

## Voluntary Childlessness: Stigma and Societal Pressures on Men and Women

Katie Reining

Though we have seen strides in challenging typical ideals of women, notions of womanhood and motherhood still seem to be synonymous. Even with birth control becoming more widely accessible, it is still assumed that this is a temporary fix until a woman is ready to be a mother. The problem with this concept is that for some women, motherhood isn't an option—because they can't have children or because they don't want to. 1 in 5 women are childfree by the time they reach the end of their childbearing years (Hayford 2013). The stigmas associated with choosing not to have children are numerous, and take form in face to face interactions, online, and in mainstream media. However, when looking at how men deal with this issue, there is a significant lack of research. This research takes aim at the gap in the literature, examining the societal pressures on childbearing as experienced by both men and women; seeking to illuminate the ways in which we receive and respond differently to those pressure. Asking do the societal pressures on childbearing affect men and women who choose to remain childless differently? If so, in what ways? The purpose of this research is to explore how the societal pressures for men and women to have kids came to exist, and how the pressures and stigmas differ between men and women. Based on stereotypes of male and female pressure, I hypothesize that men receive fewer pressures to have children than women do. Modern definitions of womanhood are changing – no longer *requiring* women to have children in order to feel fulfilled. However, this often leads to women being demeaned and having their life choices questioned. As feminism and opposing sexism move further into mainstream culture and discussions, we need to ask ourselves why we are still prioritizing women's reproductive abilities over their choices and

desires, as well as discussing the issue of why men do not experience these same pressures. To better understand the societal pressures associated with childbearing, we examine the extant literature before turning to my own research, its methods, findings, and limitations.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The current literature regarding voluntary childlessness focuses on describing women and their perceived deviance for not wanting to have children. The characteristics of these individuals are often described as selfish and cold by those they have chosen to disclose their beliefs to. However, there is little to no information about how childless men are perceived. To better understand this, we look to the research and history, stigma, individual choices and family responses, and public reactions.

### *Research and History of Voluntary Childlessness*

Waren and Pals argue that childlessness among women has been well researched, but much of that data does not apply to men (Waren and Pals 2013: 162). They used data from the National Survey of Family Growth in order to compare and contrast distinguishing factors between the two groups. Many of the arguments Waren and Pals make come from the mindset that traditional sex role belief decreases the probability of being voluntarily childless in both men and women (Waren and Pals 2013: 168).

In examining the characteristics of childfree couples as a whole, they found that “those who deliberately avoid parenthood tend to live in large urban areas, to have been married for the first time at a late age, to have been married more than once, to be non-religious, to be college educated, and to have both husband and wife employed in relatively high income positions” (Waren and Pals 2013: 168). This is unsurprising as the general assumptions regarding

voluntarily childless people are that they are career driven and often perceived to be self-centered. However, this they make the distinction that these characteristics fit only among couples who are *voluntarily* childless. The authors do not go into detail about involuntary childlessness and its effect on couples, but it can be assumed that those who are involuntarily childless fall into nearly opposite categories. Hayford highlights that childlessness has nearly doubled in the last 30 years, matched at this level only by the period during the Great Depression (Hayford 2013: 1644). Hayford's findings mirror those of Waren and Pals, suggesting that education, marriage, and fertility rates have the greatest effect on childlessness. However, they differ in that Hayford notes that they are not independent, meaning that a woman is more likely to remain childfree if they fall into all three categories rather than just one.

Hayford uses data from the Fertility Supplements of four Current Population Survey Fertility Supplements (1995, 1998, 2004, and 2008) as well as logistic regression and regression-based decomposition techniques to analyze the patterns of fertility and childbearing amongst women in the United States (Hayford 2013:1648). Hayford found that education seems to have a direct correlation to desires to be childless. In the cohort of women born between 1931 and 1968, childlessness increased steadily, accounting for the baby boom and the baby bust (Hayford 2013: 1652). However, these rates leveled and then dropped off among the women born in the later 1960s, and this trend continued into the twenty-first century. She further states that members of a birth cohort make decisions about childbearing and family formation in response to shared social and economic conditions (Hayford 2013: 1644). In addition, Hayford argues that declines in marriage rates and increases in non-marital fertility have been concentrated among women with lower educational attainment, thus upholding her previous statement that education and fertility

rates go hand in hand. Though she extensively examines the path of childlessness in the United States in women, there is a lack of data about how this affects men.

