



The Future of Human Reproduction: Working Paper #5

Voluntary childlessness and being Childfree

Stuart Basten, PhD

*St. John's College, Oxford &
Vienna Institute of Demography*

June 2009

The Future of Human Reproduction

Supported by St. John's College Research Centre, University of Oxford and the Vienna Institute of Demography, Austrian Academy of Science

Principal Co-Investigators: Professor David Coleman (Oxford) and Professor Wolfgang Lutz (Vienna)

I AM childless and I am angry. Angry that I was so foolish to take the word of my feminist mothers as gospel. Angry that I was daft enough to believe female fulfillment came with a leather briefcase.

- Virginia Hausegger, ABC (Australia) news anchor [Sunday Telegraph (Sydney, Australia) May 1, 2005

Our cats give me fulfillment and take care of the slight maternal instinct I have. People forget that having children is a choice- not a bullet point in life. I want to keep traveling way too much with my husband, and there's a lot to be said for being 'the cool aunt'!! (who gets to go home to a peaceful house at the end of the day and have a martini.)

- Post on Facebook 'Childfree' Group

Introduction

In 1973, Veevers correctly observed that 'In North American culture, two main mores regarding procreation specify that married couples should want children and should actually have them' (Veevers 1973). The childless, therefore, were viewed as a 'deviant group', but one which had been the subject of 'selective inattention'. This struck Veevers as odd, given the fact that those who chose not to reproduce were of 'intrinsic interest' in their capacity as a 'basis for contrast and comparison with the conventional conforming majority' (Veevers 1973). Since 1973, a large amount of research time has been devoted to examining the voluntarily childless - their characteristics, theoretical and political significance, prevalence, risk factors, mental and physical health and so on. Hand in hand with this, as we shall see, the *rates* of childlessness and the acceptance of this state of being by society has also changed markedly over the past forty years.

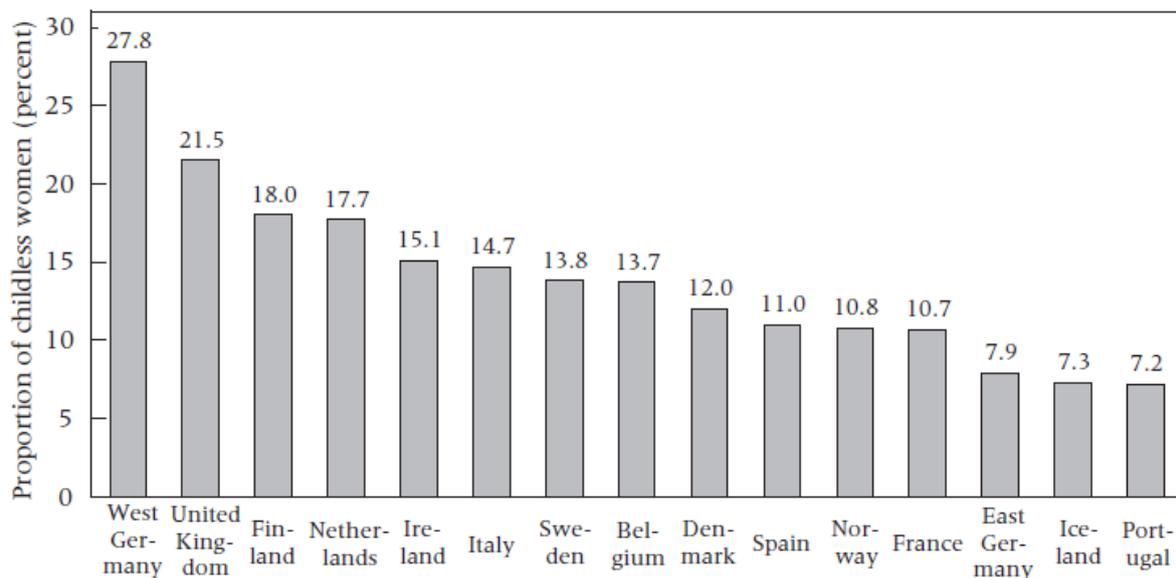
In this paper, we introduce some of the most salient of these studies in order to demonstrate the current 'state of knowledge'. A number of review articles have already been written on the subject quite recently, so the need for an exhaustive review is somewhat mitigated (e.g. (DeOllos and Kapinus 2002). This paper, however, aims to set voluntary childlessness within an overall framework of human reproduction rather than either an explicitly political or sociological state of being. After some considerations of rates of prevalence and social correlations, we move to consider some of the theoretical aspects of the subject before asking the crucial question - why be childless by choice? We then move to consider a two crucial aspects of the study which frequently occur in the literature - namely the effect of childlessness in old age, and the negative stereotyping of the childless by wider society. One method of the negating the latter is to situate oneself within a group who share your views

and situation, and thus create a normative environment. As such, we examine – in an as yet novel way – the role the internet and social networking for the childless. Finally, we conclude some thoughts concerning some possible future research strategies.

Demographic characteristics

As table 1 below demonstrates, the proportion of women remaining childless in these areas of the developed world roughly lies somewhere between 20 and 30%. Figure 1 compares levels of childlessness across Europe among the 1960 birth cohort, while figure 2 presents a picture of change over time. Studies from the USA, Japan and Australia tend to rate childlessness at around 15-25%, with a pattern of steady growth over time (Ambry 1992; Thomas 1995; Ameristat 2000; Merlo and Rowland 2000; Iwasawa 2004; Harding 2006; Hara 2008). Germany, however, appears to be surging towards 30% rates of childlessness, with the figure of 30% among graduates (Harding 2006). [For some earlier data, see (Bloom and Pebley 1982)

Figure 1: Proportion of childless women as of 2002 in the 1960 birth cohort in selected European countries, reproduced from (Tanturri and Mencarini 2008)



Source: EUROSTAT - Cronos

Figure 2a: Proportions childless in selected countries, female birth cohorts at ages 45-49 or older (reproduced from (Rowland 1998))

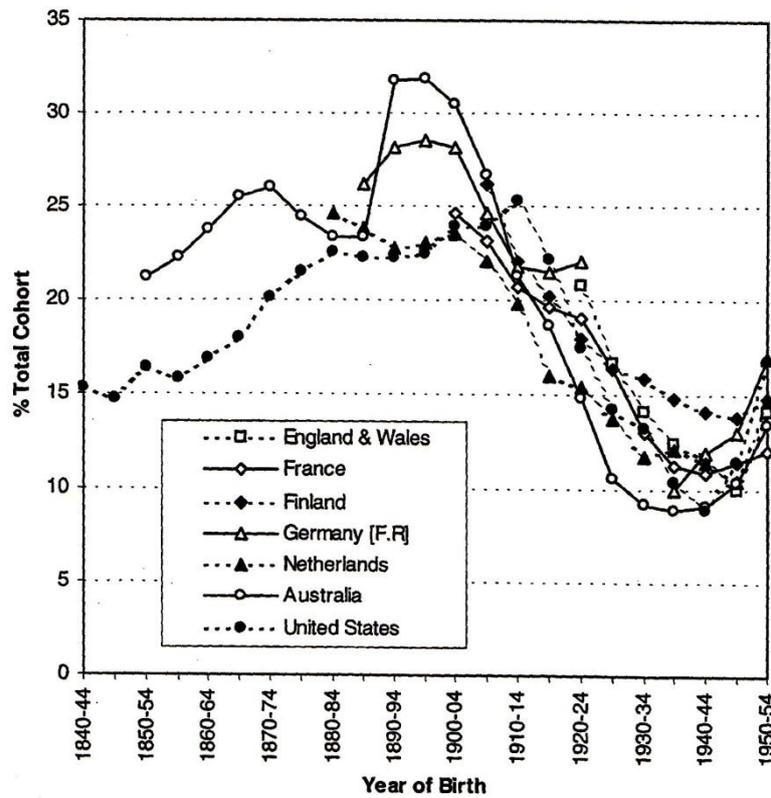
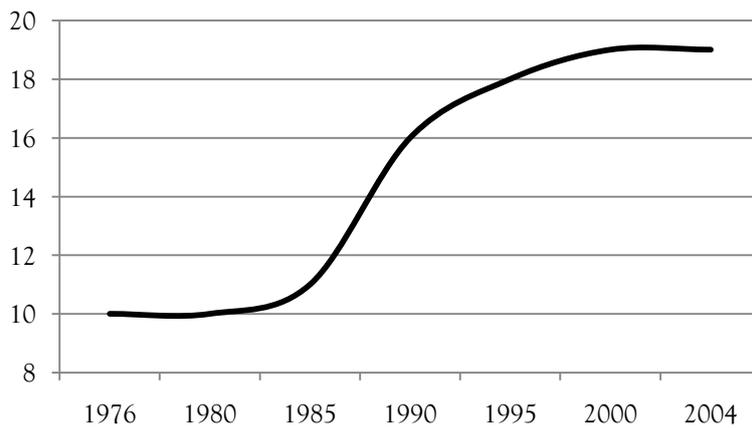


