The right to be childfree

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Abstract
The number of couples who have voluntarily chosen not to have children has doubled in the last few decades, according to the National Center for Health Statistics, Census Bureau, (Kantrowitz, 1985). In 1960 the number of married women between the ages of twenty-five and twenty-nine who were childless totalled [sic] thirteen percent, which averaged one out of ten women (Kantrowitz, 1985). In 1985 the number of married women in the same age group who chose not to have children was twenty-nine percent, which averaged one out of every four women (Kantrowitz, 1985). The only option for married women, in the past, was motherhood, however this has changed. Consequently, there was a total of nearly 3.3 million women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four who had been married and who had never had a child (Kantrowitz, 1985).
THE RIGHT TO BE CHILDFREE

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The number of couples who have voluntarily chosen not to have children has doubled in the last few decades, according to the National Center for Health Statistics, Census Bureau, (Kantrowitz, 1985). In 1960 the number of married women between the ages of twenty-five and twenty-nine who were childless totalled thirteen percent, which averaged one out of ten women (Kantrowitz, 1985). In 1985 the number of married women in the same age group who chose not to have children was twenty-nine percent, which averaged one out of every four women (Kantrowitz, 1985). The only option for married women, in the past, was motherhood, however this has changed. Consequently, there was a total of nearly 3.3 million women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four who had been married and who had never had a child (Kantrowitz, 1985).

Women today face very different environmental determinants than did those women maturing one decade or two decades ago (Reading & Amatea, 1986). The normative role prescription for women, as well as for couples, has changed significantly in the past 20 years (Reading & Amatea, 1986). According to Nock (1987) there has been no other time in United States history in which marriage has been postponed to such a late age. Today's women have not only postponed marriage, but they have also completed "historically high levels of education" (Nock, 1987, p. 390).
The pronatalistic attitude in North American society has influenced social scientists in their approach to the study of marriage and family. Biased values and dominant norm preference have contributed to the selective inattention of social scientists toward the field of voluntary childlessness (Veevers, 1973). Childless couples were virtually overlooked until the early 1970's, according to Veevers (1973). However, this invisible minority has doubled in numbers in the past twenty years. No longer are there just two major social beliefs regarding fertility in the North American society.

Voluntary childless couples and postponing couples are influencing various dimensions within the role of family and the role of parenthood. An attitudinal shift in family and parental roles is helping to close the gap between childlessness and parenthood. The purpose of this review is to investigate a neglected minority which can no longer be ignored and to consider the various interactive aspects of childlessness. The author's intent is to examine the pre-existing social attitudes regarding fertility and to highlight the most recent findings on: psychosocial stigmas of childlessness, characteristics of couples without children, factors contributing to voluntary childlessness, meaning of choice, and attitudes and expectations.
Psychosocial Stigmas of Childlessness

Until the early 1970's the two major social beliefs which predominated North American society regarding fertility were based on two assumptions. Miall (1985) cited Veever's (1980) research in *Childless by Choice*, stating that "One assumption (italics added) is that all married couples should reproduce. The other assumption (italics added) is that all married couples should want to reproduce" (p. 384). The implied social attitude was that childlessness, whether involuntary or voluntary, was a violation of what was acceptable social behavior. Childlessness was viewed as statistically unusual and as deviant behavior from social norms. Consequently the individual who chose to be childless in a society which values fertility was stigmatized or discredited by the attributes of childlessness (Miall, 1985).

The refusal to participate in traditional bonding with society through childbearing has been viewed deviant by many researchers. Failure to conform to fertility norms has been considered an infringement on social standards and has been explained with assumptions regarding personal pathology, or in terms of failure to learn the social process (Campbell, 1985).

It was the psychological deviant model which helped to perpetuate the concept that women who made the choice not to
have children were "psychologically maladjusted, emotionally immature, immoral, selfish, lonely, unhappy, unfulfilled sexually inadequate, unhappily married, and prone to divorce" (Veevers, 1980, p. 3). Reading and Amatea (1986) stated that intentionally childless women have been growing in numbers, despite the unfavorable characteristics which have been used to describe them in the literature of research. Childless women have been viewed deviant because of their parenthood choice, and often interpretations which foster the deviant image have been attributed to these women (Reading & Amatea, 1986). Past research depicts childless women as having been victims of unfortunate childhood traumas. Other fostering images of the unfortunate, which Reading and Amatea found in their review of research, described childless women as having come from any of the following: from homes with high levels of conflict and/or from homes with low levels of warmth; as coming from homes with oppressive childrearing conditions, and/or poor parental role models, with little or no identification with the mother or the role of the mother.

