
Theses, Dissertations, and Projects

2007

The experience of voluntarily childless women in contemporary New England

Sharon Marie Manning-Kelly
Smith College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses>



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Manning-Kelly, Sharon Marie, "The experience of voluntarily childless women in contemporary New England" (2007). Masters Thesis, Smith College, Northampton, MA.
<https://scholarworks.smith.edu/theses/1277>

This Masters Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations, and Projects by an authorized administrator of Smith ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@smith.edu.

Sharon Marie Manning-Kelly
The Experience of Voluntarily
Childless Women in Contemporary
New England

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of the experiences of women who have chosen to remain childless. Voluntarily childless women's experiences of regret and or satisfaction with the decision to not have children are considered against other variables and themes which emerged in review of the literature.

This qualitative exploratory study used flexible methods to interview twelve women, located through a process of snowball sampling, who identified themselves as being voluntarily childless. Participants who met criteria were older than the age of 35 and had made a conscious decision at some point in their lives to not have children. The collected narratives were examined using Cultural Relational Theory, a phenomenological based approach which examines the quality of women's relational experiences in states of connection and disconnection.

The findings of this research showed that women who have never wanted to have children and who are supported around their decision to not have children fare better in terms of satisfaction with their decision than women who became childless through a series of postponements. Women experienced more regret when confronted with either personal challenges to their decision from others, or when faced with dominant cultural messages which assume motherhood as a developmental norm and do not value other nurturing or work related contributions as valid forms of normative development in lieu of motherhood.

Sharon Marie Manning-Kelly
The Experience of Voluntarily
Childless Women in Contemporary
New England

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of the experiences of women who have chosen to remain childless. Voluntarily childless women's experiences of regret and or satisfaction with the decision to not have children are considered against other variables and themes which emerged in review of the literature.

This qualitative exploratory study used flexible methods to interview twelve women, located through a process of snowball sampling, who identified themselves as being voluntarily childless. Participants who met criteria were older than the age of 35 and had made a conscious decision at some point in their lives to not have children. The collected narratives were examined using Cultural Relational Theory, a phenomenological based approach which examines the quality of women's relational experiences in states of connection and disconnection.

The findings of this research showed that women who have never wanted to have children and who are supported around their decision to not have children fare better in terms of satisfaction with their decision than women who became childless through a series of postponements. Women experienced more regret when confronted with either personal challenges to their decision from others, or when faced with dominant cultural messages which assume motherhood as a developmental norm and do not value other nurturing or work related contributions as valid forms of normative development in lieu of motherhood.

THE EXPERIENCE OF VOLUNTARILY CHILDLESS WOMEN IN
CONTEMPORARY NEW ENGLAND

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

Sharon Marie Manning-Kelly

Smith College School for Social Work
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

2007

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis could not have been accomplished without the assistance of many people whose contributions are gratefully acknowledged.

I wish to thank Dr. Jean LaTerz who provided my first introduction to the research process in such a way so as to make it very nearly fun; Dr. Mary Beth Averill, for her patience, support and careful editing without which this manuscript would be unintelligible; and Liane Hartman, for her technical assistance. I offer a thousand thanks and more to my husband Richard, who supported me on so many levels throughout this entire process. My deepest gratitude to my mother and father who supported and believed in me. Finally, my profound appreciation for the women who shared their experiences with me, this work is theirs too.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | ii |
| TABLE OF CONTENTS..... | iii |
| CHAPTER | |
| I. INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| II. LITERATURE REVIEW | 3 |
| III. METHODOLOGY | 30 |
| IV. FINDINGS..... | 34 |
| V. DISCUSSION..... | 59 |
| REFERENCES | 67 |
| APPENDIXES | |
| Appendix A: Informed Consent..... | 69 |
| Appendix B: HSR Application..... | 71 |
| Appendix C: HSR Acceptance Letter..... | 76 |
| Appendix D: Recruitment and Screening Letter | 77 |
| Appendix E: Interview Guide | 80 |

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This exploratory study examines the personal experiences of American women who have chosen to remain childless. Research indicates that of the population of women who consider themselves to be voluntarily childless, some were always certain of their intention to never become mothers, while others came to the decision through a series of postponements (Callan, 1983). The reasons for these postponements include social, cultural and financial components (Houseknecht, 1982). Many women who postpone childbearing may eventually come to consider themselves as being voluntarily childless as their desire to have children diminishes over a period of time. Other women will become childless as a result of having delayed the decision past the point of their own reproductive viability, and at this point will consider themselves as voluntarily childless as a result of a series of voluntary decisions over time which eventually resulted in their infertility (Callan, 1983).

Despite a broadening of attitudes regarding women's roles in contemporary American society the choice to not bear a child leaves many women who have chosen to forgo motherhood in a socio-cultural limbo (Lapman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995; Letherby, 2002; Morell, 2000). Despite a cultural assumption that considers motherhood to be a normative developmental stage in a woman's life, increasingly women are choosing not to become mothers. In 1982, 4.3% of the population identified themselves as voluntarily

childless women, in 1995 that number rose to 6.6% and this trend is projected to continue (Paul, 2001).

This qualitative exploratory study used flexible methods to interview a population of women over the age of 35 who identify themselves as being voluntarily childless. The first chapter provides an introduction to the purpose of the study. The second chapter provides an introduction to some of the earlier studies done on voluntary childlessness. In the third chapter the methodology is presented. Chapter four discusses the findings of the interview process. The fifth chapter is a brief discussion of analysis of what was learned in the interview process, the theoretical lens and the earlier findings presented in the literature review. in the in this study may benefit all those who are interested in women's health and reproductive choices and are not limited only to those in the allied health professions. This research may support women who are voluntarily childless or who are considering remaining childless. The decision process involved in voluntary childlessness is one that will present, should the national trend continue, in increasing numbers in the therapeutic setting. This investigation will provide perspectives from participating voluntarily childless women to clinicians helping similar clients puzzle through their own decision making process. The decision to rely on personal narrative dovetails nicely with the needs of the social work and human services research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the late 1970s and early 1980s much of the research done on voluntarily childless couples focused on what was then considered the dual careered couple phenomenon (Callan, 1983; Houseknecht, 1982). With this research came predictions that professional women would cease to have children. However, this prediction did not happen (Callan, 1983; Houseknecht, 1982). This prompted some research which endeavored to identify other variables that influenced the decision making process of voluntarily childless couples. As a result of this second wave of research, several factors emerged which spawned further study that will be the focus of the literature review.

This literature review presents previous research regarding the voluntarily childless and is composed of five sections. Basic terminology used to define the voluntarily childless population will be presented (Callan, 1983; Ireland, 1993; Morrell, 1994). This will be followed by five areas of interest in the research on this population. The first section examines the decision making process described by women as they evaluated their choices with regards to having children (Callan, 1983; Letherby, 2002; Morrel, 2000). The second section builds on this by identifying correlates to voluntary childlessness such as education and social supports (Gillespie, 2001; Houseknecht, 1982; Ireland, 1993; Morrell, 2000). In the third section, previous research done on social perception of the voluntarily childless (Cain, 2001; Gillespie, 2001; Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995; Morell, 2000) as well as how the voluntarily childless expect that

others perceive them is examined (Callan, 1985; Gillespie, 2001; Somers, 1993). The fourth section reviews earlier relationship satisfaction studies of the voluntarily childless couple (Jeffries & Konnert, 2002; Letherby, 2002; Park, 2005; Polonko, Scanzoni & Teachman, 1982). Section five addresses environmental factors, altruism, and social issues which influence the decision of whether or not to have children. Concerns about over-population and dwindling resources fueled by environmental degradation can fuel altruistic reasons to not bear children. As well, groups that tend to exist on the margin of Euro-American culture may choose not to have children in order to achieve more upward social mobility (Boyd, 1998; Gillespie, 2001; Park, 2005; Thomas, 1995). This investigation uses Jean Baker Miller's Cultural Relational Theory (CRT) to understand the ways that voluntarily childless women respond to and frame their experiences around childlessness and how they experience their social locations and connections in contemporary American culture where childbearing is considered a normative phase. The CRT lens considers points of disconnection where the choice to lead an authentic life rather than an expected life, may create stress in social connections and how women respond and adapt to those points of distress (Jordan, Walker & Hartling, 2004; Walker & Rosen, 2004).

Definition of Key Terms

Past studies on couples who have chosen to not have children have used different terms to define their sample. The descriptors used throughout this paper are voluntarily childless or voluntary childlessness. These terms hold the implication that the woman is fecund but chooses not to bear children versus the state of being involuntarily childless

due to some biological impediment to fecundity. I have also chosen to use the descriptive terms *early decider* or *postponer* to indicate how the woman arrived at her decision.

Voluntarily childlessness occurs on a spectrum. Some women know from very early on that they have no desire or intention to bear children. This group has been labeled as *early deciders* (Callan, 1983). The second group of voluntarily childless women did not necessarily start out their marriages with the intention of not having children, but deferred the decision. This group is referred to as *postponers*, women who delayed the decision past the age of fecundity or who, through the process of postponement, became aware that they would rather not have children (Callan, 1983). Ireland (1993) chose to use the term *transitional woman* in her research to describe women who are in the process of becoming infertile and childless through postponement. Other terms that appear in the literature to describe women who remain voluntarily childless are *not-mother*, *other than mother* (Morell, 1994). Ireland (1993) uses the term *transformative woman* to describe the woman who re-defines normative female roles by choosing to remain childless.

The Decision Making Process: Postponers and Early Deciders

Callan (1983) compared two distinct groups of Australian couples who had chosen to remain childless. Voluntarily childless participants were solicited through articles that were published in newspapers and broadcast during a study related interview in 1980. One hundred and sixty voluntarily childless persons contacted Callan as a result of the story appearing in the media and of these 140 met the criteria for the study. The criteria were as follows: (a) there was no biological or medical reason that the women in the study could not bear a child, (b) participants were married and childless by choice, (c)

have never borne children or parented through any other means. Participants were given a questionnaire and categorized into separate groups in terms of the timing of their decision to remain childless. The first group was identified as early deciders, those who knew implicitly before marriage that they did not want to have children. The second group, were identified as postponers who became childless as a result of decisions that delayed pregnancy until a later, more suitable time and eventually resulted in the decision to remain childless. Using a fixed method examination through factorial discrimination analysis, Callan found differences between the voluntarily childless couples and those who became parents. He identified and explored these areas of difference into four separate areas of investigation. The first was evident in certain family background characteristics such as families of origin with more tolerant and open views surrounding life style choices as compared to those who were more traditional in their orientation and expectations of their children. Voluntarily childless couples tended to come from the more liberal family of origin background.

A second point of difference was in the attitudes that voluntarily childless couples held about their childhood family experience as well as concerns about over population. The voluntarily childless couples in Callan's (1983) study displayed a difference between early deciders who typically came from smaller families, and postponers who typically hailed from larger families. Both groups expressed concern about overpopulation which Callan linked to the size of family of origin. Why he chose to do this is not clear as there is no demonstrated correlation in his study between the size of family of origin and regard for population control.

Third, Callan (1983) examined attitudes regarding the role of the sexes using the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) to compare differences between early deciders and postponers. There were no significant differences in attitudes towards male and female roles in either group.

Finally, Callan (1983) examined the influence of others on the couples three years after marriage. The attitudes of close family and others in the social network had a strong influence on couples who felt ambivalent about becoming parents. Pressure to provide grandchildren or to parent along with peers often resulted in an ambivalent couple deciding to have a child. Callan considered those who made a clear decision to remain voluntarily childless in the face of social pressure to have independent or non-conformist personalities.

While Callan's (1983) research is pivotal in identifying variables that inform the decision to remain childless, his studies involved questioning a married, Australian, heterosexual population and may not account for variables in contemporary American culture which lead to the decision to remain childless.

In 1986 Callan continued to study his earlier findings and wrote about perceptions that voluntarily childless couples have regarding the child-centered lifestyle. This study involved a questionnaire survey of voluntarily childless Australian women. The participants were reached through voluntary sterilization clinics, university classes, radio programs and news articles. The data for Callan's study were collected from 36 voluntarily childless married women, 42 single women who chose to remain childless, 18 women who had chosen to have one child only, 18 women who were single but who wanted to have one child, 36 women who had two children, and 42 single women who

wanted to have 2 children. All respondents were given the same questionnaire which was concerned with findings in 6 dimensions-- (a) Restrictions and/or disruptions on resources such as time and money, (b) emotional satisfaction and sense of fulfillment, (c) responsibility costs; child related worries and concerns about one's own parenting skills, (d) effects of the choice on the marital relationship; loss or increase of understanding from partner as a result of having a child, (e) marital costs; feelings of being less attractive to one's partner as a result of becoming parents and (f) lifestyle costs; the ability to follow personal and career interests post childbearing.

Callan (1986) used a fixed method factor analysis of the results. As there were 7 groups of respondents, multivariate discriminate analyses were run for each set. By comparing the perspectives of all of these women, Callan found that there was a clear distinction between the perceived costs and benefits of childrearing between voluntarily childless women, married or single, and all other participants. Callan's research with voluntarily childless couples associated greater costs and losses with having children than did respondents in the one or multi child groups (Callan, 1986).