Figure 2b: Percentage of women age 40 to 44 with no children, USA. Adapted from (Biddlecom and Martin 2006)

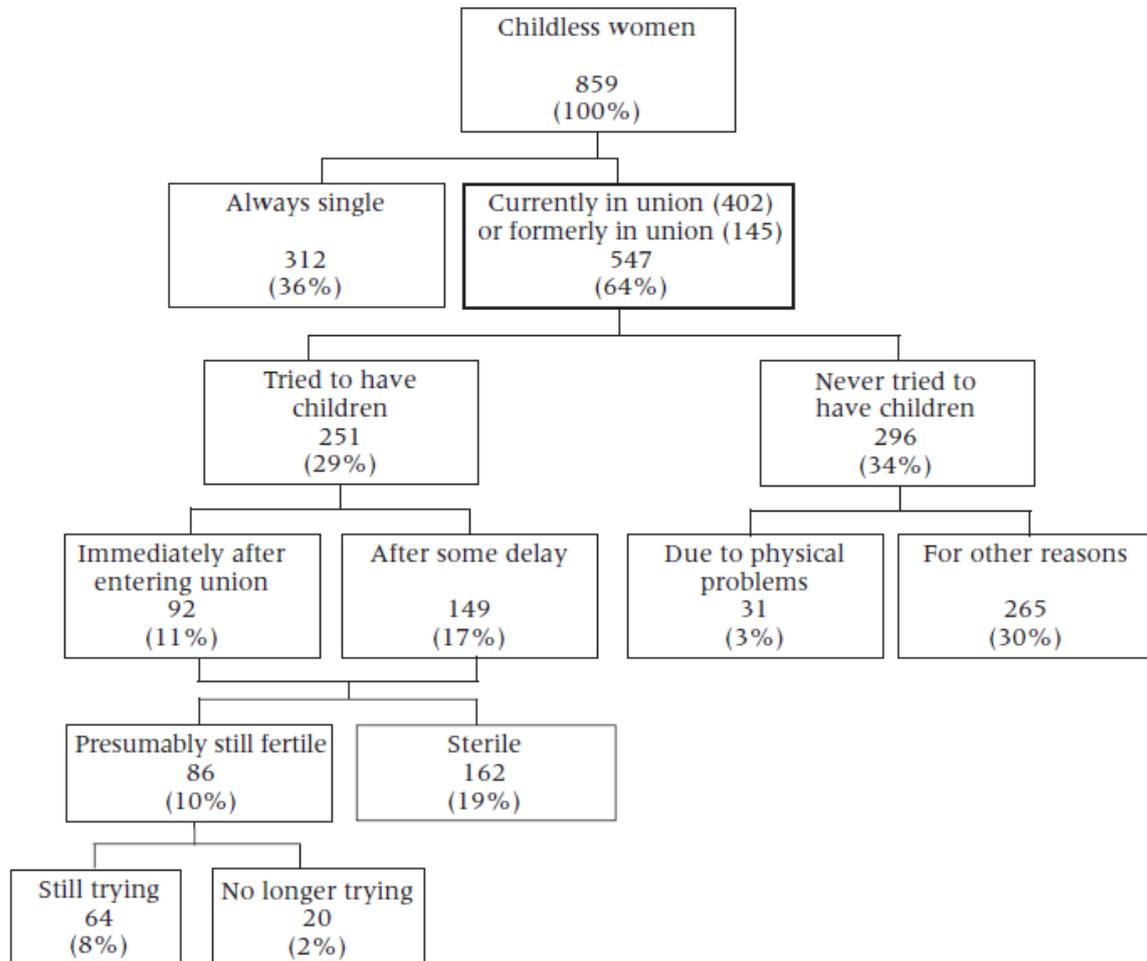


Source: Current Population Surveys, (Biddlecom and Martin 2006)

The above data relate to *total* childlessness. Involuntary childlessness However, as Chancey and Dumais point out, 'it is difficult to synthesize the existing literature on trend of voluntary childlessness since the Baby Boom because of widely differing operational definitions and data sources' (Chancey and Dumais 2009). For example, there will often be a mixture of voluntary

and involuntary factors at play – when postponement forces the hand for example. Figure 3 below, reproduced from Tanturri's study of childlessness in Italy demonstrates the extreme heterogeneity in the life courses which ultimately remain childless (Tanturri and Mencarini 2008). The various 'pathways' to voluntary childlessness, therefore, prevent any sweeping, overarching figure being presented. Indeed, these various pathways are important fields of study in determining multiple risk factors, as described below. Those which have should also be read with care. Furthermore, reliance on prospective surveys is also problematic. European polls of whether young women intend to remain childless have *consistently* report figures well below what actually prevails, revealing an apparent desire to conform to 'traditional' family norms' (Rowland 2007; Schwarz 2007). However, European extremes of *prospective* surveys could be said to be Belgium and Austria, where 14 per cent and ten per cent of men respectively do not want children, while in Slovenia and Latvia, this falls to below one per cent for both sexes (Hakim 2003).