Compounding the unfortunate victim concept and the psychological deviant model, women also have had to contend with what Friedan (1963) labelled as the "motherhood mystique." Veevers (1973) stated that the motherhood mystique incorporates the belief that to achieve true happiness and fulfillment, women must be
involved in bearing children and caring for them. It postulates that these functions are normal and natural and that motherhood is a necessary prerequisite for emotional maturity, psychological stability, and the demonstrating of femininity. (p. 183)

Veevers (1980) perhaps more accurately labelled the implicit adult roles as the "parenthood mystique."

The parenthood mystique asserts that having children is not only compatible with self actualization but is, indeed necessary for it. Advocates of the mystique no longer argue that parenthood per se is sufficient for fulfillment, but they do assert that it is a necessary factor. The social meanings of childlessness are essentially the obverse of the social meanings of parenthood, and childlessness is therefore defined almost exclusively in negative terms. (p. 4-5)

Campbell (1985) rejected assumptions which viewed childlessness as indicative of inadequacy or as pathological behavior. She believed the use of such assumptions to explain nonconformity to be simplistic. Campbell stated that not all of life can be established into preprogrammed or patterned responses and experiences. She further stated that women and men have the ability to side-step dominant norms when they choose and that becoming a parent is not a foregone
conclusion. In the same book, Campbell (1985) also challenged the "taken-for-granted routine activity that constitutes such social life" (p. 2).

According to Campbell, parenthood was more of an unconscious act, an accident perhaps, rather than an active decision. The recruitment drive for parenthood started at an early age. Campbell believed that the recruitment drive for parenthood was a subtle and continuous process. Consequently, young adults automatically assumed that they would have children. Leibenstein (1981) stated, that "the force of convention is so strong that private preferences do not really enter as a serious option on a conscious level" (p. 394). Thus the possibility of choosing childlessness did not occur because of the multi-levels of psychosocial stigmas.

Characteristics of Couples Without Children

Victor Callan (1984) developed a research study in 1982 involving fifty deliberately childless couples in Australia. The fifty childless couples were divided into two categories. The determining factor for categorizing the couples was based on when they made their decision not to have children. Those couples who decided prior to marriage not to have children were categorized as early-articulators. Those couples who decided to be childless through a series of successive postponements were categorized as postponers. Callan's study
was developed to compare background characteristics of early-articulating couples with those of postponing couples to determine factors which might have played a part in the choice of childlessness (Callan, 1984).

Veevers (1980) described how the two types of voluntary childless couples differed characteristically. Postponing couples were perceived to be more like parents because they were more likely to keep their attitude secret (Veevers, 1980). They were also less likely to publicly announce their choice (Veevers, 1980). Although postponers were attracted to the positive aspects of an adult-focused lifestyle, they also recognized the intrinsic values in sharing a life with children (Veevers, 1980). On the other hand, Veevers found that early-articulators were perceived to be more negative about a child-focused lifestyle and often held well-developed philosophies of antinatalism.

The two childless groups in Callan's study differed little on background characteristics. According to Callan, couples who chose not to have children were typically viewed as being well educated. They had less involvement with religion than those who chose to be parents and were more likely to be first born (Callan, 1984). Early-articulators cohabited before marriage more often than did postponing
couples, either because they saw less benefits in being married or because they were less conventional (Callan, 1984).

Among the voluntary childless couples there were interesting distinctions revealed with sex-role beliefs (Callan, 1984). Early-deciding women were more masculine-oriented than were postponing women (Callan, 1984). Also, early-deciding men were less feminine-oriented than were husbands in postponing relationships. Early-articulating husbands gave lower scores to their wives on femininity than did postponing husbands. A strong possible determiners for early-articulators in their decision not to have children may have been that they were less bound by traditional sex-roles, or that the benefits afforded by a childfree lifestyle may have influenced their development toward a less traditional sex-role belief (Callan, 1984).