### *Stigma*

Those who wish to remain childless often face stigmatization from friends, family, acquaintances, and strangers. This stigma stems from the concept that women should get married and have children, thus anyone who deviates from the norm are typically viewed in a negative light. These stigmas include the ideas that childfree women are cold-hearted, selfish, and materialistic. Park (2002) explains stigma management of the voluntarily childless by stating that those who possess a stigmatized identity are faced with the ongoing tasks of accepting it themselves and negotiating it with others. She further defines the concept of *pronatalism*, or essentially being “pro-baby.” It’s not that the voluntarily childless don’t *have* children, it’s the fact that they don’t *want* children that makes them deviant. Childlessness has been made possible by an increase in contraceptives and expanding female work opportunities (Park 2002).

Mollen highlights the fact that although there is a growing number of women who are choosing not to have children, these women are still heavily stigmatized (Mollen 2006: 270). As she further explains that the terms “woman” and “mother” have become synonymous (Mollen 2006: 269). She further states that reasons to not have children are complex, and childfree women are likely largely influenced by gender role expectations (Mollen 2006: 262). The research on childless stigma suggests that women who choose not to have children are considered to be deviant, greedy, not fully women, and even sub-human (McQuillan et al.2012; Mollen 2006). Mollen interviewed twenty four childfree men and women and found that the majority of these participants responded that others often viewed them as cold, peculiar, materialistic, and egotistical (Mollen 2006: 273).

### *Individual Choices and Family Responses*

Veevers notes that some have postulated that maternal instinct is what drives women to have children (Veevers 1973: 201). Additionally, socialization plays a key role in driving women to have children. She further states that childlessness is associated with emotional instability and maladjustment. While this has been fought by feminists in the past several years, the notion of pronatalism has permeated society even forty-three years after Veevers wrote this article.

Women who choose not to have children are often met with questions from peers, family, and strangers about their futures. Popular questions include “who will take care of you when you get old?” and “how can you ever hope to be a family without children,” questions that are noted in childfree forums such as Facebook groups and websites dedicated to sharing the childfree experience. While there have been great strides forward in making the childfree lifestyle more socially acceptable, as noted by Veevers’ article, there is still a long way to go. Veevers also states that sociologists tend to study particular aspects of society that they find interesting, while leaving other areas out (Veevers 1973: 199). Where sociology is typically fixed on exploring minorities, men’s voices are sometimes forgotten. This further highlights the need for more research in this area, particularly because Veevers’ article does not mention how men are affected by voluntary childlessness.

### *Public Response and Characteristics*

Waren and Pals further divide couples in order to fully grasp how the public responds to their voluntary childlessness. They found that married women who are childless, both by choice and involuntarily, have little difference in religion, socioeconomic status, or metropolitan residence (Waren and Pals 2013: 171). While there are many similarities between these women, there are two key differences: involuntarily childless women are more likely to be or have been

married, and voluntary childless women are much more likely to have no current religious affiliation (Waren and Pals 2013: 166). Overall, they found that voluntarily childless women have higher levels of overall wellbeing than involuntarily childless women, as well as lower levels of loneliness and depression (Waren and Pals 2013: 166). Lastly, Waren and Pals examine the characteristics of voluntarily childless men. This study focused on men in other countries – primarily Europe and Australia – and found that men who are married are more likely to have children than single men or men who are cohabitating with their partner. They found that higher unemployment and lower education increased chances of remaining childless (Waren and Pals 2013: 167). The authors further specify that while many cite “maternal instinct” as a reason for women to have children, this often does not apply to men. In addition, only about thirty men were surveyed, and none of these men resided in the United States, further highlighting the need for research in this field. Rijken and Merz conducted research in which they surveyed men and women to determine whether a double standard exists regarding voluntary childlessness. This research was the first to place the emphasis on the word *voluntary*. Rijken and Merz tested several hypotheses, the first being “women who choose not to have children are more disapproved of than men” (Rijken and Merz 2014: 472). Additionally, they hypothesized the inverse: “men who choose not to have children are more disapproved of than women.” The authors found that there is indeed a double standard in place, as noted by the title of their article “Double standards: Differences in norms on voluntary childlessness for men and women,” however, they specified that this is the first survey of its kind to acknowledge ideas surrounding childlessness.