Figure 3: Diagram showing distribution into different categories of interviewed childless women, survey of urban childlessness, Italy, 2002, (percent of the total), reproduced from (Tanturri and Mencarini 2008)

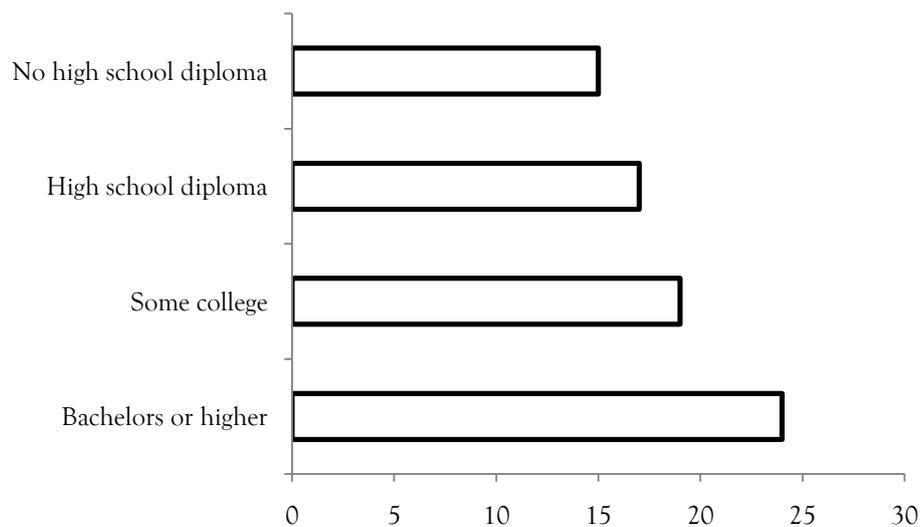


What estimates *have* been made do, however, show signs of increase. A meta-analysis of estimates of voluntary childlessness in the US, for example, returns ranges of between 1.6% to 4.5% in the 1970s; 1.8% to 6.4% in the 80s; and 7% during the period 1988 and 1994 (Mosher and Bachrach 1982; Veevers 1982; Krishnan 1993; Heaton, Jacobson et al. 1999; Chancey and Dumais 2009). However, it is perhaps more useful to simply suggest that as childlessness increases, *voluntary* childlessness – however defined – will also increase both in terms of *total* numbers and, as we suggest, *relatively*.

In terms of attempts to find predictors, or even risk factors for voluntary childlessness, there are mixed results. Ramu, studying couples in Winnipeg, found that birth order, size of family of orientation, mothers employment, or perceived parental happiness were *not* related to

childlessness (Ramu 1984). However, the broad consensus appears to be that the voluntarily childless are, in fact, characterised by less traditional and conventional in their gender roles (Bram 1984; Baber and Dreyer 1986; Callan 1986); lower levels of religious observance (Mosher, Johnson et al. 1986; Heaton, Jacobson et al. 1992; Mosher, Williams et al. 1992); urban residency (DeOllos and Kapinus 2002); greater financial stability and professional employment (Crispell 1993; Abma and Peterson 1995; Bachu 1999; Cwikel, Gramotnev et al. 2006) and, as figure 4 demonstrates below, higher levels of education (Abma, Chandra et al. 1997; Bachu 1999; Biddlecom and Martin 2006; Keizer, Dykstra et al. 2008; Kneale and Joshi 2008). Waren’s study of childlessness amongst American men, for example, found that white men were marginally more likely to remain childless than the mean – but perhaps this is a function of prosperity (Waren 2008).

Figure 4: Educational differences in childlessness among women 40-44 years old in the United States, 2004. Adapted from (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001; Biddlecom and Martin 2006)

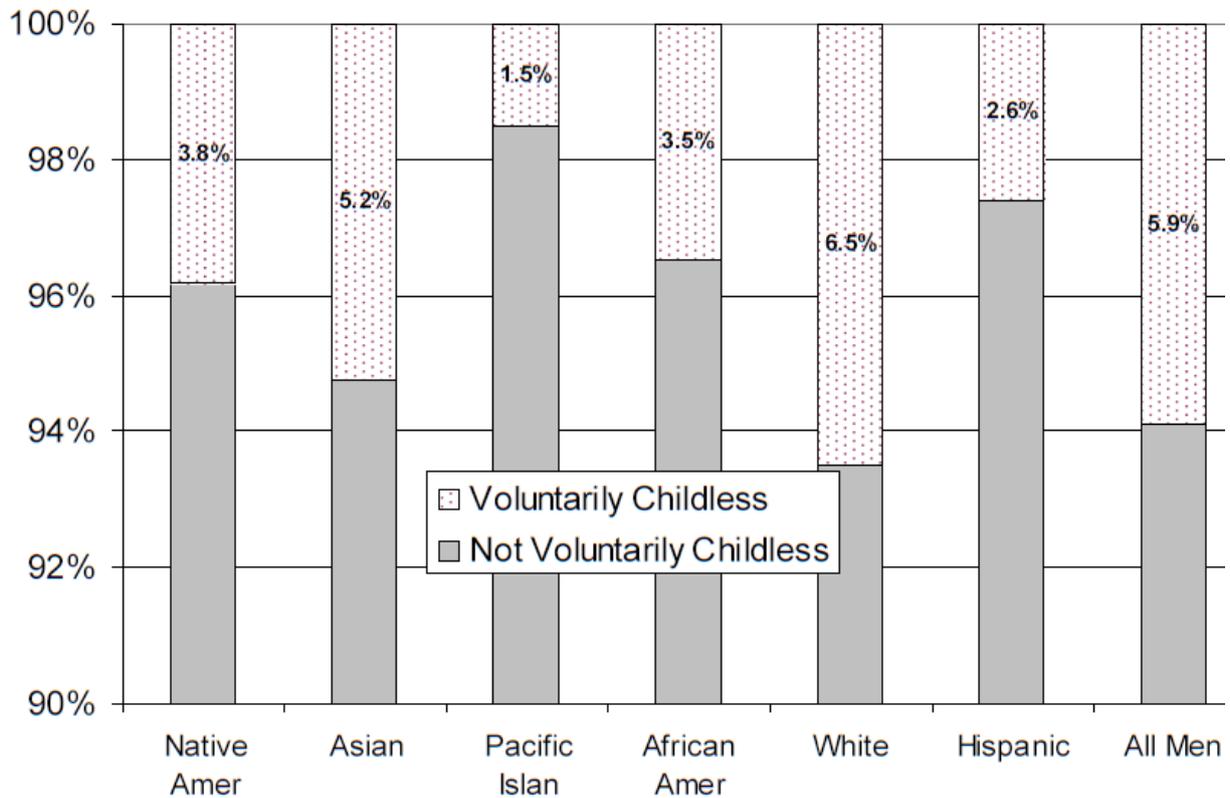


Source: Current population surveys, (Biddlecom and Martin 2006)

Ultimately, however, there are a wide number of risk factors which often interact with each within a context of intended and unintended outcomes. As such, so-called ‘pathways’ to childlessness’ often present a useful blend of qualitative and quantitative research methods to give a nuanced idea of how life cycles change and develop. Extremely valuable studies have

been performed for Italy (Gonzalez and Jurado-Guerrero 2006; Tanturri and Mencarini 2008); the Netherlands (Dykstra and Hagestad 2007; Dykstra and Wagner 2007), France (Gonzalez and Jurado-Guerrero 2006), Spain (Gonzalez and Jurado-Guerrero 2006) and Germany (Keizer, Dykstra et al. 2008).

Figure 5: Prevalence of voluntary childlessness men by race, ages 18-44, US National Survey of Family Growth 2002 (Waren 2008)



Theoretical Perspectives

A number of explicitly theoretical pieces have sought to elucidate a much deeper understanding of the interaction between femininity, motherhood, fertility, sex roles and feminism (Russo 1979; Houseknecht 1982; Houseknecht 1982; Morell 1993; Letherby 1994; Morell 2000; Wager 2000; Letherby 2002; Hird 2003; Park 2005; Sevon 2005). It would be inappropriate to attempt to distil these often highly nuanced, quasi-philosophical pieces into simple ‘soundbites’. As such, this section makes no claim to theoretical completeness – only to highlighting some of the key areas of interaction between what might be termed the philosophy and sociology of childlessness.