Letherby (2002) reviewed other empirical studies, including her own previous doctoral research completed in 1997, and considered the way in which women redefine themselves in relation to social norms. Letherby examined the reproductive decision making process throughout a women's life, across the spectrum of those who are firmly opposed to bearing children to those who are ambivalent about the prospect of motherhood. Letherby found that women who have not borne children were very often involved in an ongoing constant evaluation of themselves, their relationships and of the socio-political and environmental influences of the world in which they live. Her findings

suggested that the decision to not bear a child is actually the result of a dynamic and ongoing process of postponements that in some cases becomes a choice only in retrospect. As well, Letherby's observations of the fulfilling relationships of biologically childless women with children in their own families of origin and with children in their social environment challenged popular notions of childlessness as being without meaningful relationships with children (Letherby, 2002). Letherby's analysis has been helpful in evaluating social trends in both voluntary and involuntary childlessness. It also considered other ways in which women act as mothers and if a woman who has chosen not to become a mother is truly childless. Letherby's study challenged the assumption that such women are necessarily bereft.

Correlates to Voluntary Childlessness

Houseknecht (1982) discussed earlier findings that examined the relationship between education, childlessness, increases in women's educational levels, the growing female presence in the professional work place and low birthrates that led many social theorists to believe that more women would forgo motherhood as they gained greater equality. However, contrary to these projections, the rate of childlessness leveled in 1975. Houseknecht searched for other correlates to voluntary childlessness beyond education and career orientation. She examined how factors in the social structure combine with culture and influence decision making with regards to women's fertility choices. Her research analyzed 47 studies on voluntary childlessness in an effort to develop a theoretical formulation which could account for discrepancies between the findings of earlier studies. Houseknecht's analysis suggested that across time and culture, there are many micro and macro level factors which fluctuate and which have varying levels of

influence on the decision to bear or not to bear children by choice. Here, a micro-level influence refers to the characteristics of a woman who chooses voluntary childlessness, her life experiences and her expectations for her future. Macro-level influences are those which combine to create the social matrix in which an individual lives such as social expectations of womanly behavior, economic, environmental, and political conditions.

On the macro-level, Houseknecht (1982) found evidence of “normative reactions to normlessness” (p. 466) which is a realignment response also, called *sacralization*, to societal norms. These tend to occur once a large shift away from traditional social norms has taken place. Specifically, women who chose to be childless during the early phases of the women’s movement lost societal support for their choices as greater numbers of women stepped out of traditional motherhood roles and into colleges, universities and the professional workplace. The result of this shift away from traditional womanly behavior was a conservative back-lash:

Concomitant with the expansion of alternative lifestyles was an increased emphasis on individualism and a decline in familialism; in other words, the growth of the individual was considered more important than family stability. The woman’s movement, too, played a role in this shift, because it appealed to women as individualists, stressing their particular desires, needs, and achievements.

That these two developments, the expansion of alternative lifestyles and the emphasis on individualism, have resulted in a growing concern for the traditional nuclear family has been reflected very clearly in the popular media. Innumerable newspaper and magazine articles and radio and television shows have focused on “the family in trouble”; the government, too, reacted to the growing concern by sponsoring the 1980 White House Conference on Families. This burgeoning apprehension is directly related, of course, to the fact that one of the most predominant values in American culture is the primacy of family life; a reverence for family life is part of the cultural ethos. (Houseknecht, 1982, p. 467)

The resulting societal response caused a drop in the rate of voluntary childlessness even though women continued to make strides in education and income. This meant that voluntary childlessness was not strictly correlated with women's furthering their position in life. Houseknecht (1982) looked for other correlates to voluntary childlessness in her study of typical features of childless couples. Her research was based on 47 previous studies done on voluntary childlessness. Houseknecht examined the earlier studies for common indicators in the lives of voluntarily childless couples which included the presence of social support for the decision, level of education, level of commitment to career, and a strong sense of independence and personal agency. As well she found consistent research that showed voluntarily childless individuals often come from a family background that is generally accepting of non-traditional behaviors. Houseknecht concluded that many couples consider remaining childless but, if the preceding indicators are lacking to any significant degree, couples are more likely to have children. Houseknecht's research is helpful in organizing research done previous to 1982, but it included no novel discoveries of her own.

Ireland's (1993) book on voluntary childlessness cited earlier research to present influencing factors in the decision making process and in addition, investigated the family backgrounds of voluntarily childless women for further correlations. Ireland's interviews with 100 voluntarily childless women between 38 and 50 years of age continued to support a strong correlation between common the characteristics, such as such as education levels and career commitment, evident in other studies (Houseknecht, 1982; Somers, 1993). Ireland's participants were divided into three separate groups. The first were the early deciders, the second were the postponers, and the third group could

not have children due to infertility. Her questioning followed a different course from the studies in this literature review and was not limited to married heterosexual women. As a result, Ireland found that each group had a different hierarchy of reasons.

Early deciders most often reported that they did not have children in order to pursue a career and/or that they simply never wanted to have children. The postponing group most often reported that they did not become mothers due to external constraints such as not being with the right person or being with someone who did not want children, and financial concerns (Ireland, 1993).

The third group, those who had experienced infertility, cited genetic infertility, disease making conception impossible, or having some other condition that would make pregnancy dangerous. Based on the responses from each of these groups, Ireland (1993) concluded that the three strongest commonalities among women who chose to remain voluntarily childless are the desire to have as much freedom as possible to pursue personal interests and goals, satisfaction with and the desire to maintain a close relationship with one's partner, and career concerns.

Ireland's (1993) book on the topic of voluntary childlessness revisited much of the research already cited here. Ireland searched for commonalities among voluntarily childless women and, in particular, she looked at the independent characteristics of the women who had decided to forgo motherhood. Unlike Callan (1983), who used the Bem Sex Role Inventory as a possible indicator of voluntary childlessness and found no distinct correlation between atypical gender behaviors and the choice to remain childfree, the women in Ireland's research were found to share a non-traditional expression of typical female gender characteristics based on her own set of criterion. The difference

between Callan's findings and Ireland's may reflect difference in culture. Callan's study was done using Australian respondents while Ireland's study was done with American respondents. Along with not presenting themselves in traditional female roles or appearance, Ireland reported that the members of the interview sample were not entirely identified with their mothers. As well, her voluntarily childless sample of women went through an extended period of self discovery continuing through adulthood in which they experimented with different paths and lifestyles. The women in her study continued to demonstrate their independence in spiritual practice as well; many no longer participated in the religion of their families of origin. Since traditional female behavior can be strongly circumscribed by traditional religion, the rejection of traditional religious family values may account for lack of orientation towards traditional female roles (Ireland, 1993).

Morell (1994) has written a book that examines the social location of women who have chosen not to become mothers and the social messages they receive as a result of this choice. Her research involved 40 married women whom she divided into two separate groups: those between the ages of 45 and 55, and those between the ages of 65 and 75. This separation by cohort allowed Morell (1994) to consider the difference in messages that women received about motherhood during their formative years as each group has been informed by the social norms of their time. It also allowed her to consider the different issues that come up for a woman regarding her childless state at different periods in her life.

Since Morell's (1994) research focused on social constructs of female roles, her findings reflected the different adaptations that voluntarily childless women must make in order to negotiate and advocate for themselves in social spheres. In Morrel's words:

“My central theoretical claim is that the desire to mother does not exist outside of or prior to language and cultural images of motherhood, but is brought into play by how we talk and think and represent both motherhood and childlessness”(p. 146).

Morell's research challenged some of the findings of earlier studies. For example, Morell's interview sample produced narratives that suggested that typical female behavior is a manufactured concept. Morell put forth the idea that atypical or non-traditional feminine behavior or presentation is a subjective assessment since it is a result of particular cultural and historical trends.

Gillespie examined social trends surrounding women's roles with particular attention focused on societal changes that enable women to take more control over their reproductive decision making. Changes in reproductive technology allow women to limit family size, delay pregnancy, decrease obstacles to fertility, choose to become pregnant without the presence of a male partner, or prevent pregnancy and forgo motherhood altogether. Gillespie (2001) examined the shift in the perception of women and women's social roles, particularly since World War II. The old discourses surrounding the feminine ideal and suitable roles for women have shifted and given way to new ideas of femininity as typified in more pervasive and powerful female role models in traditionally male fields such as media, politics, and science. Modern women are now more highly educated than their female predecessors have expanded roles in the workplace and a parallel financial autonomy, greater sexual liberty and more personal independence. Not

only have these shifts made the option to forgo motherhood more viable, they have also enabled women who have chosen to mother to have professional lives while mothering at the same time. As a result, motherhood and career need not be mutually exclusive and so it would seem that there are other reasons to remain childless beyond advances in reproductive technology. The decision is still deeply embedded in a matrix of many interrelated phenomena on both the micro and macro levels.

Gillespie (2001) argued that not only do social messages and technologies impact women's decisions to bear or not bear children, the numbers of those who choose not to bear children impacts the world on many levels including such things as increasing demand for housing suited to individuals or couples, products and advertising that cater to childless individuals, and the definition of the notion of what constitutes a family.

Social Perceptions of the Voluntarily Childless

The perceptions about women who forgo motherhood reflect normative values deeply embedded in American culture. The existence of these attitudes is reflected in the negative perception of the voluntarily childless by the general public. Callan (1985) examined these cultural attitudes.

Callan's (1985) multidimensional scaling analysis of the social perceptions of voluntarily childless couples found that parenting couples were rated with more positive attributes than their non-parenting counterparts. Callan recruited students to evaluate 4 types of people: married and un-married, parenting and childless. There were 45 male and female participants in his study, 24 single and 21 married, some parents and some not. The participants averaged in age 22 years for single students and 39 years for the

parenting group. The group of students who had children was all chosen from a pool of part time students in order to achieve consistency in educational levels.

The students were presented with descriptions of 16 people with unique positions on the fertility spectrum. In one couple, only the male might be infertile, in another both partners might be infertile while yet another couple might have no problems with fertility at all. The students were then asked to evaluate the couples for commonalities along a 9 point scale based on the data presented. When this part of the study was completed, the students were then given a list of 27 descriptors which they were then asked to apply to the 16 couples. The list evaluated for qualities such as lonely, happy, selfish, etc (Callan, 1985).

The results of Callan's (1985) study revealed that voluntarily childless couples were rated poorly by the students. They were given negative attributes such as selfish, materialistic, career oriented and individualistic. Couples with children were given such attributes as happy, fulfilled and hardworking. Couples described as undergoing in vitro treatments were defined as being devoted, loving, and emotionally mature. The value of Callan's study is in uncovering social bias surrounding voluntarily childless individuals. However, the study reflects the opinions of a specific population: single students with a mean age of 22 and parenting students with a mean age of 39. Very different findings might be gathered from a broader age and social spectrum. Also, the couples presented for consideration, although similar except in terms of parenting status, were different couples. Individual biases based on minor details may also have influenced the results. For example, if the same couples were presented for consideration each time with variables regarding their parenting status changed, as is seen in the Lampman and

Dowling-Guyer (1995) study, then it would have been easier to identify biases that were rooted in attitudes toward the couples themselves regardless of their status as parents or non-parents.

Lampman and Dowling-Guyer (1995) undertook an American version of this study using students at the University of Alaska at Anchorage. The participants were between the ages of 18 and 56; 66% of the participants were female. The study involved having participants evaluate couples in vignettes based on 26 personality characteristics. The couple presented for consideration remained the same throughout each vignette with only their status as parents changing. The couple was presented as either parenting, involuntarily childless, or voluntarily childless. Lampman and Dowling-Guyer's findings showed that most people rated the voluntarily childless couple more negatively than they did the parenting couple or the involuntarily childless couple. In particular, the students rated the voluntarily childless woman with the most negative attributes, more so than her voluntarily childless husband. The voluntarily childless wife was perceived as being emotionally unbalanced, selfish, and immature. This study corrected for some of the variables in Callan's 1985 study. It broadened the age range of participants and kept the couple consistent changing only parenting status. However, it achieved the same results as Callan's (1985) study.

Voluntarily childless couples have also often been perceived by others as having had unhappy childhoods. Ireland (1993) examined this in her book *Reconceiving Woman*. In it she wrote that "a common negative myth is that all childless women must come from dysfunctional families" (p. 165). The assumption does not bear out in Ireland's research which showed that a small portion, one quarter of voluntarily childless women, came

from a family background in which at least one parent was unable to assume an adequate level of parenting due to mental illness or alcoholism. In most of these cases the woman in question had assumed a quasi-parental role. The number of women who reported being the parentified child was 40%. While there is a significant level of family dysfunction in the personal histories of one fourth of voluntarily childless women, the majority of women from dysfunctional families do grow up to become mothers (Ireland, 1993).

Morell (2000) found that women who chose to remain voluntarily childless are generally either ambivalent or satisfied with their decision but do experience occasionally experience feelings about what having a child might be like. During these periods regret may be experienced. Rather than being evidence of having made a wrong decision, Morell found that these regrets were connected to the pervasive societal messages that motherhood is the path that all women must take. Morell wrote that “motherhood is seen as both moral obligation and a ticket to fulfillment...Historically, childless women...have been subject to a ‘rhetoric of rejection,’ the use of stigmatizing labels that exclude them from the category of good woman” (Morell, 1994, p. 71). Morell indicated that this social expectation applies to white women only, as declining Caucasian birth rates have been the subject of alarmist news in recent years. At the same time, Morell (1994, p. 315) observed, “women of color who have children as single parents in non-optimal circumstances” are commonly criticized.

