life are premised on the assumption that childlessness reduces the availability of social relationships that serve as sources of social exchange and support in later life (Connidis & McMullin, 1994; Wu & Pollard, 1998). Research supports neither a task-specific (Litwak, 1985) nor a compensatory/substitution model (Cantor, 1979) of later-life support networks, models that emphasize the priority of parent-child ties over others. There is support for a functional-specificity model. Simons (1983–84), however, predicts that childless individuals will develop specialized support networks not linked to particular types of relationships. Childless individuals apparently replace missing children in their support networks with people other than relatives [p. 128 ↓ ] (Johnson & Troll, 1992; Wu & Pollard, 1998). They also are less likely to rely upon spouses and more likely to rely on siblings and formal or paid supports for daily living (Campbell, Connidis, & Davies, 1999; Choi, 1994; Connidis & McMullin, 1994). In the end, elderly childless individuals are no different from those with children in reporting sufficient supports across a variety of specific instrumental and expressive needs (Connidis & McMullin, 1994), and their lower reliance on close family members does not seem to affect their quality of life. Although some research has shown lower levels of affective balance and life satisfaction (Connidis & McMullin, 1993; McMullin & Marshall, 1996) and higher rates of institutionalization (Freedman, 1996; Rowland, 1998) and loneliness (Zhang & Hayward, 2001) in later life among the childless, these effects are not consistent (see Koropecj-Cox, 1998) and are limited to the involuntarily childless and to unmarried childless men. On the positive side, the childless elderly report lower levels of stress, perhaps due to reduced caregiving responsibilities (i.e., the cost of caring) associated with close family ties (McMullin & Marshall, 1996).

Finally, there are important differences in the effects of childlessness in later life on well-being based on gender, marital status, and race. Elderly childless men compared to childless women are less outgoing, are less likely to be involved in voluntary organizations, have less significant relationships with neighbors, and have fewer close friends that they can rely upon. However, they do not differ in terms of relationships with siblings, nieces, and nephews (Wenger, 2001). Childlessness enhances relationships with siblings, nieces, and nephews more for never-married than married women and has a more negative effect on the development of close friendships for never-married than married men (Wenger, 2001). The early development among African Americans

of lifelong ties with nieces and nephews suggests that the greater boundary flexibility of African American families and the practice of “child swapping” may facilitate the development of functional ties for African American elderly who are childless (Johnson & Barer, 1995). They are also more likely to maintain more active friendship ties.

## Conclusion

What do we know about childlessness and the lifestyles of couples without children? First, there is evidence to support the influence of biological/genetic forces, rational choice, cultural norms, and life course events and trajectories on the likelihood of not having and not desiring children. What is less clear is the relative importance of these forces and the extent to which our knowledge of the determinants of childhood is limited by our own biases and culturally specific perspectives. Second, studies of the reasons and rationales given by those without children may or may not represent true causes but do reflect dominant cultural values of individualism, freedom, and personal development as well as cultural narratives that frame the experience of childlessness in the light of an emerging new pronatalism. Third, the negative consequences of childlessness as a function of social stigma have been well documented, as have the strategies used by those without children (by choice or circumstances) to resist or deflect stigmatization. The impact of dealing with infertility and the treatment options that couples face in relationships has also been explored, although not in depth here, as have the later-life consequences of a life course without children. With the exception of the potential negative effects of invasive infertility treatments on marital relationships, the evidence does not support a view of the childless as unhappy, unfulfilled, or at risk in middle or later life.

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What is less clearly understood, however, is how those without children construct a normal life course, how their interactions differ over time, and what factors affect the happiness and stability of such relationships.

A significant contribution has been made to this research by feminist poststructuralist theorists. It could be argued that the study of predictors of childlessness in itself reflects

and reinforces dominant pronatalistic norms to the extent that researchers search for individual-level variables to explain what is often framed as non-normative behavior. This is particularly true of studies that focus on negative childhood experiences. As feminists in the 1970s and 1980s noted, the terminology used in research contributes to a deviant view of those (especially women) who go through life without having children. Since that time, however, rather than explore the unique qualities of a child-free marriage or family life course, we have worked to draw clearer distinctions between involuntary childlessness (seen as justifiable) and volitional childlessness (seen as questionable or risky), even though such distinctions may be artificial and ambiguous. There is a growing concern, perhaps tied to the emergence of a new pronatalism, about identifying and helping the involuntarily childless to achieve the goal of having children. The result of this concern, however, may be the reinforcement of the desirability of the goal itself and a failure to gain a fuller understanding of the development of a normal marital and family life without children.

But what about the future of research and theory in this area and the future of marriage and family life without children? With respect to research and theory, trends in two directions are likely to continue. First, it is likely that increasing attention will be given to the struggles faced by those who are infertile or involuntarily childless. Our modern technological society has greatly reduced the number of men and women who cannot attain parental status, but it has done so at significant cost. In the future, research on childlessness is likely to explore in greater detail how individuals and couples manage the needed interventions to have children and how those interventions affect the quality and stability of relationships. This attention to the involuntarily childless is likely to increasingly marginalize the voluntarily childless. Second, with the growth of a new pronatalism, feminist scholarship in this area is also likely to grow as researchers further explore strategies of individual resistance and social change. Where should we venture as researchers and theorists? One question in need of future research and theory is how individuals and couples construct their marital and family life course without children over time and what factors affect the health and durability of such relationships.

With respect to the future of childlessness and child-free marriages, the trends are less clear. There seems to be little question that advances in reproductive technologies will make most childlessness an issue of volition or commitment to childbearing. As Beck (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) have noted, the growth and application of

technology to solve problems in a modern society often make public problems private. Increasingly, those who do not have children will find that they bear the bulk of the responsibility for not doing so. Without changes in cultural norms, this could have increasingly negative consequences. Will women (and men) choose, then, to have children (even if it means significant personal and financial costs) rather than face these consequences? This question is difficult to answer. On the one hand, we have noted the emergence and power of a new pronatalism in society. The endorsement of this norm is likely to reduce intentions and desires to live a child-free lifestyle. A downward trend in childlessness is also expected on the basis of improvements in reproductive technologies, the emergence of [p. 130 ↓ ] new identities for men that incorporate active parenting roles, and the increasing need in a modern society to find personal authenticity and meaning and construct personal biography through marital and family life events. On the other hand, modernity reinforces norms of individualism and self-fulfillment, often in the context of public selves. As we pursue status in society through our achievements, more men and women will increasingly delay marriage and childbearing, perhaps to a point where we rationally calculate the potential rewards and costs and decide to live a life without children.

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