Firstly, it is important to differentiate between *childless* and *childfree*. The former implies that a couple or person is explicitly *without* something which is, perhaps, naturally expected (Paul 2001). Bereft, in other words (Rovi 1994; Letherby 2002). Say, for example, being *homeless* or *friendless*. The latter, however, is far more positive, and implies a kind of emancipation from something either by choice or by good fortune – *carefree* or *disease-free*. For Morell, this can be translated into the female physiology as comparing the status of womb as either a ‘vacant emptiness’ or being the space for ‘radical openness’ (Morell 2000).¹

Figure 6: Childfree Pin Badge



The second major theoretical perspective, leading from the first, involves the separation of ‘femininity’ from ‘motherhood’. Traditional perspectives, of course, see the two as

¹ Throughout this paper, I have tried to use the more neutral term of ‘voluntary childless’, while employing the more political term of Childfree only when explicitly referred to. This is not, however, any kind of judgement on the terminology – simply to avoid confusion.

inseparable (Balmer 1994), with Russo coining the term ‘motherhood mandate’ in 1976 to reflect the prevailing view (Russo 1976). Failing to reproduce means a female is ‘defective’ and has not developed properly’ (Hird 2003). While some evidence suggests this view is on the decline (Ryder 1990), the role of motherhood to female identity is still widely perceived as central (Ireland 1993; May 1995).

Finally, one point unites the two above. How do we define who is childless, or childfree? Is it a distinct strategy which is decided early on and seen through to beyond childbearing age? If so, is early sterilisation a possibility (Benn and Lupton 2005) ? Or what about the so-called ‘perpetual postponers’ (Kneale and Joshi 2008) who ‘find’ themselves to be voluntarily – and then, perhaps, involuntarily – childless as a consequence? What of those who Morrell refers to as the ‘wavering noes’ who despite moments of wanting – sometimes desperately – to bear children, other factors prevail in the decision making procedure (Morell 2000) ? As we shall see later on, there is also the important distinction in old age between *actual* childlessness and *de facto* childlessness (Schroder-Butterfill and Kreager 2005). As such, as Letherby observes, there is great heterogeneity – indeed ambiguity – between these different subgroups which must be considered if we wish to understand the different motivations to remaining childless (Letherby 2002). For Hird, this can be reflected in the Freudian concepts of ‘psychic bisexuality’ and ‘polymorphous perversity’ which allows for a complex and ambivalent notion of gender identity, of which reproduction plays but a component role (Hird 2003).

Why be childless by choice?

Gillespie identified two distinct, yet interrelated ‘motivational factors toward choosing to be childfree –the ‘attraction or pull of being childfree’ and the ‘rejection or the push away from motherhood’ (Gillespie 2003). The former is characterised by increased freedom, and better relationships with partners and others, while the push *from* motherhood involves a loss of identity and a rejection of the activities associated with motherhood.

One significant ‘pull’ towards being childless is surely that couples often appear to be happier *without* offspring. Even in 1957, it was said that the coming of a child represented a ‘crisis’ for the marriage, although with a pro-natalist overtone – like military service, childbearing was ‘a rough experience, but worth it’ (LeMasters 1957). In Winnipeg, Ramu

found that couples were, ultimately, happier without children (Ramu 1984), while Summers found that despite negative stereotyping by friends, her 'voluntarily childfree group displayed higher levels of dyadic cohesion and dyadic satisfaction' (Somers 1993). Among lesbian couples who either adopt or become parents via assisted reproduction, the quality of life often falls significantly (Slater 1995), while Houseknecht observed less stressful 'marital adjustment' among those without children (Houseknecht 1978; Houseknecht 1979). In terms of financial expenditure, Ed Wallander states that 'married couples without kids have more discretionary income than households with children' (Paul 2001). Indeed, compared to couples with offspring, it has been suggested that couples with children spend 60% more on entertainment, 79% more on food and 101% more on dining out (Burkett 2000; Paul 2001). Finally, childless couples are frequently able to interact with others in a parental pseudo-manner, be it with pets (see working paper #3) or other younger family members such as nieces and nephews (Pollet and Dunbar 2008; Hansen, Slagsvold et al. 2009). The following column by Ann Landers gives a satirical, yet astute representation of this 'pull' toward childlessness.

There is nothing sadder than a childless couple. It breaks my heart to see them relaxing around swimming pools in Florida, sitting all suntanned and miserable on the decks of their boats ~ trotting off to Europe like lonesome fools. It's an empty life. Nothing but money to spend, more time to enjoy and a whole lot less to worry about.

The poor childless couple are so wrapped up in themselves, you have to feel sorry for them. They don't fight over the child's discipline, don't blame each other for the child's most obnoxious characteristics, and they miss all the fun of doing without for the child's sake. They just go along, doing whatever they want, buying what they want and liking each other. It's a pretty pathetic picture.

Everyone should have children. No one should be allowed to escape the wonderful experience that accompanies each stage in the development of the young ~ the happy memories of sleepless nights, coughing spells, tantrums, diaper rash, debts, "dipso" baby sitters, saturated mattresses, emergencies and never-ending crises.

How dismal is the peaceful home without the constant childish problems that make a well-rounded life and an early breakdown; the tender, thoughtful discussions when the report card reveals the progeny to be one step below a moron; the end-of-the-day reunions with all the joyful happenings recited like well-placed blows to the temples.

Children are worth it. Every moment of anxiety, every sacrifice, every complete collapse pays off as a fine, sturdy adolescent is reached. The feeling of reward the first time you took the boy hunting ~ he didn't mean to shoot you, the lad was excited. Remember how he cried? How sorry he was? And how much better you felt after the blood transfusion? These are the times a man with a

growing son treasures ~ memories that are captured forever in the heart and the limp.

Think back to the night of romantic adventure when your budding daughter eloped with the village idiot. What childless couple ever shared in the stark realism of that drama? Aren't you a better man for having lived richly, fully, acquiring that tic in your left eye? Could a woman without children touch the strength and heroism of your wife as she tried to fling herself out of the bedroom window?

The childless couple live in a vacuum. They fill their lonely days with golf, vacation trips, dinner dates, civic affairs, tranquility, leisure and entertainment. There is a terrifying emptiness without children, but the childless couple are too comfortable to know it.

You just have to look at them to see what the years have done: He looks boyish, unlined and rested; she's slim, well-groomed and youthful. It isn't natural. If they had had kids, they'd look like the rest of us ~ worn out, wrinkled and exhausted.

Equally important, however, is the 'push' away from parenthood. As Park found in her 2005 study of US childfree women and men, many women saw parenting as conflicting with career and leisured identities, and claimed the lack of a 'maternal instinct' or disinterest in children as dominant influences. Men, meanwhile, were more explicit in rejecting reproduction because of its perceived sacrifices – notably financial (Park 2005). Mary Benin's study of 6,785 spouses in Toronto found that 'the first baby's arrival spurs a long drop in marital happiness that hits its nadir during a child's teen years' (quoted in (Elias 1997)); Wu and Musick found a similar story among US married couples (Wu and Musick 2008) while Weiss found heightened marital satisfaction among voluntarily childless couples (Weiss 1993). Others, however, have more explicitly controlled for income and age and have found quite contradictory results. While Wu and Hart found no major differences (Wu and Hart 2002), Meghan reported that bearing children had 'a clear negative mental health impact on unemployed unmarried women and unemployed married men' (Menaghan 1989).