Relationship and Life Satisfaction

Voluntarily childless women are surrounded by negative assumptions with respect to their quality of character, emotional happiness and satisfaction in life. However, studies done to compare the well-being of the voluntarily childless with parenting couples

revealed the exact opposite; voluntarily childless couples rated themselves higher in terms of life and marital satisfaction (Letherby, 2002; Somers, 1993). Jeffries and Konnert (2002) examined regret and psychological well-being in a group of 72 participants over the age of 45. The study compared the responses of mothers, involuntarily childless women, and voluntarily childless women. The results of their study showed that voluntarily childless women reported higher levels of well being, personal autonomy and mastery over their environments. Women who had become childless through a series of postponements experienced occasional regret. It is worth nothing that in this second group, some of the postponers had financial and relationship considerations that actually afforded them less choice than they would have hoped. However, this group still considered them selves as being voluntarily childlessness since their childlessness was a result of decisions made earlier in life and that ultimately led to childlessness. Had certain conditions been met earlier, such as having an appropriate partner or a secure career, they might have chosen to become mothers. The way that this group differs from involuntarily childless women is that for some women, motherhood is so important that they will choose to have a child regardless of income or partner.

Women who were involuntarily childless experienced the greatest amount of regret and had the least amount of control over their decision. Jeffries and Konnert (2002) found that the amount of regret and satisfaction women experienced around their childbearing decisions was consistent with the amount of control that the women believed that they ultimately had over the decision. The study also considered the role that generativity plays in decision satisfaction. The women who transformed any regrets that they had about their decision had found other ways of making contributions to the world.

The findings of these early studies are important for a clinician to understand. Clients who are questioning whether or not they should become parents should know that ambivalent feelings are a normal feature of the decision making process and to expect regret coupled with relief throughout. The level of anxiety that a client feels around this decision may be connected, if Jeffries and Konnert's (2002) studies bear out, to the degree of control that the woman actually has over her decision. As well, regret may be tied to generative concerns which may be addressed in a therapeutic setting through exploration of other creative avenues.

Self reports of marital satisfaction of married couples with and without children yielded results that ran contrary to popular expectations (Polonko et al., 1982). The researchers interviewed married women in a stratified random sample of 95 voluntarily childless women, 91 undecided women, 209 women who were postponing, and 323 mothers. All of the women in the study were living in the mid-west, were white, in first time marriages and had married after the age of 21. No other intentional commonalities were set as parameters. Education, income and career varied in the interviewed sample.

The findings in the study (Polonko et al., 1982) showed that married couples with children reported lower marital satisfaction than did the voluntarily childless couples in the sample. As compared to parenting couples, the voluntarily childless couples reported more rewarding levels of cohesion, communication, and interaction, shared power in their relationship on a more equal basis, shared household management responsibilities and also tended to value the wife's career as much as the husband's. The couples who chose not to have children had a greater degree of emotional closeness than couples who had children. However it is also noted that mothers were emotionally satisfied when their

relationships with their children were close. Mothers reported greater degrees of emotional distance from their husbands than did women in the non-mothering sample. (Polonko et al., 1982).

Overall, the Marital Satisfaction study conducted by Polonko et al. (2002) revealed that the cooperative power dynamic in the voluntarily childless couples, which was reported as low to lacking in married, parenting couples, had a strong bearing on their higher levels of satisfaction in the voluntarily childless marriages. It is interesting to consider that the level of personal power over decision making processes in the lives of voluntarily childless, postponing and involuntarily childless women was also an important element in Morell's (2000) research. Polonko et al. have also found that the married, voluntarily childless couples reported greater experiences of shared power and were able to relate to each other more as individuals. The voluntarily childless couples reported greater levels of happiness than married couples with children. The study did not necessarily suggest that children deprive couples of satisfaction, but rather leads to a shift in power that result in lower levels of marital satisfaction. Given this, it would not be unreasonable to study these conditions among a broader economic demographic where financial power or lack thereof may either level or exacerbate some of these interpersonal dynamics.

Somers (1993) compared 74 voluntarily childless couples to 127 parenting couples. All participants were at least 30 years old, living together or married for a minimum of 5 years, and were of similar educational and occupational levels. The study evaluated the way that voluntarily childless couples perceived they were viewed by others against how parenting couples believed that they were viewed by others.

Participants were given a questionnaire and told to rate a list of attributes that described such things as marital satisfaction, personal character, and fondness of children. The two groups exhibited differences in income with the voluntarily childless making about \$10,000 more on average than the parenting couples and the parenting couples having stronger religious convictions than the non-parenting group.

Somers (1993) found that voluntarily childless couples expected to be perceived more negatively than did the parenting couples. The participants were largely from Washington DC metro area and reflected the views of the region but are perhaps not representative of the broader population. However, as in earlier studies, more negative perceptions of voluntarily childless couples may be more universally true (Callan, 1985; Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1982). Furthermore, Somer's study continued to support earlier findings of higher rates of life satisfaction among voluntarily childless couples (Houseknecht, 1982; Ireland, 1993; Morell, 1994; Polonko et al., 1982).

Environmental and Social Pressures

Changes in the environment have sparked concerns from all quarters of the globe. For many, overpopulation is seen as one of the key hurdles to achieving a sustainable future. Organizations encouraging people to have no more than two children have cited shrinking resources, increasing ecological stressors and subsequent increases in social unrest as a necessary consideration in family planning today. Organizations such as the Population Connection, formerly known as Zero Population Growth (www.populationconnection.org), Population Policy (www.popco.org), and the Population Institute (www.populationinstitute.org) research and publish findings on the

adverse effects of rapid population growth and suggestions for slowing population growth such as having fewer children and considering voluntary childlessness.

Gillespie's (2001) study reported findings that cited diminishing resources and overpopulation as reasons some women gave in support of their decision to remain childless. Park's (2005) study noted that environmental concerns were cited in 21% of previous studies as a reason to remain voluntarily childless. Women more than men considered issues of over-population, questioned their ability to parent well, and considered the state of the world with respect to parenting. Park surmised that this may reflect the greater degree to which a woman's role is intertwined with nurturing and a self-sacrificing quality.

Past studies on voluntary childlessness have been done using largely Caucasian sample groups. African Americans, Asian Americans, Native American and Hispanic/Latina populations have not been well studied. Having said that, it is also important to acknowledge that classification by race is a tricky proposition as it neither has genetic basis nor do individuals necessarily have racially homogenous ancestral lines. In an article published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, Waters (2000) wrote,

In the 1990 census, 5% of the US population reported an ancestry that differed from their primary race or Hispanic identification. By race, 4% of Whites and 5% of Blacks report multiple ancestries. More than 25% of those reporting their race as an American Indian report a non-American Indian ancestry, and about 10% of Asian and Hispanic respondents report a non-Asian or non-Hispanic ancestry respectively. (p. 1736)

The studies mentioned in this research have assumed an homogenous racial identification. However, this is not always the case and this should be borne in mind when reading the data. For example, identification as a Native American is complicated

by government policies that require a lengthy, extensive and daunting documentation requirement in order for a tribe to achieve federal recognition. Individuals wishing to claim tribal affiliation must go through an equally challenging process. As a result, individuals who may self identify Native American, and who know through family history that they have tribal ancestry, are unable to produce the appropriate paperwork to satisfy census bureau criteria (Churchill, 1998). The problem of who is therefore allowed to declare tribal affiliation may account for the lack of information surrounding the choice to remain childless in Native American populations since the population numbers reflect artificial, superimposed governmental criteria.

Populations that exist on the periphery of the dominant Euro-American power structure are influenced by additional environmental and historical factors with respect to the child bearing decision. A comparison between birth rates of Euro-American women and African- American women, for example, has revealed differences that have been attributed to differences in social and economic power. Boyd (1989) analyzed childlessness in both populations over the past century. The changing social norms that have influenced rate of voluntary childlessness among Euro-American women have also contributed to the rise in those who remain childless by choice among African American women.

In examining the role of social environment on the rise of voluntary childlessness among African Americans, Boyd (1989) was able to make a comparison of birth trends in African and Euro-American populations between 1835 and 1929. This research demonstrated both groups had parallel rise and fall of births in response to external economic and social macro-level changes. African-American women had both a higher

increase and decrease in birth rate just prior to 1940. Boyd's research attributed the higher birth rate to lack of access to birth control and the declining birth rate to the combined effects of industrialization and a decline in health in all across the United States as a result of the Great Depression. African American women, who experienced greater levels of poverty, were more dramatically affected by these external events. Poverty is closely linked to involuntary sterility through the sexually transmitted diseases, inadequate health care, starvation and malnutrition (Boyd, 1989).

Boyd's (1989) research indicated that over time, the birth rates of Euro-American women remained low due to changes in attitudes towards and improvements in birth control which was more widely available to them. The lowered birth rate among African-Americans was attributed to poor health resulting from poverty as well as directed efforts to encourage African-Americans to choose to remain childless in an effort to become more upwardly mobile. Between the years of 1940-1950, the birthrate for Euro and African American women increased in what has become known as the post-war baby-boom. The birth rate dropped off after 1950, again, moreso for African-American women. But during the 1980's the birth rate for both groups appeared to come more closely together. The reason for this more recent trend is attributed to increasing social mobility for African-Americans. Boyd's research indicated that the disadvantages suffered by a minority population can cause the fertility rate of that group to drop when three conditions are met:

...(1) the minority group desires acculturation; (2) there is convergence of minority-majority socio-economic characteristics...along with minority ambitions for social mobility; and (3) the minority group has no pronatalist ideology or norm proscribing contraception. Thus, middle- and upper-class black couples could exhibit lower fertility and higher rates of

voluntary childlessness than their white counterparts. (p. 195)

Rates of voluntarily childlessness among Hispanic women and Latinas are lower than their Euro-American Counterparts (Thomas, 1995). Part of this reason is the high value that these traditionally Catholic cultures place high value on the role of woman as mother and on the centrality of family. Since social support for the decision to remain childless ranks high in the decision to parent or not to parent, Hispanic and Latina women who receive little social support for the decision to remain childless are subject to a great deal of community pressure from both church and family (Thomas, 1995).

Theoretical Perspective

The qualitative research undertaken in support of my thesis revolved around a collection of individual narratives which gives voice to the experience of voluntary childlessness in a small sample of New England women. The data were analyzed using Jean Baker Miller's Cultural Relational Theory (Walker & Rosen, 2004; Hartling, Jordan & Walker, 2005) which was developed around observations of women's experiences of their relationships. This theory is particularly suitable for qualitative research in that it emphasizes the phenomenological experience of individuals. Miller's observations of her clients as they experienced relationships in connection and disconnection, led her to conclude that women are intrinsically motivated towards their highest developmental potential through their relationships (Rosen & Walker, 2004).

The core concepts of Cultural Relational Theory are that women grow through the process of relating to each other and that this continues throughout life. Miller defined growth fostering relationships as having five good things in them. Judith V. Jordan of the Jean Baker Miller Institute outlined them as follows: (a) zest, a sense of having energy,

vitality, (b) productivity, a sense of being able to act, to move forward, (c) clarity, a sense of understanding, insight, and awareness of shared experience, (d) worth -a sense of self worth, personal value, and (e) more connection: a desire to stay connected to the relationship (J. Jordan, personal communication, April 28, 2007).

Walker and Rosen (2004) described Miller's observations concerning the centrality of maintaining connection in women's relationships as being so important that rather than lose a relationship, a woman may suppress aspects of her authentic self if that part of her might make her less acceptable. As a result, she becomes estranged from herself and feels unfulfilled. Therefore, not all relationships are growth enhancing. Those that are not can have the effect of being draining, leaving one feeling unsupported and unable to effect change, confused and mystified; engendering a sense of low self worth and leading to disconnection and isolation from others.

This theory is not only applicable to the way women relate to each other, but in the way groups interact with each other. Cultural Relational Theory (CRT) has been used to understand the effects that broader social behaviors such as racism, sexism and homophobia have on marginalized groups (Rosen & Walker, 2004). Since women who choose not to have children are a cultural anomaly and a biological minority, they tend to feel set apart from their mothering counterparts and are not always honored for the choices that they have made. CRT is used here in an effort to gain insight into their experiences of voluntary childlessness. Specifically, this theory is used to understand the ways in which they stay connected and experience the five good things even in the face of loss of both peers and a family legacy of their own.

CRT has been chosen as it is surmised that one of the findings of my investigation into voluntary childlessness will be that situations which trigger doubt or regret in voluntarily childless women, are those in which a relational disconnection occurs and that this disconnection is at least in part due to internalized definitions of a woman's worth that socially embedded in the feminine mothering ideal. It is expected that the innate need for positive regard from the larger social environment will result in incongruency between the individual's value system and the introjected cultural standards of normative female development. Given that there is no hard evidence that human reproduction is driven by instinctual needs (Veenhoven, 1975), but rather is subject to an intersection of personal needs, social, economic and cultural forces; how these forces influence a woman's child bearing decisions may be explained in part by CRT.

A woman's reproductive choice is as much a result of her life experience as her current life situation. Maintaining personal authenticity in relationships between women does not necessarily hinge on bearing children, but bearing children has historically been accepted as a fulfilling role for women and part of their developmental norm. Going against the social norm can be challenging and costly in terms of social support. Therefore, a stated objective of this study is to gather narrative data from a small sample of women who have chosen to remain voluntarily childless for the purpose of gaining insight into their motivations, adaptations and experiences with respect to choosing a child-free lifestyle

Summary

The reviewed literature indicated higher levels of well-being on most levels among the voluntarily childless as compared to parents. However, this sense of well-

being is correlated to having good social support for the decision. It must be noted that most of the literature reviewed here drew study samples from largely white, heterosexual, predominantly married, middle class populations. Other perspectives with respect to race, relationship status, sexual preference, or lower socio-economic classes were not well represented in the research. Many studies were nearly 30 years old. Newer research needs to be done on environmental and political issues as they are increasingly becoming part of the popular discourses that surround the child-free lifestyle.