Factors Contributing to Voluntary Childlessness

Ambivalence

Many contemporary aspects of modern times have contributed to ambivalence regarding fertility decisions. Faux (1984) believed that nearly all contemporary women viewed childbearing with deep ambivalence and that much of their reluctance has taken the form of postponement of a decision or of their simply allowing the issue to resolve on its own.
According to Faux (1984), during the 1980's, there were significant numbers of American women, as many as 25%, who were of childbearing age but who may never have children. Faux (1984) stated that women today recognize the difficulty of combining a successful career with motherhood, and that many women feel a need to choose between the two responsibilities. Those women who choose between motherhood and a career often feel they could not be fully committed to both responsibilities without someone being cheated.

Some other major factors which have contributed to women's hesitation about childbearing include a high divorce rate, a successful career, and realistic considerations as to whether these women believed they would receive help in the home with their children (Zuck Locker, 1985; Kantrowitz, 1986). Longer life expectancies, economic recessions, the women's liberation movement, and a strong need for equality, have all contributed to the trend of women establishing multiple roles (Zuck Locker, 1985). Technological advances in contraceptives and consciousness raising regarding the fact that women do have a choice in childbearing have contributed to the postponement of motherhood.

Multiple Roles

Many women have been able to exercise control over family size and childbearing patterns in contemporary society (Zuck
Locker, 1985). With longer life expectancies and less years invested in childbearing, women have become more active outside the home. According to Zuck Locker, many women have had several roles overlapping with the responsibilities of career and the responsibilities of rearing a family. Multiple roles within the family and within the career has created a lot of stress. Role strain, role conflict, and role overload were listed by Zuck Locker as the difficulties of multiple role negotiation.

Compounding voluntary childless women's ambivalence and multiple role negotiation, many adult women essentially grew up with different values than those values expressed today (Zuck Locker, 1985). Women who grew up in the 1950's were encouraged to leave the work force to have the "2.7 children." A career outside the home was not encouraged. According to Zuck Locker, the values internalized by women in the 1950's were family-focused and society had a renewed glorification of the homemaker's role.

It was during the 1960's that there was a rebirth of the feminist movement. There was a significant increase in the 60's of what Nook (1987) called nontraditional women. Nontraditional women perceived the mother and wife roles as limiting roles, which some eventually rejected in favor of the liberation of women. "The 'liberated' woman was encouraged
to reject motherhood and family as her primary destiny—to strive for success, freedom, and occupational achievement" (Nock, 1987, p. 389).

Consequently childless women's values conflicted with the social expectations toward motherhood (Zuck Locker, 1985). Childless couples observed their friends juggling the demands of work and family and became even more leery of a childrearing commitment (Kantrowitz, 1986). It was during the feminist movement, in the 1970's and early 1980's that the lowest contemporary birthrates were ushered in by women who were coming of age (Nock, 1987).

Meaning of Choice

Several theories have been developed about fertility decisions regarding childlessness and parenthood. Varied interpretations have been attributed to the social meaning behind parenthood and childless choices. Veevers has best portrayed the pronatalistic attitudes regarding meaning.

Traditional Perspectives

Veever's (1980) insight into traditional dynamics is provided in Table 1 on page 12. This table that she devised has clarified more completely the social stigmas attached to the meaning of childlessness. The social meanings of parenthood are listed in the left column and the social meanings of childlessness are shown in the right column. Traditional perspectives regarding parenthood are polarized.
Table 1. The Social Meaning of Parenthood and Childlessness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Parenthood</th>
<th>Childlessness</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Morality</td>
<td>Desire for parenthood is a religious obligation; being a parent is being moral.</td>
<td>Desire for childlessness is a flouting of religious authority; not being a parent is being immoral.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Desire for parenthood is a civic obligation; being a parent is being responsible.</td>
<td>Desire for childlessness is avoidance of responsibility; not being a parent is being irresponsible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>Desire for parenthood is the meaning of marriage; being a parent improves marital adjustment and prevents divorce.</td>
<td>Desire for childlessness destroys the meaning of marriage; not being a parent hinders marital adjustment and increases divorce proneness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>Desire for parenthood is acceptance of gender role; for a woman, being a mother is proof of femininity; for a man, being a father is proof of masculinity.</td>
<td>Desire for childlessness is rejection of gender role; for a woman, not being a mother indicates lack of femininity; for a man, not being a father indicates lack of masculinity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normalcy</td>
<td>Desire for parenthood is a sign of normal mental health; being a parent contributes to social maturity and stability of personality.</td>
<td>Desire for childlessness is a sign of abnormal mental health; not being a parent is associated with social immaturity and emotional maladjustment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Therefore, childlessness is "defined almost exclusively in negative terms" (Veevers, 1980, p.4).