The elderly childless

One traditional view of childlessness is that there are clear negative implications in old age, and, indeed, numerous studies have borne this out for both the developed and developing world (Rubinstein 1987). Childless couples appear to have less social support and emotional ties in old age and, importantly, are subject to less benevolent surveillance and crisis help (Koropecyk-Cox 1988; Giranda, Luk et al. 1999). Within this group, childless males appear to fare better, as they are found to be more likely to hold other roles (Koropecyk-Cox 1988;

Hansen, Slagsvold et al. 2009). Other studies have found that *single* childless people fare better than married couples, as they are more likely to be involved with family and friends (Johnson and Catalano 1981; Rubinstein 1987) *cf.* single men in (Wenger, Scott et al. 2000) A recent Australian survey, however, found that childless women aged 73-78 reported few differences in physical and emotional health than those with children. This may, however, be more to do with the 'striking characteristic' of this childless group, being their high levels of education fewer reported financial difficulties and higher rates of private health insurance (Cwikel, Gramotnev et al. 2006). Indeed, this has been echoed in other studies (Beckman and Houser 1982; McMullin and Marshall 1996) Conversely, however, a 2008 study found childless women in Midlife and Old Age reporting lower life satisfaction and self-esteem than both mothers with residential children and empty nest mothers (Hansen, Slagsvold et al. 2009).

A pioneering study of the experiences of the childless elderly in Java, meanwhile, forces us to reassess what the parameters of the terms involved actually mean. By splitting up *de facto* childlessness where, despite having children there is a lack of support, from *demographic* childlessness, and by examining the effect of patronage, charity and wider kin support, Schröder-Butterfill and Kreager raise important issues regarding the heterogeneity of the childless experiences in old age (Schröder-Butterfill and Kreager 2005). Stephens *et al.*, for example, found that the elderly childless often have more extensive social support systems than people with only one or two children owing to greater social involvement (Stephens, Blau et al. 1978). Clearly, the role of friends and neighbours (Cantor 1979) as well as broader kin needs to be examined further with regard to the childless elderly and, indeed the childless in general.

Views of society

One of the most dramatic changes to affect childfree couples is the changing views of society (Chancey and Dumais 2009). In a 1960 study of 96 American working class men and women, for example, there was an almost universal rejection of women - not couples - who wanted to remain childless, who were perceived as 'childish, neurotic, self-involved, or in poor health' (Rainwater and Weinstein 1960). Similarly, in 1965, a similar sample found that those with, or who wanted, only one child were 'self centred, lacking in responsibility, selfish, sick, cold and self-reliant,' while women who wanted *seven* children were characterised as 'patient, kind-hearted, sweet, likeable, happy-go-lucky, loves her husband' (Rainwater 1965). Similar results

have been returned in numerous studies from each decade since (Polit 1978; Lampman and Dowling-Guyer 1995; Mueller and Yoder 1997).

More recent research has, however, examined in more depth these views and the groups who hold them. The broad findings are that women – particularly white women – are more supportive of voluntary childlessness than men (Seccombe 1991; Koropecj-Cox and Pendell 2007). Similarly, religion has been found to play an important role. In the United States, Baptists and Jews tended towards more pro-natalist views (Koropecj-Cox and Pendell 2007) along with Catholics 30 (Polit 1978; Krishnan 1993) and, *ergo*, Latinos (Thomas 1995).

However, the most recent studies do suggest a possible move away from the away from the views (cf. (Chancey and Dumais 2009)). Compare, for example, two surveys of undergraduate students taken as close apart as 1997 (Mueller and Yoder 1997) and 2007 (Koropecj-Cox, Romano et al. 2007). The former survey, taken among undergraduates at the University of Wisconsin, found that childfree women were viewed least favourably, and that norms regarding both ideal family size (two children) and female employment still existed (Mueller and Yoder 1997). In 2007, meanwhile, a survey of University of Florida undergraduates found that although economic and employment considerations were still important, neither infertility or voluntary childlessness was rated negatively. Furthermore, the Floridian students regarded delayed parenthood as normative and, in contrast to most other previous studies, rated couples perceived as temporarily rather than permanently childless more positively (Koropecj-Cox, Romano et al. 2007). Although these surveys need to be reproduced in other areas and social groups, the possible implication that one of the last barriers to becoming childfree – negative stereotyping – might be dissipating is clearly important for the future of human reproduction. Indeed, this could be viewed in the context of Lutz's 'Low Fertility Trap,' where greater voluntary childlessness simply alters the ideational approach of couples (Lutz, Skirbekk et al. 2006).

Social Referencing

Another potentially crucial factor in declining negative images of childlessness is the increase in mutually supporting reference groups. When Houseknecht observed the importance of normative approval for childlessness within limited social contexts as a counterbalance to the negative stereotyping of others in the 1970s (Houseknecht 1977), and when Motherwell

advocated the use of psychotherapeutic techniques as recently as 1998 (Motherwell and Prudent 1998), the ability to communicate and create social ‘networks’ was entirely different to today. On Facebook alone, there are a wide variety of groups, each with hundreds of members, and a number of dedicated internet message boards and forums exist to provide support and shared experiences.

Facebook Groups	Childfree; Childfree, Pro-choice, and LOVING IT; Childless By Choice; Child-free by choice; Consciously childfree; Childfree Australia; Childfree Ireland; Childfree Christians; Childfree Dating; Childfree Atheists; Childfree Academia; Childfree Cape Town; Child-Free Zone Australia; Child-free smokers unite!; Child-Free and Happy; Il Gruppos “Childfree” Ufficiale in Italiano per chi non vuole figli!!!; No Kidding!; Striving for a DINK Household
Web-based groups and forums	Happily Childfree [http://www.happilychildfree.com/]; Google Childfree Discussion Forum [http://groups.google.com/group/alt.support.childfree/topics?pli=1]; MSN Childfree Discussion Forum [http://groups.msn.com/Childfree/]; Yahoo Groups - Childfree [http://uk.dir.groups.yahoo.com/dir/1600644092?st=10];

Table 1: Internet-based Childfree discussion groups

As well as internet-based discussion forums, however, a large number of social groups are increasingly coming into existence, facilitated by the power of the internet to identify and communicate with like-minded people. Not only do these groups serve as spaces where members’ decisions are regarded as normative and advice and social support can be given, but they also diminish the so-called ‘social capital’ argument made by some anthropologists which suggest that childbearers interact with more people as a result of the contacts and networks associated with their offspring. As figure 6 demonstrates, just one social networking site identifies a large number of such groups in North America, with many more apparently ‘in the pipeline. Interestingly, as can be seen in figure 10, there is a suggestion that the demand for such groups is strong in India.