.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The question for this study is: What are women's experiences around the decision to remain childless in the context of Western social expectations? Women's fertility choices in contemporary American society are influenced by a number of factors; these were analyzed as pieces of the experiences and decision-making process for voluntarily childless women.

A snowball sampling process identified twelve women who considered themselves to be voluntarily childless. I have chosen the age of 35 as the youngest representative of the sample as it is at this age that a woman's fertility declines markedly. By this age, women who have ambivalent feelings about parenting are beginning to seriously consider the implications of delaying pregnancy. A non-probability sample was recruited and interviewed qualitatively as I am most interested in gathering thickly described narratives. Through the collection of personal narrative accounts gathered from women who identify themselves as being voluntarily childless, I examine the decision making process that each woman in this study went through; her feelings about her role in her community, and her feelings about the appropriateness of her choice.

Informed consent letters (Appendix A) were sent to those who expressed a desire to participate in this research. An application was made to the Human Subjects Review Committee for approval to gather data (Appendix B). Once the Human Subjects Review

Committee approved the study (Appendix C), the participants were contacted to schedule interviews.

All twelve prospective applicants signed and returned their informed consents and agreed to meet privately for interviews. Interviews were digitally transcribed using Dragon Naturally Speaking transcription software and were digitally recorded at the same time to insure accuracy of transcription. The participants were asked for basic demographic information and then asked a series of open ended, semi-structured questions. Participants were also asked to identify from a list of specific concerns of interest to this researcher, any other issues that had played a part in their decision to remain childless. Narrative data were analyzed for content of recurrent themes and for novel information regarding the experience of voluntary childlessness. Women who were childless as a result of deferring the decision showed a common cluster of concerns that were not shared by early deciders. As a result, data from these two groups was analyzed separately for common themes. Themes that emerged for both groups are presented together.

As this phenomenon is not well understood and dominant theoretical hypotheses to explain it have yet to emerge, a flexible method of research was deemed most appropriate to allow for the emergence of novel data from experience-near perspectives. As the data gathered are gathered from semi-structured interviews, qualitative analysis was used to analyze the narratives for recurring themes. The research method was flexible, field-focused, small and naturalistic for the purpose of discovering a growing phenomenon in contemporary American culture. In this respect it followed the form of ethnography using semi-structured questions to gather narrative from a local population.

Since one of the purposes of this study is to determine the need and usefulness of an investigation into the experiences of voluntarily childless women, and also given the time constraints on the duration of the research project, it was decided to work locally.

Demographic Cross Section of Participants

Participants in the sample included 11 women who were of European extraction; one is of mixed European and American Indian extraction. Sexual orientations of participants were self-stated as being heterosexual (10), lesbian (1) and bi-sexual (1). The relationship status of the participants was as follows: married (6), engaged (1), co-habituating/owned /invested in property with a partner (3), single (2). The average age of the participants was 49.3 years. The educational backgrounds of the 12 participants was as follows: master's degrees (4), bachelor's degrees (2), associates degree (1), some college (3), high school diploma (2). In terms of personal income, six participants earned between 45 and 65,000 per year, four earned between 25 and 45,000 per year, and two participants were self employed in areas where their income fluctuated often and chose not to report an income level.

The religious life of the participants was largely non-traditional: four reported that they did not practice any particular belief system, three identified as pagan, one identified as following a shamanic path, one identified as a Quaker, one identified as having a non-denominational spiritual practice and two reported as Catholic. Of the two Catholic respondents, one stated that she does not practice but that she came into the world as a Catholic and it was important during her childhood and considered herself lapsed but still identified as such. The other considers herself "Catholic-lite", attending church on major holidays and for rituals of transition such as marriage. Defining belief system was not

always easy since many of them followed eclectic paths and have been influenced by various belief systems over time. One respondent, who eventually chose not to identify with any tradition, acknowledged that the Catholic Church had been a big piece of her childhood and recognized that it had influenced her spiritual orientation in many ways, but as a result of disagreements with church policies felt that she shouldn't identify as such.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The major findings presented in this chapter are based on participant responses concerning their experiences of voluntary childlessness. It was learned that the experiences of voluntarily childless women differ with respect to the level of regret for their decision based on four major findings. The first finding is based on the timing of the decision; those who were early deciders had the least amount of regret while those who postponed the decision experienced more regret. The second finding was that the level of support from significant others is a factor in the satisfaction level with the decision to remain childless. The third finding was that all participants shared concerns growing old without children. The fourth finding was that the level of involvement with fulfilling work or projects also provided a sense of comfort about having made the decision to remain childless. These findings are enumerated and discussed under theme headings at the beginning of chapter IV. The discussion of these findings is followed by the results of a direct inquiry regarding a list of specifically identified concerns of interest to this researcher. Unexpected results are presented at the end of this chapter.

Theme 1: Timing of the decision

The experiences of voluntarily childless women differed significantly depending on whether the woman had made her decision very early in life or if she had become childless through a series of postponements. Those who had made their decision early in

life experienced the least amount of regret for their decision while those who deferred their decision based on inadequate supports at an earlier age, experienced the most regret.

Experiences with Early Decision

Eight of the women in this study described themselves as early deciders. These women had a sense early in their lives that motherhood would not be an option for them. At times they thought about what it would be like to have a child, but for reasons that were not always clear to them, knew that they would not become mothers. Looking back through their lives, each was able to consider events that might have led them towards childlessness, but these women universally expressed that regardless of any possible precipitant, they essentially do not have the drive to become a parent. These feelings were expressed in the following quote:

I feel right from the time I was pretty young that I knew I would not have kids and that was something that by the time I was in college, and by the time I met (my husband), I felt like I was really clear that I do not want to have kids. And I can't actually say that I know what the reasons are for that....

Another participant who defined herself as an early decider felt that her early lack of maternal instinct was subsumed by societal expectations and was only recognized in retrospect.

I think I never had a strong drive to have children. I never was someone to...just feel pangs if a baby carriage went by. I always assumed that I would have a partner...get married. In the end, I assumed probably I'd have children, but just because that was an assumption. It never was a strong urge on my part...I expected I would go to college, I expected I would work, expected that I would have a child. Not out of desire, just because that's what a woman does. That's part of it. You get married and you have a child.

Some early deciders recalled early feelings of aversion towards responsibility for children, or lack of a maternal instinct towards them. They all expressed that they like children and have children in their lives with whom they have good relationships, but expressed little patience for the 24/7 aspect of childrearing and also considered the amount of stress involved in caring for children to exceed the rewards of raising them. One participant had a lot of childcare experience throughout her childhood through taking care of her younger siblings as well as other people's children. While she recognized that this might look like a causative factor in her decision to not have them, she saw it more as making her aware of how much energy and work is involved in parenting, and that she'd rather do other things. Therefore, early childcare experiences were not what put her off of motherhood, but rather made her aware of what really mattered to her, and that children would not be her first priority.

I got access to child care as a young person and I realized how much work it was and how much responsibility it was. I liked taking care of kids. But I realized just how much work and how much responsibility it is and it never ended. And I also knew that I wanted to do a lot of other things that would also require a hundred percent of my time. And by the time I had my first... (menses) I already knew that I didn't want kids. I realized that I needed to make a choice, and it was easy for me to make that choice, because I knew I would not be fulfilled by children.

Another participant who felt her lack of desire to have children was evident early in childhood noted the differences between her childhood reactions to babysitting and dolls and other pre-mothering types of behaviors and those of her peers:

I am childless by choice. I've always known that I didn't want kids, even from a young age. Not real interested in dolls or babysitting although I did and have had both. I've been pregnant twice and I have terminated the pregnancies so I've always known I did not want children. A key factor, when I was younger, I was just scared; it's a huge responsibility ...how do other people do it? There they are, I watched them, they... all seemed to

know or want to be a babysitter or want to play with kids and I just had no desire. When it came time to babysitting & stuff, kids liked me well enough, but I was always afraid of them. When I got older my friends started having kids, I was literally afraid to hold them like I was going to drop them or break them; just not interested.

Both felt that their early reactions to childcare served as evidence that they were not inclined to become mothers themselves. They noticed that they were different from their peers who enjoyed caring for children and acting out the mother role with dolls. Both participants lacked any other early trauma that would account for this and both have siblings who went on to raise their own families, which they also see as evidence that they have no maternal drive around having children. All participants in this study had siblings who had similar childhood experiences, both good and bad, and went on to become parents themselves. As a result, the majority of participants did not interpret their decision as being a result of early childhood experience, but rather one of personal temperament.

Postponement

Postponers described that group of women who had ambivalent feelings about having children and deferred the decision until a more suitable time. In the postponement process they either realized that they did not want to become mothers, or that they had moved past childbearing age and accepted their childless state as a result of a series of conscious decisions. Four women in the study felt that they had undergone a process which eventually led them to define themselves as being voluntarily childless, rather than being childless as a result of always having known they did not want to have children.

Some participants who postponed the decision and eventually became childless were faced with difficulties in their lives that left them feeling as if they could not

provide good mothering to a child during a time when they might otherwise have had them. Other participants did not consider their feelings towards motherhood until their bodies forced them to, either through difficulties with pregnancy or through becoming unintentionally pregnant. Unlike the early deciders, postponers generally did not make a conscious decision to remain childless until either forced to, or until the natural course of their hormonal cycles made the decision for them. Each participant progressed in her conscious awareness of her feelings around different life events which highlighted her decision to remain childless. One of the participants described how an early unplanned pregnancy caused her to re-evaluate motherhood:

I think getting pregnant accidentally and being faced with having a kid... having an abortion... I sat down and really thought about what does it take to have a kid? You know it's not something that you can do part time. It's a full time job, 24-7 for a long, long, long time. And do I really want to do that? Then I thought about the whole process of giving birth ... that doesn't sound very appealing.

Another participant who identified herself as having made her decision to remain childless over a process of time faced medical complications which made conception by natural means difficult, but not medically impossible.

... childless by happenstance... it wasn't directly a choice but it was never a driving force in me to become a parent. I liked children but didn't really see it as part of my life, didn't feel the need...the most key factor was that I didn't easily become pregnant and when it didn't naturally come on, my husband and I looked upon it as if that's what is meant to be. That's okay.

With minimal medical intervention, she could have become pregnant. It was the necessity of undergoing a medical procedure that made her question how much she wanted to be a mother.

Two of the participants had wanted children at one point in their lives but felt that they could not have children in good conscience unless other conditions were met. One entered into two marriages in which the decision to remain childless was a key factor. She experienced an unplanned pregnancy in both marriages and each time she argued to keep the child without success. This became her reason for seeking divorce in her second marriage:

...I was getting older, I was 35 I think... and I told my husband I really wanted to have children ... I distinctly remember his answer as being very negative. And I remember standing in the shower thinking, "Do I have time to get rid of this man and find another one?" and "I don't really know if I have time." But I did end up leaving him about that time anyway. And I never found another opportunity to be with someone to have children with them. I would have had to go out and find someone to get me pregnant and have it by myself and I really I didn't have a career path or anything....I know some women have done that but my head's not put together that way. And I never, never really felt comfortable with my decisions.

She recognized that some women do have children without partners and despite limited financial means, but did not want to mother a child in those conditions. Unless she could provide and care for a child in a safe environment, she would not consider motherhood as a viable choice. She expressed a high degree of regret about her childlessness but felt that she had made a series of conscious decisions and that she could have chosen differently in life if having a child was truly important to her.

Another participant echoed this experience of choosing to remain childless. She and her husband married and intended to have children, however her husband's behavior began to change shortly after they married. When he became abusive and pressured her for children, she put him off using their precarious financial situation as an excuse. She divorced him after learning that he was involved with hard drugs, had burned through

their savings, taken and maxed out charge cards and could not pay off the balances. The after-effects of living in that marriage affected her for many years and, due to the many areas of her life which she needed to set in order, caused her to delay her decision past childbearing age:

Well I always wanted them. It was just never the right time; I think that's what it was. And even when I got older...it kind of got farther away the older I got... I guess the main factor was that I wasn't in the right relationship to have... to feel like I could have kids in a safe environment and I just wanted the best for them. And if I didn't have... if my husband or my significant other wasn't...if I didn't feel safe in that relationship, I didn't think it was safe to bring children into that... I think now that I'm older...well, I'm recently engaged. So I think that some of them (her family) thought, "Oh kids...she can have kids now", at 42 that's kind of... at this age kids seem a little difficult... to do that now at this stage in life. But I guess I think I went through a phase where I thought about it a lot. Like I don't have kids, there's something wrong with me. I even thought of the divorce, I thought for a long period of time that I was sad because I didn't have kids and I really wanted kids. And then there was part of me that said, "Oh well I'm not good enough. I'm not good enough to have a nice husband." or "I'm not good enough to have a nice husband and have children". And there was probably a part of my life that I was...my self-esteem plummeted, because I didn't think I was really normal, because those were all the things I always wanted and it didn't happen in my life.