Where Waren and Pals and Hayford have made distinctions between voluntary and involuntary childlessness, McQuillan et al ask if the reason why women have no children matter

with regard to level of childlessness concerns? (McQuillan et al. 2012: 1166). The authors argue that women who have biomedical fecundity barriers are under greater distress than those who remain childfree by choice. They make the claim that a woman not assuming a position as a mother is deviant – that is to say they are labeled as irregular and unusual. The authors lay out three kinds of childfree women: the “traditional,” “transitional,” and “transformative-childfree.” (McQuillan et al. 2012: 1172). First, the traditionally childfree woman is childfree due to infecundity, or the biological inability to have children. This is important to distinguish as fecundity and fertility have very different meanings. Women who are infertile are characterized as women who have been trying to conceive a child for at least 24 months without producing a fetus, whereas women who are infecund are biologically unable to produce a fetus (Poston, Jr., Bouvier 2010: 49). Second, the transitionally childfree are those who are ambivalent and career driven. Lastly, the transformative-childfree are strongly committed to childlessness and choose partners and friends who support their choice. The difference between the transitional and transformative-childfree is that the transitionally childfree are undecided about children, where the transformative-childfree are adamantly against having children, and nothing will sway them (McQuillan et al. 2012: 1162). Additionally, McQuillan et al divided childlessness into categories and to analyze them with marriage and friendship patterns, while also giving credence to those who are unable to children, thus effectively answering their question: does the reason matter?

Overall, the literature presents substantial evidence that there is a gender bias regarding voluntary childlessness, but there is no research distinguishing the specific ways in which men and women are treated differently (Rijken and Merz 2014: 472). The lack of research on this particular topic is why it is warranted in this specific area. Since childlessness has doubled in

recent years, it is crucial that we understand why this demographic change is taking place, and what societal pressures it forces upon women in a world that is currently in flux between women's liberation and traditional gender role upholding (Poston Jr. & Bouvier 2010). Some respondents seem to celebrate and glorify childlessness as a personal choice for bodily autonomy and freedom, but others call it selfish and question why women don't feel compelled to have children. My individual research aims to examine why these divisions exist, and how we can garner responses in order to accurately convey reasoning to opposing parties.

## METHODS

The purpose of this research is to understand people's different, individual experiences. Qualitative research is the best way to approach this, as short answer surveys leave a significant amount of information out, since it is difficult to answer and analyze personal experience in a multiple choice or short answer survey. Additionally, in order to get the depth of analysis required to accurately gauge the experiences, bonding and trust need to be present, which is nearly possible to attain via survey. As the goal is to obtain deep analysis on societal pressures of childbearing, the qualitative approach is the best option for this research.

To answer my question, I conducted semi-formal interviews lasting approximately twenty to sixty minutes in person and online with the voluntarily childless. The participants interviewed were of adult age, ranging from 21 to 76. I interviewed four men and five women. Eight of the nine participants were white, one was of South American descent. Some participants were married, and some interviews were conducted with both parties present. Participants were selected via snowball sampling, beginning with personal acquaintances, then moving outward. Each participant signed an informed consent, in which they agreed to the interview and knew that they were able to leave the study if they ever became uncomfortable with the process.



Methods of protecting privacy include changing names, omitting identifying factors from the descriptions of participants, and holding the interview records under lock and key for three years before destroying them. The goal of these interviews was to obtain as much rich information about being childfree and how it is accepted or rejected on a broader scope.

The interviews were coded via a combination of open and axial coding, and major themes were identified and analyzed. The coding process found six themes: personal realizations, family responses, friend responses, public responses, stigma, responding to stigma, and general ideas of childlessness. These themes were later combined to form the four major themes of analysis – individual choice, familial and friend reactions, spousal reactions, and public reactions. These four themes were best to explore the individuals' experiences.

## LIMITATIONS

As with all qualitative research, there is potential that the parties being interviewed are uncomfortable answering questions, or give short answers that will not advance the richness of the research. Additionally, some may become offended by questions I ask, and thus terminate the interview. Though I made sure to avoid content-specific language, some words such as “stigma” may be difficult to explain to someone who is unfamiliar with the word, thus making all questions using that word nearly impossible to ask. Additionally, if a participant is giving particularly short answers, it can hinder the depth I am looking for in my responses. My research was somewhat limited as my target demographic fell outside the McKendree population. While there are some who will be eligible and willing to participate in this study, it may be more difficult to find participants. I personally do not wish to remain childfree, meaning that my own views could come out during the research or writing process. Also, because I am a woman, I have experiences many of these pressures women face when it comes to having children. These

identities may impact the research as there is possibility for leading questions toward a specific answer, though the questions are written with the intent of keeping that at bay.