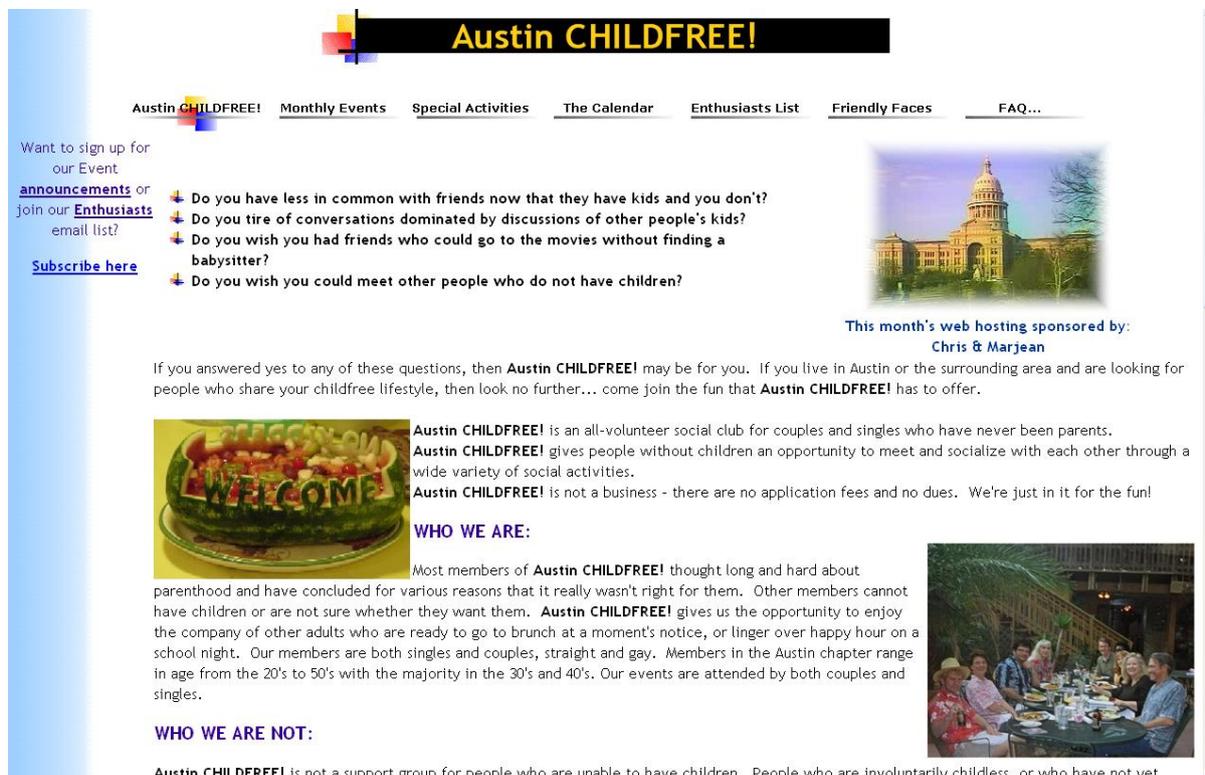
Figure 6: Location of US Childfree Groups listed on www.meetup.com. Red = existing groups; white = Interested in a new Childfree Meetup Group



Figure 7: Logos of two North American 'Chapters' of *No Kidding*



Figure 8: A 'typical' US Childfree social/support group



The screenshot shows the homepage of the Austin CHILDFREE! website. At the top, there is a navigation menu with links for Austin CHILDFREE!, Monthly Events, Special Activities, The Calendar, Enthusiasts List, Friendly Faces, and FAQ... Below the navigation, there is a sidebar on the left with a sign-up form for event announcements and an email list. The main content area features a list of four questions: 'Do you have less in common with friends now that they have kids and you don't?', 'Do you tire of conversations dominated by discussions of other people's kids?', 'Do you wish you had friends who could go to the movies without finding a babysitter?', and 'Do you wish you could meet other people who do not have children?'. To the right of these questions is a photograph of the Texas State Capitol building. Below the questions, there is a section titled 'This month's web hosting sponsored by: Chris & Marjean'. Further down, there is a paragraph explaining that Austin CHILDFREE! is an all-volunteer social club for couples and singles who have never been parents. Below this paragraph is a photograph of a 'WELCOME' sign made of fruit. To the right of the sign is a section titled 'WHO WE ARE:' followed by a paragraph describing the group's members and activities. Below this is another section titled 'WHO WE ARE NOT:' followed by a paragraph explaining that the group is not for people who are unable to have children. To the right of the 'WHO WE ARE NOT:' section is a photograph of a group of people sitting at a table in a restaurant or bar.

Austin CHILDFREE!

[Austin CHILDFREE!](#) [Monthly Events](#) [Special Activities](#) [The Calendar](#) [Enthusiasts List](#) [Friendly Faces](#) [FAQ...](#)

Want to sign up for our Event [announcements](#) or join our [Enthusiasts](#) email list? [Subscribe here](#)

- Do you have less in common with friends now that they have kids and you don't?
- Do you tire of conversations dominated by discussions of other people's kids?
- Do you wish you had friends who could go to the movies without finding a babysitter?
- Do you wish you could meet other people who do not have children?

This month's web hosting sponsored by: **Chris & Marjean**

If you answered yes to any of these questions, then **Austin CHILDFREE!** may be for you. If you live in Austin or the surrounding area and are looking for people who share your childfree lifestyle, then look no further... come join the fun that **Austin CHILDFREE!** has to offer.

Austin CHILDFREE! is an all-volunteer social club for couples and singles who have never been parents. **Austin CHILDFREE!** gives people without children an opportunity to meet and socialize with each other through a wide variety of social activities. **Austin CHILDFREE!** is not a business - there are no application fees and no dues. We're just in it for the fun!

WHO WE ARE:

Most members of **Austin CHILDFREE!** thought long and hard about parenthood and have concluded for various reasons that it really wasn't right for them. Other members cannot have children or are not sure whether they want them. **Austin CHILDFREE!** gives us the opportunity to enjoy the company of other adults who are ready to go to brunch at a moment's notice, or linger over happy hour on a school night. Our members are both singles and couples, straight and gay. Members in the Austin chapter range in age from the 20's to 50's with the majority in the 30's and 40's. Our events are attended by both couples and singles.

WHO WE ARE NOT:

Austin CHILDFREE! is not a support group for people who are unable to have children. People who are involuntarily childless, or who have not yet

Figure 9: The Rochester 'Childfree Meetup Group' on an expedition to the bowling alley



Figure 10: Prospective Childfree groups in India from www.meetup.com



As with all areas of the Childfree, however, both these ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ groups display a large degree of heterogeneity in their outlook. Ramu’s study of the voluntarily childless in Winnipeg, for example, found that they did not comprise anything remotely resembling a ‘hedonistic, spontaneous, proselytising, subculture’ (Ramu 1985). In contrast, a number of views expressed on internet forums are often aggressive and acutely self-assertive. For example, the mailing list for www.childree.net states:

WARNING: Anti-child or anti-parent sentiments are sometimes expressed on this list; if this offends you, please don't subscribe.

This heterogeneity in experience, and the extent to which these views are part of a proselytising exercise are worthy subjects for further research.

Conclusion

Research into this topic has moved on enormously since Veivers’ complaint of ‘selective ignorance’ in the 1970s (Veivers 1973) and, if the ‘Low Fertility Trap’ is indeed in action, the rapid changes in attitudes towards, and rates of, childlessness will continue to change rapidly (Lutz, Skirbekk et al. 2006). As such, further research into this field is crucial. Areas for study could include:

- A qualitative and quantitative analysis of the role of both the internet and social networking sites in creating both virtual and 'real-life' support networks and friendships among the voluntarily childless, and the effect on negating isolation and perceived loss of social capital. This could be particularly useful for the examination of childless 'Silver Surfers'.
- An extended regional quantitative analysis of childlessness from survey data (e.g. US States)
- Asking non-students of various age ranges and occupations their opinions on the voluntarily childfree in 2009
- Is deliberate sterilisation – either male or female – *before* the birth of a first child at all prevalent?
- How have marriage counsellors and psychotherapists come to terms with the shift in attitudes towards voluntary childlessness?
- A more thorough – although difficult – analysis of 'regret'
- More longitudinal studies to see whether 'perpetual postponers' actually become parents eventually (Seccombe 1991)

In this short paper, we have outlined some of the main characteristics of voluntary childlessness in the developed world. The overall picture is clearly one of extreme heterogeneity. Heterogeneity in definition, motive, culture, impact, risk factors, prevalence and so on. Despite this, the topic is clearly incredibly important both as a component element in the normalisation of small family sizes associated with the 'Low Fertility Trap' (Lutz, Skirbekk et al. 2006) and in its own right. Furthermore, the study of voluntary childlessness sheds much light on the issues raised in the previous working papers concerning whether or not there is a natural 'instinct' to parent and/or a 'need to nurture.'