These women described experiences that beg the question of if they are truly childless by choice. They have never felt that they were in a situation which was fully supportive enough to have a child. Their decision to not have children was not so much a "no" to motherhood, but rather a "no" to the pain, stress and hardships that would be involved in raising children in those particular situations. As a result of a careful evaluation of their support systems and their concerns for the welfare of a child, they chose not to have children. As other women in similar situations choose to have children, both they and I felt that they too met the criteria for inclusion.

Those who identified as early deciders reported either low levels of regret to no regret at all about their decision. Those who became childless as a result of deferring their decision until a more appropriate time did report having regret. Postponers also reported a higher level of concern around financial solvency and personal readiness than those who were early deciders. Some of those who had deferred their decision occasionally wondered if they were indeed voluntarily childless or if they were casualties of modern social policies and economic difficulties that leave them with fewer resources to provide good mothering to a child:

.... well I think we only decide that it's a choice... but I really wish in the society that the there was more support for women having children. I think that children come to us when they come to us and that if our society was supportive enough that it wouldn't matter if you were 17 or 30 or who the father was or how much money you had. I mean, in an ancient society people would just go, "Cool, a baby! Another new human being we're witnessing the mystery of birth. Wow cool... You need to be somewhere else? Sure! Your grannies and your aunts have the baby... It just seems like we're such a complicated society is such a big deal to have a baby now that women just don't have the support they need to have babies.

The issue of whether or not the decision was from the heart or a reaction against environmental constraints re-emerged in another interview. Based on my understanding of her experiences, I began to question if she was actually voluntarily childless. When I asked her directly if she believed that she was voluntarily childless she replied:

Well, I suppose if I think about everything I said, I suppose I did because I never gave fate a chance. I always said, I can't I can't do this now... Even after my marriage ended, there was nobody really that I love that I would want to have children with. So I suppose I did choose it. I was always thinking... I'll meet the right man, a good honest loving man, and then I'll have children, but that never happened. So I guess I would have to say I did really in the end. I chose it because I didn't really give fate a chance. I had made up my mind that if it just wasn't safe or right, and even now... I love my fiancé and if it was 10 years ago, and he said the same thing... definitely, we would have kids. We're too old now... so yeah I

guess I would have to say it's something I always dreamed of and wanted but I did make the choice not to.

She had not refused to have children as much as she refused to have them in the circumstances she found herself in during her reproductive years.

Theme 2: Experiencing Acceptance by Others

Being accepted by others is a core piece of positive interpersonal experience. All participants had healthy levels of acceptance for their decision from important and influential others in their lives. This acceptance helped them to feel good about their choices in the face of experience of either conscious or unconscious challenges to their childlessness.

The majority of the participants in this study tended to make unconventional decisions in other areas of their lives and was not unused to questions regarding those choices. All of them reported that their immediate families accepted these aspects of them as well. The experience of being positively supported and regarded by significant others in their lives and the non-traditional paths which most of these women walked, seems to have prepared them for challenges to their choice to remain childless.

In general I feel good about it again, because I have never lived a traditional lifestyle which makes it a lot easier for me. I think people react less to me not having children and more to the fact that I do unusual things and make other unorthodox choices in life. So not having children has been less strange for them to understand than other choices I've made.

Participants experienced off-putting reactions from those outside of their immediate family such as co-workers, health care practitioners and random acquaintances. Participants responded to the reactions of others way in which this

generally resulted in efforts to find the most appropriate response that would bridge, rather than sever, these connections.

Many participants reported a significant disconnection from friends once members of their social circle became parents. Parenting peers tended to socialize with other mothers. For some this was accompanied by a sense of frustration and being pigeonholed as someone who cannot socialize in the new context.

... now; everything is geared toward only inviting the people who have kids and families. The ones who are single don't get invited to stuff. Also, I find people are always looking for an excuse...like, "Oh, you would be so bored. It's just a bunch of kids it would drive you crazy."...And I'm like, okay [shrugs and looks confused].... But mostly I feel like there's such strong family cliques up here, that everything that people do... they school their children together, they do things together, but everything they do is geared around their children. And that's where their social life begins.

While it is a confusing experience to be shut out of social gatherings because of not having children, the practical problems those parents face when making social plans was recognized by participants.

Definitely changes in my social circle as a result of not having kids, especially in the last five years probably as more and more of the people that I hang out with have kids and their lives become super kid centered. People do things that are interesting for kids and are not necessarily interesting for adults, but even the things that families go to... they're so kid oriented. People have to leave at a certain time to put the kids to bed. They spend their whole time the kids running up and pulling them on the leg and going, "Hey, pay attention!" in the middle of trying to have an intelligent conversation with somebody and they turn around and walk away to go deal with the kid...And so, I feel like the sort of intellectual connection with people who have kids has just sort of dissolved in the last couple of years and I'm assuming that as kids get older, people are going to come back out of that again. But I feel like there are a lot of people who were really fun to hang out with before they had kids and they're in a phase right now where they're not so interesting to hang out with, and probably we're not so interesting to hang out with, because we're not involved in the kid thing.

Both of these women lived in small rural towns that are considerable driving distance to larger urban areas. Social life in these rural environments tends to be based in the community and loss of local social connections can be acutely felt. Women who lived in more urban areas still reported feeling the changes in their social networks without the same sense of loss, but with awareness that they had become separate. Their potential for a larger sense of loss was belayed by larger opportunities for forging new social connections in their communities.

I didn't [notice a loss] because I've been doing music and other things. I've often traveled in circles where having children is not the norm. And it's only been in very recent years that occasionally someone I know in the different circles I've traveled in, that people have children and then tended to drop off the face of the earth that I never hear from them again. So again, I keep moving in circles where children are not the norm.

One participant, who reported no significant change in the members of her social circle, did notice a difference in the quality of those relationships with regard to her status as a non-parent. This was an upsetting point of relational disconnection.

I have noticed that as I get older I tend to gravitate towards, just happens to be that the people I hang out with don't seem to have children; ones that are my closer friends... mostly women come to me at work or someplace where they're not with their kids. There is a time where there are certain situations where they'll look and they'll go, "Well you don't know about this because you don't have kids", which always gets my back, my hackles up. How do you know I don't know? But that doesn't happen very often.

Another participant felt that the changes she had experienced in her social circle had little to do with the consequences of mothering vs. not mothering, but is a cumulative result of other life choices. Rather than having an experience of moving away from friends, she felt that it was more of a general process with no single precipitant, "I

wouldn't say particularly because of not having children, I think that would be more related to distances and just life changes for me and my friends.”

Women fared better in their experience of themselves as voluntarily childless when their decision has been accepted by significant people in their lives. These connections helped them to weather some of the adverse reactions they received from others they encounter from time to time. In general, adverse reactions to voluntary childlessness were not intentional but rather are rooted in common social assumptions that women of a certain age, particularly if married, have or should have children. Most participants did report the experience of witnessing subtle or overtly negative reactions to their choice. All of the women interviewed believed that no one meant to be offensive in their response, but most of the participants had learned over time to brace themselves for an odd reaction. The most common reaction to the response that there are no children is what one participant aptly described as “that sad, uncomfortable look.” Some of the participants had pre-chosen ways to respond when these situations arose. As a health professional, she had to ask her clients for details about their family structures which sometimes led to her clients asking her about her family. Her childlessness sometimes elicited a shocked or saddened reaction from her clients and she strove to maintain some sort of empathic connection with them:

...they'll say, “Oh, how many children do you have?” and I say, “Oh I don't have any children. I have a large orange cat and a dog.” And they get this sad uncomfortable look on their face. Sometimes they don't know how to respond to that...It makes me want to assuage their discomfort, and that's why I always bring up the part about I used to say before we had Hannah (her new cat), “Oh, I have big fat Louis (dog), and he's as much work as any toddler!” I make a joke that they can laugh at and we can move on. So I interject with something that I do care about, and so we have something of a vague similarity. Sometimes they'll mention a pet

they have too, so trying to move beyond their discomfort and create something of a bridge between us...

Offensive responses are often a result of cultural expectations and therefore generally well-intended. For example, a common assumption is that married heterosexual couples both desire to, and will have children.

I don't think anyone automatically thinks that "Oh, maybe they're not going to have kids" I mean, I suppose a lot of people ask me if Steve and I are going to have kids and I always think it's kind of a funny question because however you answer it, it can be perceived as you having some kind of problem. Like if you say, "No we're not planning on having kids." then sometimes people will see us as like cold-hearted or not loving or you hate children. And then if you say, "Yeah... we do want to have kids." and you don't have kids in your and your late 30s and they automatically think trouble is there, some physical problem there, (and) isn't that sad? ... And then if you say "I don't know." that seems kind of noncommittal when really it's nobody's business. So I don't choose to answer or be defensive or anything about it.

Some participants found ways to stay connected to the speaker and to honor their own choice in those moments. However there are times when voluntarily childless women are faced with reactions that, whether intended or not, are perceived as being offensive and leave them feeling as if they have to justify their decision, "...they're like 'Come on, you're getting old!' and 'Oh, no! Oh, really...?' ... You almost feel like you have to give an explanation..." but what she would prefer to say in these cases is, "I don't owe you an explanation. Why am I telling you anything?"

One participant shared the frustration of having to listen to well-meaning parenting women suggest to her that her decision to remain childless has prevented her from having a full emotional life:

Here is what I can't stand... women who say you haven't really known and loved until you have a child or even... "My art just wasn't anything until I had a baby!" I really think that's like saying to people who,

whether by choice or by not by choice, who don't have kids; it's kind of like saying they're just half a person. Until you have a baby, you're an empty vessel, which is what Sylvia Plath interestingly said about not having children. She killed herself and abandoned her kids so... whatever! I really think that is just like a terrible thing to say to somebody like I'm not a whole person or I'm not interesting or I'm not a contributing member of society or I don't make happiness or I haven't experienced happiness because I don't have a child. That is just unfair and kind of brutal and a bunch of garbage...I understand parenthood is noble, it's great. I support it. I'm willing to pay higher taxes for better schools. I'm not anti-child, but I just can't stand it when I haven't experienced all there is to experience because I don't have a baby. What a bunch of crap!

Very few respondents reported people reacting to their decision to remain childless in a deliberately offensive manner. Participants all reported having experienced at least the occasional odd look and some have had to field more forceful responses including one participant being told that she would change her mind someday, a perception that proved to be harmful in her particular case. The participant had suffered for many years with painful uterine fibroids and was repeatedly refused a hysterectomy by her gynecologist who told her she was too young to know for certain that she would not change her mind:

...when I was in my 20s and 30s I actually had people tell me that I was stupid for not wanting children and it really made you rethink what... whether or not I was doing the right thing because society really wants us all women to have children ...when I was 30 years old...or 29...I had... gynecological surgery. And I had signed papers for them to do a hysterectomy on me in case things were worse than they thought. And things were very much worse than they thought when they got in there. Yet, my surgeon refused to do a hysterectomy... because she wouldn't do a hysterectomy, because she felt it was too young and I might want to have children... even though I had told her that I *absolutely* did not want children and to please take out whatever she needs take out because I've had many years of bad health. And consequently because she didn't do surgery I went on for five more years, actually six more years, of being really sick and having five more surgeries all because she refused... When somebody says they don't want children and then somebody else decides

that you should have them, you know, it can create a lot of problems. And that's really common, especially with gynecologists now.

In retrospect, she did not understand why she stayed with the same gynecologist for so many years but she thought it was in part due to that particular doctor's reputation in her area, and also in part that a doctor was a person of authority and in the face of that authority, she complied even though it went against her deepest feelings about her situation. As a result she suffered for many years, not only physically but emotionally as well. There is a clear power differential in this western medical model doctor-patient relationship which results in the supremacy of the doctor's concerns over her own. She was essentially told that she did not fully understand the repercussions of her decision, her personal experience of her body and her self awareness were delegitimized by someone considered to be authority in her life. Consequently she began to doubt herself in order to maintain what was considered an essential connection. When a woman's authority over her own body is second guessed by those in whom she puts her trust, the resulting sense of self doubt can be profound.

Theme 3: Concerns about growing older

Growing older can be the ultimate disconnection for many. All participants had concerns about their ability to care for themselves when they are elderly without grown children to advocate for them and to assist them with the vicissitudes of old age. Some look to family, others do not see that as being an option, "Who is going to take care of me when I'm old? I don't have that so when Bill & I get old it's just me and (my husband)..." Even if families are available, not all women are comfortable relying on others to care for them when they become unable to do so for themselves. One

participant expressed concern about burdening her niece and nephews with caring for her when she is elderly, although she recognized them as potential supports to her later in life:

You know, I wonder about being old, being alone old. Again, the financial; will I have enough for retirement? What if I get sick? I don't want to be a burden to my two nephews and my niece and I would never want them to take care of me...At the tail end of life, will I regret it... old and alone and scared and me trying to shovel out my car after a snowstorm when I'm 90 and osteoporotic?.

Another participant hoped for some support from her sisters and their children.

However, she was also considering living in a traditional community where care of elders is more readily provided regardless of relationship status.

I do think about... more in terms of how one has support in later years...but there's no guarantee of that either because you can't predict how children are going to come out. You think about options for having support in the community. When I'm older.... I think some of that will come from... my sisters who are younger, or my nephews who I'm very close to... or I also think of living in traditional communities. I think that's an option.

Some of the participants reported that concern for their old age is the only time that they really feel regret about not having children while at the same time recognizing, that is not a good reason to start a family.