Additionally, the majority of the participants I interviewed were white. So while the data does highlight that there were very few pressures from family and friends, the one participant who is from South America could have experienced different pressures had they not moved to the United States. This demographic data should be expanded in future studies in order to truly identify the large scale pressures experienced by people of all races and ethnicities.

Lastly, since this was an assignment, I was under a significant time constraint to complete this research. The interviews were completed in the course of a semester, so with more time, this research could be expanded to include more viewpoints and include more diversity.

## FINDINGS

The findings of this research gave interesting insight into how voluntarily childlessness affects both men and women. Where I expected men to have almost no pressure to have children, this was not the case. Additionally, many women disclosed that their families were very supportive of their choices, but strangers were more likely to comment on their lifestyle.

### *Individual Choices*

In my research, many of the participants disclosed that they knew they wanted to be childfree from a rather young age. Leonard, a 76 year old man stated that he's never been comfortable with children, even when he was a young child. He stated that when he was four, his parents put him in preschool, and they ended up taking him out a short while later because he didn't get along with the kids. He also told his parents that he absolutely did not want a younger sibling, but if they wanted any grandkids, they better have another child because they would not

get any from him. This sentiment was echoed by Sidney, a 34 year old woman who stated that she thinks that being in the company of a child is “the most horrible thing I can think of. I mean, they’re really horrible creatures even when they’re sitting still and not speaking” (Sidney Interview). 22 year old Hillary stated that she had a dream in which she had a child that developed an allergy to dogs, and in her dream she chose the dog over the child, and this was the moment she realized that she wanted to remain childfree. These ideologies were the more extreme end of the spectrum of people I interviewed, but the point still stands that being childfree is a personal choice for everyone.

On the opposite end were Winnie and Rusty, a married couple aged 41 and 39, respectively. They married approximately ten years ago, and were very career driven. They both like to travel, and enjoy being able to pick up and leave on a moment’s notice. When asked about their decision to not have children, they stated that they “just never got around to it.” Winnie stated that there were times when they would discuss having children, and they tried for a while to have a baby, but it never happened, and so they decided they were happy with their freer lifestyle and wanted to keep it that way. They stated that the last time they discussed the possibility of having children, they were on vacation, and they couldn’t remember which country they were visiting or which time they had visited. Rusty laughed and said “that’s the childfree lifestyle! The vacations just blend together!” Similarly, Aubrey stated that being childfree has given her more time, freedom, and funds to be able to be with her belly dancing troupe. Emma is a 28 year old nanny who has decided to remain childfree. She loves children, but doesn’t want them for herself. These three interviews display that there are people who enjoy children, but do not want to have them themselves.

Wesley, aged 41, and Leonard both stated that they identify more as “loners,” and that influenced their decisions to not have children. Leonard stated that he isn’t very social, and prefers to be alone. Wesley stated almost the same idea – he never married, never really dated, never wanted to have children, and prefers to be by himself.

The majority of the men interviewed stated that their individual decision to not have children was largely influenced by their aversion to children. They stated that they were uncomfortable with kids, or generally did not enjoy them. Fewer women shared this mindset, but there were some who stated expressly that they did not like children.

The individual choices to remain childfree are numerous, with answers ranging from monetary reasons, freedom, and ability to travel. Additionally, nearly all of the participants self-identified as selfish when it comes to not having children. This label used to be an insulting stigma for the childfree, but it seems as though some are reclaiming this title and embracing their childfree lifestyle in this way. Many participants stated that they adjusted to a childfree lifestyle and quickly began to enjoy it, thus maintaining this integral part of their identity.

### *Familial and Friend Reactions*

As social beings, humans are widely influenced by our primary and secondary agents of socialization – friends and family. Since humans crave acceptance from others, the idea of expressing an idea that could be counterintuitive to what our social circle believes is a daunting task. This idea pertains to things like sexual identity, political identity, and ideas involving familial structure.