Bibliography

- Abma, J. C., A. Chandra, et al. (1997). "Fertility, family planning, and women's health: new data from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth." Vital and health statistics. Series 23, Data from the National Survey of Family Growth(19): 1-114.
- Abma, J. C. and L. S. Peterson (1995). "Voluntary childlessness among U.S. women: Recent trends and determinants." Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America.
- Ambry, M. K. (1992). "Childless chances." American Demographics 14(4): 55.
- Ameristat (2000). "Fertility: Having children later or not at all." Population Reference Bureau and Social Science Data Analysis Network.

- Baber, K. M. and A. S. Dreyer (1986). "Gender-role orientations in older child-free and expectant couples." Sex roles 14(9-10): 501-512.
- Bachu, A. (1999). "Is childlessness among American women on the rise." Population Division Working Paper 37.
- Balmer, R. (1994). "American fundamentalism: The ideal of femininity." Fundamentalism and Gender: 47-62.
- Beckman, L. J. and B. B. Houser (1982). "The consequences of childlessness on the social-psychological well-being of older women." Journals of Gerontology 37(2): 243-250.
- Benn, P. and M. Lupton (2005). "Ethics in practice: Sterilisation of young, competent, and childless adults." British Medical Journal 330(7503): 1323-1325.
- Biddlecom, A. and S. Martin (2006). "Childless in America." Contexts 5(4): 54.
- Bloom, D. E. and A. R. Pebley (1982). "Voluntary childlessness: A review of the evidence and implications." Population Research and Policy Review 1(3): 203-224.
- Bram, S. (1984). "Voluntarily childless women: Traditional or nontraditional?" Sex roles 10(3-4): 195-206.
- Burkett, E. (2000). The Baby Boon: How Family-Friendly America Cheats the Childless. New York.
- Callan, V. J. (1986). "Single women, voluntary childlessness and perceptions about life and marriage." Journal of biosocial science 18(4): 479-487.
- Cantor, M. H. (1979). "Neighbors and friends. An overlooked resource in the informal support system." Research on Aging 1(4): 434-463.
- Chancey, L. and S. A. Dumais (2009). "Voluntary childlessness in marriage and family textbooks, 1950-2000." Journal of Family History 34(2): 206-223.
- Crispell, D. (1993). "Planning no family, now or ever." American Demographics(OCTOBER): 23-24.
- Cwikel, J., H. Gramotnev, et al. (2006). "Never-married childless women in Australia: Health and social circumstances in older age." Social Science and Medicine 62(8): 1991-2001.
- DeOllos, I. Y. and C. A. Kapinus (2002). "Aging childless individuals and couples: Suggestions for new directions in research." Sociological Inquiry 72(1): 72-80.
- Dykstra, P. A. and G. O. Hagestad (2007). "Childlessness and parenthood in two centuries: Different roads-different maps?" Journal of Family Issues 28(11): 1518-1532.
- Dykstra, P. A. and M. Wagner (2007). "Pathways to childlessness and late-life outcomes." Journal of Family Issues 28(11): 1487-1517.
- Elias, M. (1997). Couples in Pre-Kid, No-Kid Marriages Happiest. USA Today.
- Gillespie, R. (2003). "Childfree and feminine: Understanding the gender identity of voluntarily childless women." Gender and Society 17(1): 122-136.
- Giranda, M., J. E. Luk, et al. (1999). "Social Networks of Elders without Children." Journal of Gerontological Social Work 31(1-2): 63-84.
- Gonzalez, M. J. and T. Jurado-Guerrero (2006). "Remaining childless in affluent economies: a comparison of France, West Germany, Italy and Spain, 1994-2001." European Journal of Population/Revue europeenne de demographie 22(4): 317-352.
- Hakim, C. (2003). Childlessness in Europe: Research Report to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) on the project funded by research grant RES-000-23-0074. London, LSE/ESRC.
- Hansen, T., B. Slagsvold, et al. (2009). "Childlessness and Psychological Well-Being in Midlife and Old Age: An Examination of Parental Status Effects Across a Range of Outcomes." Social indicators research: 1-20.

- Hara, T. (2008). "Increasing Childlessness in Germany and Japan: Toward a Childless Society?" International Journal of Japanese Sociology 17(1): 42-62.
- Harding, L. (2006). Germany agonises over 30% childless women. The Guardian. London.
- Heaton, T. B., C. K. Jacobson, et al. (1992). "Religiosity of Married Couples and Childlessness." Review of Religious Research 33(3): 244-255.
- Heaton, T. B., C. K. Jacobson, et al. (1999). "Persistence and change in decisions to remain childless." Journal of marriage and family 61(2): 531-539.
- Hird, M. J. (2003). "Vacant wombs: Feminist challenges to psychoanalytic theories of childless women." Feminist Review(75): 5-19.
- Houseknecht, S. K. (1977). "Reference group support for voluntary childlessness: evidence for conformity." Journal of marriage and family 39(2): 285-292.
- Houseknecht, S. K. (1978). Childlessness and Marital Adjustment: The Need to Distinguish among the Various Types of Childlessness. Childlessness and Marital Adjustment: The Need to Distinguish among the Various Types of Childlessness.
- Houseknecht, S. K. (1979). "Childlessness and Marital Adjustment." Journal of Marriage and the Family 41(2): 259-265.
- Houseknecht, S. K. (1982). "Childlessness and the one-child family." Journal of Family Issues 3(4): 419-599.
- Houseknecht, S. K. (1982). "Voluntary childlessness. Toward a theoretical integration." Journal of Family Issues 3(4): 459-472.
- Ireland, M. S. (1993). Reconceiving women : separating motherhood from female identity. New York, Guilford Press.
- Iwasawa, M. (2004). "Partnership transition in contemporary Japan: Prevalence of childless non-cohabiting couples." The Japanese Journal of Population 2(1): 76-92.
- Johnson, C. L. and D. J. Catalano (1981). "Childless elderly and their family supports." Gerontologist 21(6): 610-618.
- Keizer, R., P. A. Dykstra, et al. (2008). "Pathways into childlessness: Evidence of gendered life course dynamics." Journal of biosocial science 40(6): 863-878.
- Kneale, D. and H. Joshi (2008). "Postponement and childlessness: Evidence from two British cohorts." Demographic Research 19: 1935-1964.
- Koropecjy-Cox, T. (1988). "Loneliness and depression in middle and old age: Are the childless more vulnerable?" Journals of Gerontology Series B 53 B: S303-S312.
- Koropecjy-Cox, T. and G. Pendell (2007). "The gender gap in attitudes about childlessness in the United States." Journal of marriage and family 69(4): 899-915.
- Koropecjy-Cox, T., V. Romano, et al. (2007). "Through the lenses of gender, race, and class: Students' perceptions of childless/childfree individuals and couples." Sex roles 56(7-8): 415-428.
- Krishnan, V. (1993). "Religious homogamy and voluntary childlessness in Canada." Sociological perspectives : SP : official publication of the Pacific Sociological Association 36(1): 83-93.
- Lampman, C. and S. Dowling-Guyer (1995). "Attitudes toward voluntary and involuntary childlessness." Basic and Applied Social Psychology 17(1-2): 213-222.
- LeMasters, E. E. (1957). "Parenthood as crisis." Marriage and Family Living 19(4): 352-355.
- Letherby, G. (1994). "Mother or not, mother or what? Problems of definition and identity." Women's studies international forum 17(5): 525.
- Letherby, G. (2002). "Childless and bereft?: Stereotypes and realities in relation to 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' childlessness and womanhood." Sociological Inquiry 72(1): 7-20.