I do worry about when I get old you know that the old Whose going to take care of me?... I do worry about that because there isn't anybody you know...I'm hoping that I'll be able to take care of myself or that I'll be in a place where I'll be able to have that done. But you know ...if that doesn't happen because that's not really the norm... I don't have anybody to take care of me, anybody younger than me, and that is a concern. But I think that's a societal thing. I think it's a lousy reason have kids but I worry about that.

Theme 4: Experience of satisfaction with the decision

Participants reported experiencing satisfaction and fulfillment in career and/or personal projects which gave them a sense of purpose in life. While women who have had children may also have had the same experience, the women who participated in this study tended to report that they did not think they would be able to give as much to their work if they were also parenting. Involvement with fulfilling work is not definitively in lieu of children as it is not strictly an either-or situation. One participant wondered if choosing one over the other is evidence that she never had a drive to bear children:

I see other women who are really excited about having kids. They're very excited about being pregnant and all these kinds of things... I've never thought it was something I really want to do. And maybe it's because I've replaced it with other things like animals and plants. And there's this whole nurturing thing with feeding people and stuff like that and so maybe that sort of taken care of some...nurturing instincts. So I don't feel like there's this part of me that's unfulfilled because I haven't raised a child and... that's unclear whether that's because it is fulfilled or because I'm not interested. I don't really know.

A participant who felt fulfilled in her artwork was able to identify similarities between the creative process and mothering:

...there were many other ways that I found that I could fulfill my life and being artistic fortunately is one of them and I created a lot in an artistic world that I gave birth to and let go of that into many people's homes and that is very satisfying.

All of the women in this study had work that created a sense of generativity for them. Ways that they served the larger population included farming, teaching, and publishing, ministering, doctoring and creating works of art among other things.

Although a participant and her partner never had children, they have increased the size of her family as a result of successful genealogy work. Ties were re-established between

families that had not communicated since her grandparents immigrated to the United States. She and her European cousins now travel back and forth to visit each other yearly. Such things, she feels would be more complicated and potentially unaffordable with small children in tow.

Most respondents reported a sense of fulfillment in at least one significant area of life where they feel connected to others in a generative capacity. Whether it is through their work, through a personal pursuit, or through actively donating back to society in some way; the participants in this study possessed a sense of accomplishment. For some this took the form of supporting children in need.

If in any way you're feeling a lack that you haven't had a child, that in every small way that you give financially or physically your time to help children who are in hospitals, or in countries that don't have proper water....my husband and I just watched a program the other day in one of the poorest countries in Africa that it only cost four dollars a year to send your child to school. And he had several children, he's a farmer, some of them did have to stay home to farm with him but he could not afford the four dollars a year to send all of his children to school. My husband and I got online and looked it up and we have sent some money so that these children in this village, they can go to school, that's so little. I could spend four dollars on 4 cups of coffee a week I don't need the coffee and I feel much better that we could do something like this. Just little things like that help me feel that I am contributing something because I don't know that we need more children. Of course there always has to be babies coming along, they are wonderful and the world has to renew itself, but there so many already here that need help that I just feel even stronger about taking care of them.

Many participants voiced a sense of responsibility to society at large. A participant who was clear that while she was not interested in babies or young children, she has considered providing foster care to older children:

Fostering has crossed my mind...working within the state system to have a foster child to be a positive influence on a kid's life. It's less about me having an idea I want to have children. Or feeling like there's something

missing and more about this is something I might be able to do. We currently don't have space for it but you know.... when we had a house before, had a farm, I thought that this is a great environment for a kid. Perhaps not permanent, but to be able to give a child a healthy environment for a while until their situation stabilizes.... get them out of an environment that's harmful, is well worth considering.

Others found themselves “adopted” by the children of their friends. One participant was happy to be proactive in the lives of the children in her environment and was also able to maintain strong connections with her parenting friends:

I love my friends' kids. I'm like a really good auntie. I sew Halloween costumes, I baby-sit, I go and play with them...my friends have always made me feel I'm part of the family... I think that's how I do it. I just help other people's kids that I take an interest in. I'm a good auntie to them.

A participant who once worried that she would miss rewarding relationships with adult children discovered that this need was fulfilled through her role as a mentor:

... I've actually had students who look at me as a mentor and that's what I wanted from ...you know not wanting to miss having adult children. Because who knows, kids could like turn out to be ...I could have had a daughter that wanted to be a Republican lawyer and work for the Bush campaign. How do I know? There are no guarantees, you know... You get a human being and after that all bets are off. I've had a couple of relationships and still do, where I've felt there's been a level of trust because I am an older woman... a lot older than these people. That is what I thought I was missing or was going to miss, so in essence I haven't missed it. And still won't miss it ... there will be other opportunities, they will always come up, mentoring and things like that, and that's what I thought I was going to miss, that level of trust. But I really haven't.

She recognized ways to nurture others through her teaching and also in donating time in service of others in need. She felt that the role of mother as nurturer was also a role that non-mothering women could fulfill through other channels.

I think... more nurturing... if women have an impulse to nurture, or take care of other people; there are so many ways to do that. We can take care of old people, we can take care of homeless people, we can teach people how to speak English or... there's a million ways that people can use that

impulse that does not require procreating and there are so many other ways to do that. I do give a lot to people; my family, my friends, my students...in a way that also made a positive, really positive change, in those children's lives.

One participant had a career in the health field which provided her with many opportunities to nurture. She recognized that this career might be very difficult if not impossible to pursue if they also had the responsibility of children:

I was 30, in a masters program, which was very consuming, and enjoying my life. And the next five or six years were very busy with a few new jobs which were very scary, a lot of responsibility. I changed jobs every two years and relocated a couple of times so it just was not even on the radar. Again, no pangs at all just my life was absolutely focused on work and my job...(it) was, is, and continues to be, but especially as a new clinician. It was terrifying with a huge learning curve and all this responsibility. I was meticulous about birth control, there was not even a chance I was going to get pregnant. It was not on my radar. It was on the avoid part of the radar, danger zone, keep away from this, and you don't want this in your life.

All of these findings regarding participants' experiences around the timing of the decision, their feelings of acceptance by others, having satisfying avenues of work, and worries about old age speak to their sense of themselves as having worthwhile lives even without children.

Other Findings

In a separate list of concerns, participants were asked to identify items that might have informed their decision to remain childless. Some respondents indicated that although they may have had significant concern about some of the items listed, they saw them not as causative factors for their decision to remain childless but rather as justification for their choice.

Responses to these concerns did not show any overwhelming influence on participant choices beyond those discussed in the narrative part of the interview. The

number of affirmative responses is indicated in parenthesis after the indicated concern: concerns about the environment and/or over-population (6), concerns related to politics and the global socio-political climate (4), concerns about career development and personal accomplishment (1), concerns about finances and economic security (5), concerns that one's own personal goals and lifestyle will not be compatible with motherhood (2), concern for passing on heritable illnesses (2), concern for one's own health and/or longevity (2), concerns resulting from one's own negative experience of, or perception of childhood (2), concerns about one's own parenting abilities (1) and concerns of or related to the process of being pregnant and giving birth (3).

Unexpected findings

There were four major unexpected findings in this study (a) the difficulty in generating discrete categories around voluntary childlessness as women were not unduly influenced by external events to bear or not bear children, (b) that many women who did not want children had wanted to experience pregnancy (c) the list of concerns which I had identified as being potentially pivotal in the decision to remain childless had little influence on women's decision making process and (d) the ways in which social networks changed for women who chose not to have children.

Difficulties in Defining Voluntary Childlessness

Applying satisfactory labels on the childless experience proved to be more difficult than anticipated once the interviewing process began. All the participants were aware of the parameters of the study and the criteria for participation and felt that they qualified as being voluntarily childless. However, at times I wondered if some of my participants had truly chosen their childlessness. In the interviewing process, I learned

that some of them had very much wanted to become mothers but had made certain choices in their lives that resulted in their remaining childless. As a result of their secondary choices, they felt that they had primarily chosen to remain childless. These narratives influenced my views and definitions of what emotional experiences are involved in the decision to remain childless and have led me to consider that some women are childless as a result of a confluence of external circumstance, past experience and internalized value systems around readiness to enter motherhood.

Attraction to the Idea of Being Pregnant

Another unexpected finding was that many of the women interviewed expressed the idea that they thought that they would like experience pregnancy and actually had some regret that they didn't get to experience birth. Three of the respondents had terminated pregnancies and therefore had a brief experience of early pregnancy. One participant described this feeling as being "rich", and although she felt that pregnancy would be an agreeable experience for her, did not want to become a mother. Another participant also described why she missed having the experience:

...I did know some women who didn't have kids because they didn't want to go through being pregnant. I always wanted to do that. I always wanted to be pregnant and go through it and give birth to see what it was like, not to see what I am missing, not because I thought I was really missing something; but just to experience something that most women go through.

A third participant in this category even considered acting as a surrogate for her sister whose endometriosis made it hard for her to conceive:

... I was thinking... I would volunteer as a surrogate... I thought that would have been a neat experience just to experience, gestation and birth. But again, it didn't matter to me that it was mine. In fact I didn't want it to

be mine...I've just found this choice, I made a very conscious choice. I'm very happy with it.

“Additional Concerns” Were Not a Concern

Only half of the participants stated that concerns about the environment and overpopulation were a piece of their decision making process, but of this group, two stated clearly that these issues simply justified a decision that they had already made. Political and social issues were considered to be relevant to only 4 of the participants. Financial concerns were listed as being significant by 5 of the participants who were unanimously in the postponing group with the addition of one early decider. Very few individuals were concerned by worries over pregnancy or passing on heritable illnesses or reported being influenced by adverse childhood experiences. A number of participants reiterated that these concerns were not causative, but rather served as justifications when their childlessness is called into question either in their minds or by someone else. These findings seem to suggest that there may be an inherent desire to have children which is not connected to environmental concerns or issues and which is not present in all women. This could be a direction for further investigation.

Changes in Social Networks

A central assumption of this research was that women must fortify themselves against social losses as a result of their choice not to bear children. It was therefore unexpected when some of the participants reported no change in their social networks as a result of their decision to remain childless.

The differences in the experiences of women who felt their social networks shrink those who felt they become enhanced, and those who felt no change may be explained by

a variety of factors. These may include the general size of each woman's social network and the amount of time and energy she has to maintain those bonds when they become more tenuous. As well, some women clearly did not form bonds with women who either were, or eventually became mothers. Two of the participants, by way of example, work in demanding fields which put them in contact with other professionals who prize their careers very highly and who tend to organize and prioritize their lives around their work. They often have to travel for their work, need to be in an environment with minimal distraction, or work irregular hours; none of which makes an inviting environment for people who can only visit on a child oriented schedule.

Other respondents seemed to gravitate towards other childless individuals as a matter of affinity and therefore also circumvented feelings of loss around the issue of children. The education and work life of some participant put them in close association with others on a similar path and who also did not have children. These participants described traveling in circles where children were not the norm and therefore any changes in their social networks were considered to be due to other events.

Maintaining a role as a valued friend in the lives of those who have become parents has enhanced the lives of at least two of the respondents. These participants reported no change in their social circle and continued to be included in the lives of her friends who had children as if they were family members:

I have friends who have kids that totally love the fact that I don't and totally respect that choice...I also have quite a few friends who have decided not to have kids themselves and so they hear everyone's not wrapped up in child raising and having children, so that's been that's been great for me. I guess if I lived in a different part of the country or I'm thinking... when you see magazines and advertisements, if I really let that

get to me I can see how that might get to a person... kind of wear them down and be like; well, what's wrong with me? But I haven't felt that way.

Most participants expressed that they had wondered about being mothers themselves at various times in their lives. Sometimes this was around the idea of having grown children, sometimes it was in relation to having the opportunity to guide and teach a child, or any other number of things. Fluctuating feelings are normal and appropriate can also be helpful, particularly if there is a partner involved in the decision making process who is of a different mind. Couples can become polarized around issues and in the interest of minimizing overly reactionary choices, it's important to support the gradations of feeling in between the two poles:

... I think it would've been great to have somebody at point where I sort of felt myself softening from the defensive position about not having kids; it would've been really great to have somebody say its okay for you to change your position on this. It's not part of your... what is the core view, to have this defensive stance. By softening a little bit you're not changing who you are. You're just changing your view on something. It would have been helpful to have someone to say ... it doesn't change who you are, people aren't going to disrespect you or anything for changing the way you think about something. And it's not going to make you a different person. People aren't going to think you're not as solid or sturdy, or reliable or anything... you changed your mind...people change their minds about things all the time. Or maybe you haven't changed your mind yet, but it's also okay to have a range of... to have a very complicated view of something and you don't need to just stay in one place and build walls around you. Because, I wonder sometimes whether I would have...if things would be different.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The major findings of this investigation into the experiences of voluntary childlessness in a small population of New England Women are summarized as follows: There are differences in the timing of the decision to remain childless and these differences in timing are related to levels of regret or satisfaction with the decision. The acceptance of the decision to remain childless by significant others is an important factor in a positive experience of voluntary childlessness. All participants in this investigation did share concerns about growing older without children to look after them. Participants were satisfied with their lives through fulfilling work and had some generative role that allowed them to participate and contribute to their world in meaningful ways. Overall, the earlier studies described in the literature review support these findings.