Another traditional perspective regarding the meaning childlessness was presented by Ramu. Ramu (1984) even questioned whether childlessness had increased and he has regarded the estimates of childlessness as speculation.

However Ramu (1984) stated:
that if such beliefs are true, regarding an increase in childlessness (italics added), voluntary childlessness has potentially serious implications because it threatens an orderly replacement of population.... The economic and political survival of a society is contingent upon its ability to reproduce itself...and voluntary childlessness represents an acknowledgement of failure in this respect. (Ramu, 1984, p. 64)

Aldous (1987) expressed another traditional perspective regarding the meaning of childlessness. She expressed concern with reports of continued decreases in birthrates. Aldous attributed a basic characteristic--individualism--to the cause of the decrease in U.S. birthrates. She further challenged the effects of individualism and discussed how she viewed children as the real victims of individualism.

According to Aldous (1987), "individualism now rules most family members, whose decisions are based on calculations of self-interest and for whom obligations for the welfare of the family unit take second priority" (p. 422). Consequently, she thought that individualism contributed to the high divorce rate as well as to the increase in numbers of single-parent families. Aldous further noted that men and women spent less time at home with their children. Therefore, she
interpreted individualism as a threat to the family unit and childlessness as a threat to society.

Aldous resounded Ramu's perspective when she emphasized that some people believed the public's focus needed "instead to be on higher birthrates to ensure the person power to keep the society operative in the next century" (p. 424).

**Nontraditional Perspectives**

Nock's insight has best represented the nontraditional meaning of the childlessness perspective. In response to Aldous' and Ramu's concerns over the replacement of population, Nock (1987) projected an extreme. Regarding couples without children, even under the most extreme projections, three-fourths of all women would have at least one child. Consequently, Nock believed that most couples would choose to have at least one child and that the threat of childlessness was not substantial.

Nock believed that women remained childless or limited their childbearing largely because of the symbolism associated with childbearing as opposed to a childless lifestyle. He also surmised that for some women the significance of having a child represented not only the choice to have a child, but was also seen as a link to the individual's perceptual view of the world. For some women, the choice to have a child
represented a decision regarding how women fit into society (Nock, 1987).

In modern America, the two most obvious positions representing the core symbolic value of motherhood has been found "in the 'prolife' and 'prochoice' abortion debate.... They are embedded in two fundamentally different worldviews: one seeing 'natural' or innate male-female differences, the other viewing such differences as undesirable social constructions" (p. 188).

The distinction between these two worldviews was based on the meaning and value of motherhood (Luker, 1984). Persons who adopted the prolife perspective viewed motherhood as sacred or as a natural consequence in the divine plan. According to Luker, the traditional viewpoint was grounded in religious doctrine and on the belief that motherhood was women's most important role.

Nock believed that women with a traditional view often chose to forego educational opportunities or occupational pursuits because these achievements were seen as less rewarding. He also anticipated that women with traditional views were expected to marry early and to bear more children than nontraditional women (Nock, 1987).

Women with the nontraditional viewpoint, according to Luker, sees the traditional view as an undesirable social
construction. The nontraditional women were more likely to postpone marriage and to have pursued educational or occupational careers. According to Nock, the nontraditional view interpreted motherhood as an interference with independence and individual achievement.

Nock (1987) proposed that fertility decisions reflected a woman's view of the world and thus, how she perceived her role in society. Women who married later and postponed childbearing, or forewent childbearing, had lower fertility rates. "Nontraditional women were twice as likely as traditional women actually to have no children...." (Nock, 1987, p. 385).

Faux (1984) believed the meaning of increased childlessness represented an attitudinal shift. Marriage has been postponed to a later age. Women have completed "historically high levels of education" (Nock, 1987, p. 390). The number of women postponing childbearing has increased significantly since the 1970's. In fact, according to Faux (1984), "the possibility of remaining childless now occurs to most young women, whereas a generation ago, it was considered by relatively few" (p. 67).