- Lutz, W., V. Skirbekk, et al. (2006). "The low-fertility trap hypothesis: Forces that may lead to further postponement and fewer births in Europe." Vienna Yearbook of Population Research: 167-192.
- May, E. (1995). Barren in the Promised Land: Childless Americans and the Pursuit of Happiness. Cambridge, MA, Harvard UP.
- McMullin, J. A. and V. W. Marshall (1996). "Family, friends, stress, and well-being: Does childlessness make a difference?" Canadian Journal on Aging 15(3): 355-373.
- Menaghan, E. G. (1989). "Psychological Well-Being among Parents and Nonparents: The Importance of Normative Expectedness." Journal of Family Issues 10(4): 547-565.
- Merlo, R. and D. Rowland (2000). "The prevalence of childlessness in Australia." People and Place 8(2): 21-32.
- Morell, C. (1993). "Intentionally Childless Women: Another View of Women's Development." Affilia 8(3): 300-316.
- Morell, C. (2000). "Saying No: Women's Experiences with Reproductive Refusal." Feminism and Psychology 10(3): 313-322.
- Mosher, W. D. and C. A. Bachrach (1982). "Childlessness in the United States: estimates from the National Survey of Family Growth." Journal of Family Issues 3(4): 517-543.
- Mosher, W. D., D. P. Johnson, et al. (1986). "Religion and fertility in the United States: the importance of marriage patterns and Hispanic origin." Demography 23(3): 367-379.
- Mosher, W. D., L. B. Williams, et al. (1992). "Religion and fertility in the United States: new patterns." Demography 29(2): 199-214.
- Motherwell, L. and S. Prudent (1998). "Childlessness and Group Psychotherapy: Psychological and Sociological Perspectives." Group 22(3): 145-157.
- Mueller, K. A. and J. D. Yoder (1997). "Gendered norms for family size, employment, and occupation: Are there personal costs for violating them?" Sex roles 36(3-4): 207-220.
- Park, K. (2005). "Choosing childlessness: Weber's typology of action and motives of the voluntarily childless." Sociological Inquiry 75(3): 372-402.
- Paul, P. (2001). "Childless by choice." American Demographics 23: 45-50.
- Polit, D. F. (1978). "Stereotypes relating to family-size status." Journal of marriage and family 40(1): 105-114.
- Pollet, T. V. and R. I. M. Dunbar (2008). "Childlessness predicts helping of nieces and nephews in United States, 1910." Journal of biosocial science 40(5): 761-770.
- Rainwater, L. (1965). Family design. Marital sexuality, family size and contraception, pp. 349. Aldine Publishing Co.: Chicago.
- Rainwater, L. and K. K. Weinstein (1960). And the Poor Get Children. Chicago, Quadrangle Books.
- Ramu, G. N. (1984). "Family background and perceived marital happiness: a comparison of voluntary childless couples and parents." Canadian Journal of Sociology 9(1): 47-67.
- Ramu, G. N. (1985). "Voluntarily childless and parental couples: A comparison of their lifestyle characteristics." Lifestyles 7(3): 130-145.
- Rovi, S. L. D. (1994). "Taking 'NO' for an answer: Using negative reproductive intentions to study the childless/childfree." Population Research and Policy Review 13(4): 343-365.
- Rowland, D. (1998). "Cross-national trends in childlessness." ANU Working Papers in Demography(73).
- Rowland, D. T. (2007). "Historical trends in childlessness." Journal of Family Issues 28(10): 1311-1337.
- Rubinstein, R. L. (1987). "Childless elderly: Theoretical perspectives and practical concerns." Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology 2(1): 1-14.

- Russo, N. F. (1976). "The Motherhood Mandate." The Journal of Social Issues 32(3): 143-153.
- Russo, N. F. (1979). "Overview: Sex Roles, Fertility and the Motherhood Mandate." Psychology of Women Quarterly 4(1): 7-15.
- Ryder, N. B. (1990). "What is going to happen to American fertility?" Population & Development Review 16(3): 433-454.
- Schroder-Butterfill, E. and P. Kreager (2005). "Actual and de facto childlessness in old age: Evidence and implications from East Java, Indonesia." Population and development review 31(1): 19-55.
- Schröder-Butterfill, E. and P. Kreager (2005). "Actual and de facto Childlessness in Old Age: Evidence and Implications from East Java, Indonesia." Population & Development Review 31(1): 19-55.
- Schwarz, K. (2007). Childlessness in Germany: Past and present. Lifestyles, Contraception and Parenthood: Proceedings of A Workshop. H. Moors. The Hague: 241-250.
- Secombe, K. (1991). "Assessing the Costs and Benefits of Children: Gender Comparisons among Childfree Husbands and Wives." Journal of Marriage and the Family 53(1): 191-202.
- Sevon, E. (2005). "Timing motherhood: Experiencing and narrating the choice to become a mother." Feminism and Psychology 15(4): 461-482.
- Slater, S. (1995). The lesbian family life cycle. New York ; London, Free Press.
- Somers, M. D. (1993). "A Comparison of Voluntarily Childfree Adults and Parents." Journal of Marriage and the Family 55(3): 643-650.
- Stephens, R. C., Z. S. Blau, et al. (1978). "Aging, Social Support Systems, and Social Policy." Journal of Gerontological Social Work 1(1): 33-45.
- Tanturri, M. L. and L. Mencarini (2008). "Childless or childfree? Paths to voluntary childlessness in Italy." Population and development review 34(1): 51-77.
- Thomas, I. M. (1995). "Childless by choice." Hispanic 8(4 MAY): 50-53.
- Thornton, A. and L. Young-DeMarco (2001). "Four decades of trends in attitudes toward family issues in the United States: The 1960s through the 1990s." Journal of marriage and family 63(4): 1009-1037.
- Veevers, J. E. (1973). "Voluntarily Childless Wives: An Exploratory Study." Sociology and Social Research 57(3): 356-366.
- Veevers, J. E. (1973). "Voluntary Childlessness: A Neglected Area of Family Study." The Family Coordinator 22(2): 199-205.
- Veevers, J. E. (1982). "Differential childlessness by color: a further examination." Social biology 29(1-2): 180-186.
- Wager, M. (2000). "I. Childless by Choice? Ambivalence and the Female Identity." Feminism and Psychology 10(3): 389-395.
- Waren, W. (2008). Characteristics of voluntary childless men. Population Association of America Annual Meeting. New Orleans, LA.
- Weiss, R. (1993). "The kidless culture." Health 7(4): 40-43.
- Wenger, G. C., A. Scott, et al. (2000). "How important is parenthood? Childlessness and support in old age in England." Ageing and Society 20(2): 161-182.
- Wu, L. L. and K. Musick (2008). "Stability of marital and cohabiting unions following a first birth." Population Research and Policy Review 27(6): 713-727.
- Wu, Z. and R. Hart (2002). "The mental health of the childless elderly." Sociological Inquiry 72(1): 21-42.