Earlier studies demonstrated a strong correlation between level of regret for the decision to remain childless and the timing of the decision (Callan, 1983; Jeffries & Konnert, 2002; Morrell, 2000). Participants in this study also showed comparative levels of regret or satisfaction with their decision; early deciders experienced the least regret and postponers experienced the most regret. Regret was also linked to the experience of not being supported in the decision to remain childless as shown in earlier research (Callan, 1983; Houseknecht, 1982).

Most participants in this study have had the experience of being challenged or questioned about their decision to remain childless either directly by others, or through

the general experience of being immersed in a culture where most women become mothers and the choice to remain childless is not positively perceived (Gillespie, 2001; Morrell, 1994, 2000). How participants responded in these instances either fostered understanding and growth and improved their connection to others, or left them disconnected and feeling more isolated and misunderstood.

Staying socially connected in an authentic and fulfilling way proved to be an important and protective factor against emotional distress and regret around the decision to remain childless. One participant's rejoinder to a confused patient regarding her childless state was an attempt to repair an empathetic failure in their relationship. Her response about caring for animals helps both her and her clients to nurture a connection between them which could otherwise be threatened if she were to respond with anger, self-doubt or shame. Jordan (Rosen and Walker, 2004) called this strategy mutual empathy and identifies this as being, "key in moving a relationship toward deeper and more resilient connection" (p. 10). In order for this participant to provide the level of care that she wanted to offer to her clients, she liked to be able to be authentic with them. She has found a way to respond that allows her to be authentic in who she is and also similar to the client in some way. Her response emphasized their commonality, not their difference, reinforcing social connections and shaming neither the client nor herself.

Most participants in this study reported having to find some way to politely deal with adverse reactions to their decision to remain childless. Where the relationship is important, considerable effort is made to respond in a sincere and respectful manner. Where relationships are less meaningful, non-essential and more circumstantial, participants demonstrated more willingness to be less conscientious in their replies and

were more aware of their frustrations. According to CRT, “How those differences are treated is a telling indicator of the quality of connection” (Rosen & Walker, 2004, p. 9).

Earlier research (Callan, 1983; Houseknecht, 1982) has shown that a positive experience for voluntarily childless women has been connected to having the support of significant others for this decision. Participants in this study all experienced support for their decision from important and significant people in their lives which helped them to buffer any adverse reactions. The importance of these relationships in participants’ positive sense of themselves as childless women is borne out by CRT which suggests that women will make concessions against their authentic wishes and desires in order to remain connected to important individuals in their lives (Jordan, Walker & Hartling, 2004; Rosen & Walker, 2004).

An example of the significant impact of social support for the decision is evident in Callan’s (1983) study which showed that couples that had ambivalent feelings about becoming parents would have children in order to stay connected to their families and parenting counterparts. Letherby’s (2002) research showed that women who had ambivalent feelings about motherhood would likely remain childless if they were not pressured into motherhood by their social network. Participants in this study all reported that they have never been pressured by their families or other significant people in their lives around their decision to remain childless.

As well, participants tended to lead unconventional lives in other dimensions, often self-employed in uncommon fields or practicing non-traditional forms of spirituality. Participant’s families also supported them in these other areas of their lives. Having families of origin who are tolerant of non-traditional lifestyles is demonstrated to

be common in women who choose to remain childless by Ireland's (1993) research. Her findings suggested that voluntarily childless women value having the personal freedom to pursue personal interests and that this quality was a result of having tolerant and encouraging families. It should be noted that not all women in this study identified their families as having these supportive and encouraging qualities although they also neither encouraged nor dissuaded their children from becoming parents. Two participants identified mothers who were alcoholic, mentally ill and blamed having had children for their unhappy state. Both of these participants felt that their experience somewhat, although not exclusively, informed their experience to remain childless. This is also consistent with earlier research (Ireland, 1993) which investigated the assumption that women who choose to remain childless must be reacting to early childhood trauma. Voluntarily childless women were found to have no higher incidence of childhood trauma than the general parenting population.

Common themes emerged in the narratives that were not addressed in the literature review, but which add to the general body of knowledge regarding women's experiences of voluntary childlessness. These included concerns related to growing older without children and that the majority of participants experienced shifts in their social networks away from friends who have chosen to have children. Both of these findings were connected with some regret and sense of loss for participants. When analyzed from a position of CRT, this finding is not surprising. CRT identifies points of disconnection as being personally distressing and resulting in feelings of difference, unworthiness and shame (Rosen & Walker, 2004). These feelings may be explained by the negative attributes found to be given to voluntarily childless women (Callan, 1985; Lampman &

Dowling-Guyer,1995; Somers ,1993). These early studies showed that women who chose to remain childless were more often perceived negatively. These negative perceptions were tied to cultural values embedded in social messages regarding developmental norms for women (Gillespie, 2001, Morell, 1994). Walker and Rosen (2004) describe these culturally controlling images as, “culturally constructed ‘stories’ about groups and individuals that communicate how that group or individual is to be regarded by others...falsities that have the effect of holding people in place...protect existing objectifications and power arrangements.” (p.17)

By not conforming to prevalent social expectations that women become mothers, voluntarily childless women do pay a price socially. However, other factors must be considered with respect to the shift in social networks that most voluntarily childless women experience once their peers begin to have children. This shift was accounted for by participants as a result of changing interests and a differing nexus of commonalities that naturally occur when something as life-changing as children enter the picture for some women but not for others. These changes include a decrease in available socializing time for new mothers and a profound drift away from shared empathic experiences between mothers and voluntarily childless women.

Voluntarily childless women were generally buffered from the cumulative effects of these losses if they were involved in activities, hobbies or work that had components which allowed them to make generative contributions and engage in a nurturing role outside of the experience of motherhood. This provided them with a general sense of satisfying connection and fulfillment in life.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestion for Further Research

Limitations of this study included only drawing on a very local population of women and relying on a snowball sampling process to identify respondents. As a result, participants in this study were similar in many areas; racially, spiritually, economically and in terms of their educational levels. With the exception of two participants, the sample was heterosexual, most held at least a bachelor's degree and all participants were Caucasian. Therefore, the experiences reflected upon in this study reflect a very small segment of the population and are not necessarily applicable to women living elsewhere in the country or who are from different racial and/or ethnic groups where different cultural expectations, beliefs and practices will influence women around the decision and the experience of voluntary childlessness. There is a need for a broader racial and cultural examination of the factors involved in the decision making process around voluntary childlessness as well as an examination of those experiences with the decision across a broader social spectrum.

It should also be noted that this researcher was acquainted with all participants through various social channels prior to their participation in this study. While I had some concern that this might bias the outcome, particularly from the position of CRT in that participants might re-script their narratives to be consistent with my needs in order to maintain our emotional bond as women who have chosen not to have children. While I believe that is important to acknowledge this possibility, the quality of information gathered in the interviewing process was, according to one participant, enhanced by our prior connection. The participant stated that she would not have given as much private information to someone that she did not know but because of our acquaintance, she felt

comfortable sharing such deeply personal information with me. Therefore I could conclude that my general acquaintance with the participants has a positive influence on the results, yielding more intimate information than might have been gathered otherwise.

At the outset, I had fairly clear notions of what constitutes a voluntarily childless woman, and these were largely reinforced by the static nature of definitions used in previous research into this phenomenon. However, during the process of gathering narratives, my awareness of what is considered voluntary childlessness was expanded. Eventually, the focus became less about the decision-making process and more on the environmental supports for the decision which translated into the timing of the decision. I consider this discovery to be serendipitous as had I set stricter criteria, this intersection of external and internal experiences might not have been as visible. By allowing women to identify themselves as voluntarily childless rather than pre-identifying more stringent criteria for participation, these unexpected interpretations of voluntary childlessness emerged. If I were to re-do this study, it would include a new category for the experiences of women who are fecund but who define themselves as being childless as a result of circumstance.

Implications

Some of the findings have implications for social policy. Two participants shared experiences with the circumstantial nature of their childlessness that draws attention to the lack of resources available to potential mother's who are single and/or low income. This finding has implications for family focused social policy if women are remaining childless as a result of financial circumstance. Secondly, a growing population of elderly

women without children may have implications for future trends in social policy regarding elder care and also merits further investigation.

Clinicians working with women who are either childless by choice or in the process of deciding whether or not to become a mother, should be aware that a woman's decision to remain childless may have been known to her for as long as she can remember, or it may be an ongoing process that contains elements of grief and regret as well as satisfaction and hope. A woman's ability to manage her distress around her experience is likely to have a better prognosis if the decision was made very early in life and if she has been supported by important others in her decision. Her changing perception of her experience of remaining childless is being informed by external pressures as well her own internal sense of what is right for her. It is important for those in the helping professions to be aware of this when their clients express ambivalence around the question of motherhood. Supporting women through this process includes deconstructing the attitudes and assumptions extruded by the environment as well as her internal needs. The general protective qualities of satisfying work or hobbies that allow women to make contributions should also be considered as a way of making peace with the decision to remain childless where high levels of regret may be affecting the client's sense of well being. As Walker (2004) wrote:

“...connection is both *encounter* and *active process*, and its fundamental quality is *respect*... connection provides safety from contempt and humiliation; however, it does not promise comfort...connection involves the respectful negotiation of difference that facilitates growth and the emergence of something new.”

References

- Boyd, R. L. (1989). Racial differences in childlessness: A centennial review. *Sociological Perspectives*, 32(2), 183-199.
- Cain, M. (2001). *The childless revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.
- Callan, V. J. (1983). Factors affecting early and late deciders of voluntary childlessness. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 119, 261-268.
- Callan, V. J. (1985) Perceptions of parents, the voluntarily and involuntarily childless: A multidimensional scaling analysis. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, November, 1045-1050.
- Callan, V. J. (1986) The impact of the first birth: Married and single women preferring childlessness, one child, or two children. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 48 (2), 261-269.
- Churchill, W. (1998). *The Crucible of American Indian Identity: Native tradition versus colonial imposition in post conquest North America*. Z Magazine, January, 1998. Retrieved 1/25/2007 from www.zmag.org/zmag/articles/jan98.htm.
- Gillespie, R. (2001). Contextualizing voluntary childlessness within a postmodern model of reproduction: Implications for health and social needs. *Critical Social Policy LTD*, 21(2), 139-159.
- Houseknecht, S. K. (1982) Voluntary childlessness: Toward a theoretical integration. *Journal of Family Issues*, 3(4), 419-471.
- Ireland, M. S. (1993). *Reconceiving women; Separating motherhood from female identity*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Jeffries, S. & Konnert, C. (2002). Regret and psychological well-being among voluntary and involuntary childless women and mothers. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 54(2), 89-106.
- Jordan, J., Walker, M. & Hartling, L. (Eds.). (2004) *The Complexity of Connection*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Lampman, C., & Dowling-Guyer, S. (1995). Attitudes toward voluntary and involuntary childlessness. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 171(1&2), 213-222.

- Letherby, G. (2002). Childless and bereft? : Stereotypes and realities in relation to “voluntary” and “involuntary” childlessness and womanhood. *Sociological Inquiry*, 72 (1), 7-20.
- Morrell, C. (1994). *Unwomanly conduct: The challenges of intentional childlessness*. Routledge, NY.
- Morell, C. (2000). Saying no: Woman’s experiences with reproductive refusal. *Feminism and Psychology*, 10 (3), 313-322.
- Park, K. (2005). Choosing childlessness: Weber’s Typology of action and motives of voluntarily childless. *Sociological Inquiry*, 75(3), 372-402.
- Paul, P. (2001). Childless by choice. *American Demographics*, 23 (11), 45-50.
- Polonko, K., Scanzoni, J., Teachman, J. (1982). Childlessness and marital satisfaction. *Journal of Family Issues*, 3 (4), 545-573.
- Somers, M. D. (1993). A comparison of voluntarily childfree adults and parents. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 55, 643-650.
- Thomas, I. M. (1995) Childless by choice: Why some Latinas are saying no to motherhood. *Hispanic*.8 (4). Retrieved 6/26/07 from <http://www.hispaniconline.com/magazine/PDF/may%201995%20Childless%20by%20Choice.pdf>.
- Veenhoven, R. (1975). Is there an innate need for children? *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 1,495-501.
- Walker, M. & Rosen, W. (Eds.) (2004). *How Connections Heal*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Waters, M. C. (2000). Immigration, intermarriage, and the challenge of measuring racial/ethnic identities. *American Journal of Public Health*, 90 (11), 1735-1737.

Appendix A

Informed Consent

Dear Participant,

My name is Sharon Manning-Kelly. I am an MSW candidate at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a study of voluntarily childless women to learn more about the reasons and the process that inform the decision to remain childless and women's experiences around this choice. The study is being conducted for the Master of Social Work thesis at Smith College School for Social Work. The results of this study will be used for possible presentation and future publication.

I am interested in women's experiences around the decision making process of voluntary childlessness in the context of western social expectations. This study focuses on women who have chosen not to become mothers, will not reproduce, and do not intend to adopt a child. You are being asked to participate in this study if (a) you do not intend to become a mother and/or may have been pregnant but chose not to carry a child to term; (b) you are 35 years of age or older and define yourself as being voluntarily childless.

I will ask participants in this study to answer questions regarding their decision to remain childless and how this has contributed to such things as social experiences, general life satisfaction, career and future outlook, and self-perception within a culture that perceives childbearing as a normative developmental stage. This interview process should last no more than 75 minutes and will be directly transcribed to computer using the Dragon Naturally Speaking transcription program. The interview will also be digitally recorded as back up to the transcription program. To ensure your confidentiality, each transcription will be identified by code instead of by name and the digitally recorded back up data will be deleted upon successful completion of each transcribed interview.