Attitudes and Expectations

Reading and Amatea (1986) studied 80 married graduate student women between the ages of twenty-four and forty for
the purpose of assessing what factors affect the parenthood choice. Forty of the women were mothers and the other forty were women without children who were asked to be in a study. Four different questionnaires were used in the study—a demographic questionnaire, a Life Role Expectation Scale, a Child Study Inventory which measured the individual's perceptions of women's and men's motivations for parenthood, and a Life Interpersonal History Enquiry developed by Schultz (Reading & Amatea, 1986).

Subjects in the mothers group and the group of women without children filled out the four questionnaires and were compared as a group. The mothers group scored significantly higher in parental role salience (Reading & Amatea). They listed their reasons for bearing children as enjoying, loving, and nurturing, whereas the voluntary childless women scored lower in parental role salience. Women who chose not to have children perceived narcissistic motives for childbearing and held the view that people had children in order to gain personal credibility or importance. These two groups of women had different perspectives on the personal rewards in having children (Reading & Amatea).

Reading and Amatea examined women's attitudes towards their own early parent-child relationships. The researchers
were "struck by the distinctively different profile of attitudes this group of childless women had towards the paternal relationships" (Reading & Amatea, 1986, p. 259). Women in the group without children were significantly less dissatisfied with their paternal relationships than women in the mothers group. Contrary to popular belief, according to Reading and Amatea, women without children did not feel dissatisfaction or rejection in their relationships with their mothers. Instead, the mothers group of women expressed more dissatisfaction with both parental relationships (Reading & Amatea, 1986).

When Reading and Amatea studied the results regarding father/daughter relationships, both groups of women expressed dissatisfaction with their fathers' level of affection. Fathers' lack of affection was a greater source of dissatisfaction than fathers' inclusion or fathers' control. In addition, the mothers group did report dissatisfaction with both parents' expression of inclusion and control (Reading & Amatea).

On the basis of their findings, Reading and Amatea speculated that the parents of the childless group of women may have related to these women in terms of the women's performance and competencies rather than by expressing emotional closeness. The mothers group may have followed
both a parental role path as well as a career role path for self-recognition and expression (Reading & Amatea, 1986).

Conclusion

The family in the U.S. seems to have undertaken a new direction in contemporary times. Childlessness and postponement of childbearing has added multi-dimensions to the family. Delayed childbearing has created smaller families, as well as contributed to changes in women's roles. Women no longer define themselves only in childbearing and childrearing roles. They have become more active outside of the home and often their roles with home and work responsibilities overlap.

Contemporary parenting has taken on a new focus where children are no longer the core of family functioning. Some researchers, like Aldous, viewed these changes as a threat to society and the family. From Aldous' perspective, contemporary parenting has taken on elements of individualism which have shifted the parental focus.

Some researchers also believe an attitudinal shift has occurred. Many sociocultural changes, like technological advances in contraceptives, a successful career, economic recessions, the women's liberation movement, and a high divorce rate, have contributed to the postponement of parenthood. Couples have become more free in their life role options and,
consequently, childlessness or postponement has also become a potential option. The increase in numbers of those couples choosing not to have children would indicate that couples are choosing the most attractive roles.

The psychological deviant model of couples without children has become outdated and these couples no longer need to be stigmatized as avoiding culturally prescribed roles. In fact, some researchers believe that women without children may not be truly different from other mothers. As long as women without children are still of childbearing age, their decision to be childless can still be revoked. Women without children may be comprised of a "subset of the mothers group who have postponed childbearing" (Reading & Amatea, 1986, p. 259). Women without children may also be a "legitimate alternative to parenthood" (Campbell, 1985, p. 13).

In summary, this research paper was an attempt to acknowledge and legitimize voluntary childless couples and postponing couples by clarifying the motives and meanings behind the childless choice. The author's intent was to define the compounding stigmas within our society regarding childlessness couples and postponing couples and parents.

By focusing on increasing numbers of voluntary childless couples, one is able to make relative sense of the contemporary sociocultural changes taking place within society. The new
freedom incurred by reproductive choices affect not only voluntary childless couples and postponing couples, but parenting couples as well. Veevers states most succinctly that it would seem to be "in everyone's best interest to make having children the result of a deliberate choice, rather than of sexual happenstance" (Veevers, 1980, p. ix).
References