Your participation is voluntary. You will receive no financial benefit for your participation in this study. However, you may benefit from knowing that you have contributed to the knowledge of the voluntarily childless experience. It is my hope that this study will help social workers have a better understanding of women who are puzzling through their decision making process and be more effective in serving this population. You may also benefit from being able to tell your story and having your perspective heard.

The potential risks of participating in this study are the possibility that you might feel strong or uncomfortable emotions while talking about your experiences during or after the interview. I will give each participant a list of resources for additional support.

Strict confidentiality will be maintained, as consistent with Federal regulations and the mandates of the social work profession. Confidentiality will be protected by coding the information and storing the data in a locked file for a minimum of 3 years. Your identity will be protected, as names will be changed in the analysis of the data. Your name will never be associated with the information you provide in the questionnaire or the interview. The data may be used in other education activities as well as in the preparation for my thesis.

This study is completely voluntary. You are free to refuse to answer specific questions and to withdraw from the study at any time before March 30, 2007. If you decide to withdraw, all data describing you will be immediately destroyed.

Sincerely,

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

_____ Date: _____

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

_____ Date: _____

Sharon Manning-Kelly, Researcher

Please keep a copy of this form for your records. If you have any questions or wish to withdraw your consent, please contact:

Sharon Manning-Kelly
PO Box 3005
Ashfield, MA 01330
(413)628-3818
smanning@email.smith.edu

Appendix B
Human Subjects Review Application

Investigator Name: Sharon Manning-Kelly

Project Title: An Investigation into Women's Experiences of Childlessness by Intention or Through a Process of Postponement

Contact Address: PO Box 3005, Ashfield MA, 01330

Contact Phone: (413)628-3818

E:-mail Address: smanning@email.smith.edu

Project Purpose and Design

The purpose of this study is to focus on 1.) the reasons that women have for choosing to remain childless and 2.) their perception of themselves within a culture that perceives childbearing as a normative developmental stage.

This study uses qualitative methods in semi-structured interviews to investigate a voluntarily childless population of women who are at least 35. I have chosen the age of 35 as the youngest representative of the sample as it is at this age that a woman's fertility declines markedly. By this age, women who have ambivalent feelings about parenting are beginning to seriously consider the implications of delaying pregnancy. Participants will be identified through a snowball sampling process. Twelve women who are identified as being voluntarily childless will be selected to gather qualitative information in semi-structured interviews. The decision to include personal narrative dovetails nicely with the needs of the social work and human services research.

The findings in this study may benefit all those who are interested in women's health and reproductive choices and are not limited only to those in the allied health professions.

This investigation will provide participants' point of view to clinician's helping similar

clients puzzle through their own decision making process. This information will be used for the MSW Thesis, presentation, and publication.

The Characteristics of the Participants

Women will not be excluded due to race, sexual orientation, or relationship status.

A minimum of 12 completed interviews are required for the qualitative study method.

Characteristics of the women participating in the study are:

- **35 years of age or older**
- **Childless status is a result of intention, not as a result of infertility**
- **Have not borne children**
- **Do not intend to bear children**

Women are excluded from this study if any of the following are true:

- **Has borne a child**
- **Younger than the age of 35 and fertile**

The Recruitment Process

Participants in the study will be recruited using snowball sampling. This process begins with seven voluntarily childless women known to this researcher. These seven women are very committed to helping other women who are considering not having children by informing members of the social work profession about their personal experiences with voluntary childlessness, their decision making process, and other things that they have learned along the way. Through them, other participants are being identified. As well, other individuals are being referred to me through contiguous social channels as the nature of my research travels by word of mouth.

Potential interviewees will be screened according to study criteria as outlined in the preceding section. To establish suitability, each potential participant will be mailed a brief description of the study and its purpose. This letter will contain an SASE and a short questionnaire. The potential participants will be asked to check either “yes” or “no” at each item on the short questionnaire and if “yes” can be answered to all criteria, to return it in the SASE.

Those that meet all criteria of the study will be invited to participate. These will be notified through a letter which will also contain 2 copies of the Informed Consent letter. One copy is to be signed and returned to me in an enclosed SASE before the interview appointment is set.

The Nature of Participation

Through a brief series of open ended questions, participants in this study will be asked to discuss the following areas: their decision making process, factors that have influenced their decision, and their personal experiences surrounding their decision both good and bad, and what they would want a therapist to understand about their childlessness. An opportunity will also be provided for each participant to say anything that she wished concerning her childlessness that has not otherwise been addressed.

Face to face interviews will be conducted. It is estimated that the interview process will take a minimum of one hour and not more than one and one half hours. Interviews will be transcribed directly to my computer using the Dragon Naturally Speaking Transcription Program. This program requires a five to ten minute voice calibration process in order that the program learns the unique pronunciations of each interviewee. As well, the interview will be backed up with a digital reordering of the

interview in order to double check any errors in the transcription process. The digital interviews will be transferred to CD-rom which will be securely stored for three years with all other interview materials. The interviews on the digital recorder are deleted once each interview has been saved to the CD-rom.

The interviews will be conducted either in my home or the participant's home or some other suitable location to be mutually determined. This is to ensure both the comfort and privacy of the participants as well as to prevent extraneous noises from interfering with the recording devices. Such things could not otherwise be controlled in public spaces.

Risks of Participation

The sensitive and emotional subject matter of this research may cause emotional distress in participants. A list of therapeutic referral resources as well as organizations which represent voluntarily childless individuals will be distributed to all who participate in this study.

Benefits of Participation

Participants in this study may benefit in a number of ways. The process of telling their story can help them to feel less isolated in their decision to remain childless. They may gain new clarity in the process of analyzing the questions in a deliberate interview which can provide new perspectives. Participants in this study are making a contribution to the field of social work which will inform the perspectives of clinicians helping both decisively and ambivalently childless women.

Informed Consent Procedures

Two copies of a document of Informed Consent will be mailed to all participants in this study with an SASE. Participants must sign and date both copies keeping one for

them selves, the other to be mailed to me in the SASE before the interview can be arranged.

Precautions Taken to Safeguard Confidentiality and Identifiable Information

In order to safeguard the identities of all participants any identifiable information, such as names and mention of identifiable place markers will be removed. Transcription of each interview will be stored separately from Informed Consents and in a secure, locked area for a minimum of three years. Digital back up material will be transferred to CD-rom and deleted from the recording unit upon completion of the thesis both for security and in order to be able to have free memory space on the digital recording unit for subsequent interviews. Since participants are being identified through snowballing, many of them are known to each other. Thus anonymity cannot be guaranteed in every case, but confidentiality of responses can be. My research advisor will have access to the data once all identifying information has been removed. Confidentiality will be protected in presentation by changing names and other significant identifying information as well as disguising illustrative vignettes and quoted comments.

Investigator's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Advisor's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C
HSR Acceptance Letter

March 4, 2007

Sharon Manning-Kelly
PO Box 3005
Ashfield, MA 01330

Dear Sharon,

Your revised materials have been reviewed and all is now in order. We are now able to give final approval to your study.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain signed consent documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Mary Beth Averill Research Advisor

Appendix D
Recruitment and Screening Letter

Sharon Manning-Kelly
PO Box 3005
Ashfield, MA 01330
March 9, 2007

Participant name
[Street address](#)
Town, state, zip code

Dear Participant,

I am a Master's level graduate student enrolled in the Smith College School of Social Work. I am currently working on a thesis which examines women's experiences of childlessness by intention, chance or circumstance. You are receiving this invitation because you have expressed prior interest either to me, another participant, or an associate of mine familiar with this project.

Your participation involves providing your personal first hand accounts including your experiences of remaining childless in a culture that perceives childbearing as a normative developmental stage, the reasons that you have for choosing to remain childless, and significant factors in your decision making process.

This invitation is extended as it is understood that you are a woman who has either chosen to remain childless or who has deferred the decision and you are currently 35 years of age or older. If you have begun to define yourself as a woman without children, and/or not likely to have a child, and would like to contribute your personal experiences with being voluntarily childless to this research, please respond to this invitation by March 15, 2007. Criteria for participation can be found on page 3 of this letter.

The following information is provided in order to help you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. The purpose of this study is to examine some of the factors that influence a woman's decision to either not have children or to defer the decision past the age of a facile conception or into infertility. The study also seeks to understand how this decision affects a woman socially, culturally and economically. Advances in reproductive technology as well as changes in social attitudes towards who may become a parent have expanded childbearing options in our culture. Therefore, no one will be excluded from this study based on sexual orientation or relationship status.

- You are asked to read and answer the questions presented in the eligibility section of this document. If you answer "yes" to all the questions, you are eligible to participate.

- If you are eligible to participate and wish to do so, please read and sign both copies of the Informed Consent document. Keep one copy for your personal records and mail one to me in the enclosed SASE.
- Once I have the SASE, you will be contacted via your indicated preference, to discuss the interview method and to address any questions or concerns that you may have about your participation in this study.
- Please allow at least one hour for a personal interview. An additional half hour is offered if necessary. It is important that recorded interviews take place away from distracting environmental noises and in a place where you would feel comfortable talking about personal issues. An appropriate location is to be mutually determined by us and may include your home or mine.

Participation involves answering open ended questions. The method of recording your answers will be by way of the Dragon Naturally Speaking computer aided voice transcription program. In order for the transcription program to be able to recognize your natural method of speaking and transcribe it accurately, it must learn your voice. First time users dictate from a provided text into the computer for between 5 and 10 minutes. This helps the program to accurately transcribe the unique patterns of speech each of us has; for example to learn to differentiate between similar sounds. The digital recording of the interview will be transferred to a CD-rom as back up to the transcription. No one else aside from me will have access to these materials until your identity as a participant has been disguised. After your identity has been protected, my thesis advisor will have access to the interview materials. All interview materials will be stored in a safe, locked area for a minimum of three years in accordance with federal guidelines for the protection of study participants.

There are no right or wrong responses; the goal is to gather the stories of individual women who have chosen another direction for their lives outside of the typical role of “mother.” I would be very pleased if you would consent to lend your voice to this study which benefits social research and increases understanding of this often poorly understood but growing part of contemporary American culture. Eligibility criteria, two copies of a consent form and an SASE are included at the end of this document. If you chose to participate in this study, please sign and return *one* copy of the Informed Consent along with the Eligibility Form in the SASE. The other copy of this form is for your personal records. The consent form authorizes information that you provide to me to be used for the purpose of research and dissemination of the research. It also outlines the methods which will be used to disguise and protect your identity. Once I have the SASE, I will contact you with specific interview information.

Sincerely,

Sharon Manning-Kelly
 (413)628-3818
smanning@email.smith.edu

Eligibility

No one will be excluded from this study based on sexual orientation or relationship status.

1.) I am 35 years of age or older.

Yes No

2.) I am childless by choice and not as a result of infertility.

Yes No

3.) I feel that it is highly unlikely that I will or I do not intend to have or adopt children

Yes No

If you have answered “yes” to all of the above and want to be interviewed, please provide contact information:

Name: _____

Contact Information: *please circle preferred method of contact*

Phone: _____

E-Mail: _____

Please read and sign the Informed Consent document enclosed. Using the SASE enclosed please mail both the Informed Consent and this page to me: Please keep the second copy of the Informed Consent form for your own records.

Sharon Manning-Kelly
PO Box 3005
Ashfield MA 01330

Thank you for your time and your participation in this study.

Appendix E

Interview Guide

Part I: Demographic Questions:

Age:

Race:

Sexual Orientation:

Relationship status:

Highest Level of Education:

Gross Annual Household Income (please circle one):

Under \$25,000

Between \$25-\$45,000

Between \$46-\$65,000

Between \$66,-\$86,000

Over \$86,000

Religious Affiliation:

Part II: Open Ended Questions:

1.) How would you define your self in the spectrum of childless women; childless by choice, by happenstance... or is there some other way that you prefer to describe yourself?

2.) What would you say are the some of the key factors which caused you to decide to not have children? Was it a singular defining event or more of a process? Please elaborate.

3.) When you think about it, do you see changes in your social circle as a result of not having children? Tell me about what you've noticed.

4.) How do you think that your decision is perceived by your family and friends?

5.) How do you feel about your place in this culture as a woman without children?

6.) Have you ever felt regret for this decision? If so, what situations or conditions precipitate this feeling?

7.) Is there anything that has not been covered in this interview that you would like people in the helping professions to understand about women, like yourself, who have chosen to remain child free?

If the following have not otherwise been addressed in the course of the interview and there is time:

** Have any of the following concerns played a role in your decision to remain child free?

- Concerns about the environment and/or over-population
- Concerns related to politics and the global socio-political climate
- Concerns about career development and personal accomplishment
- Concerns about finances and economic security
- Concerns that one's own personal goals and lifestyle will not be compatible with motherhood
- Concern for passing on heritable illnesses
- Concern for one's own health and/or longevity (i.e., having a cancer in remission, possibility of developing post partum depression or bi-polar illness, etc)
- Concerns resulting from one's own negative experience of, or perception of childhood
- Concerns about one's own parenting abilities
- Concerns of or related to the process of being pregnant and giving birth
- Are there any other concerns that you have had which you would add to this list?