The most surprising aspect of this research was that nearly all participants stated that their friends and family members were extremely supportive of their choices not to have children. All

participants eluded that their friends were unquestioningly more supportive, even in situations where the family was supportive too. This may be due to the fact that younger people are more likely to understand the reasons of wanting to remain childfree, where parents and other family members may be more inclined to uphold older ideas about familial structure, but still want to support their children. Hillary stated that her grandparents seem sad when she talks about her decision to not have kids, but that's likely because that side of the family is rather small. Her immediate family seems to be pretty indifferent. 24 year old Devin and his fiancée receive some pressure from his parents, but more of it comes from his brother and fiancée, who are also childfree. Hillary summarized this concept ideally when she stated that "a man's family is more likely to ask his girlfriend/fiancée/wife when they're going to have children than they are to ask the man."

While many participants did express that their families and friends were very accepting, there were a few who still had their choices questioned. This sentiment was echoed by 34 year old Sherri, a secretary at a local high school:

Usually the first response is "\*gasp\* Why not?" also get the "there's still time, you'll change your mind." Some of the people I work with, because it's in education, it has that stereotype associated with it that like if you're a woman in education it's because it is so family oriented. There are a lot of people who say like "well once you have your first one you realize how much you want to be a parent." And that just seems like such an irresponsible way to become a parent! It's not like you can test drive a baby and give it back if you don't like it.

### *Spousal reactions*

Following reactions from friends and family members, many participants detailed the conversations they'd had with their spouses and significant others regarding voluntary childlessness. Nearly every participant interviewed stated that they had found a partner who also

wished to remain childfree. Many of the participants also noted that wishing to remain childfree was a driving reason behind their relationship. The only outliers in this instance were Winnie and Rusty, who stated that they went into the marriage with no firm ideas of whether they wanted children or not, but came to that conclusion as their relationship continued to grow. Interestingly, Leonard remarried a woman who already had children, but since these children were aged approximately 24 and 16, he still considers himself to be childfree as neither were actually children when they wed, nor are they biologically his.

The participants discussed the importance of finding a partner that shared their ideals to not have children. Aubrey stated that she and her partner have found other childfree friends to engage with, and that support system has made it seem easier to combat the stigmas associated with being childfree.

### *Public reactions*

Where the participants did not receive much pressure from friends, family, or partners about having children, they almost unanimously stated that the pressures and comments they do receive come from complete strangers. One particular story from Winnie captured the lack of boundaries that many seem to have faced:

I was doing a ride along with a sales team member who had just started with our company and had spent very little time with the individual, basically just through the interview process and this was my first time spending an entire day out in the field and she really grilled me about ‘why don’t you have kids, do you not like them?’ It was just a really uncomfortable situation because first of all, you’re not my friend, we’re coworkers, I’m actually your supervisor and this isn’t a conversation I had really planned on having with you to begin with. And it was unusual and intrusive.

Where women received much of this feedback from strangers, men hardly experienced the same. People tend to praise unmarried, childfree men as perpetual bachelors who are “living

the dream,” where we have created terms for women who hold these ideals as “spinsters” and “crazy cat ladies.” This disproportionate impact on women further perpetuates the very idea that we’ve been working to erase – women are defined by their children. These conceptions are damaging, and the stigmatization leads to a lifetime of shame, guilt, and feelings of worthlessness. This double standard is unfair and the treatment of women who choose to remain childfree needs to improve drastically.

## CONCLUSION

The literature states that women are being pressured to have children at higher rates than their spouses and partners due to existing stigma that women who are not fulfilled by being a mother are wrong. As seen through the research, this may hold true, but we may also be experiencing a shift in thinking that allows women more access to choice. This research is necessary as we are currently seeing a shift in what women desire in life – be it a focus on motherhood or their career, or both. A woman’s choice to have or not have children is exactly that: a choice. Women should not be judged because of their views on motherhood. By asking the question do the societal pressures on childbearing affect men and women who choose to remain childless differently? If so, in what ways?” we can garner more evidence about the lacking research on responses to men choosing to remain childfree.

## References

- Hayford, Sarah R. 2013. "Marriage (still) Matters: The Contribution of Demographic Change to Trends in Childlessness in the United States." *Demography*: 1641-1663.
- McQuillan, Julia, Griel, Arthur L., Shreffler, Karina M., Wonch-Hill, Patricia. A., Gentzler, Kari C., & Hathcoat, John D. 2012 "Does the Reason Matter? Variations in Childlessness Concerns Among U.S. Women" *Journal of Marriage and Family*: 1166-1183.
- Mollen, Debra 2006 "Voluntarily Childfree Women: Experiences and Counseling Considerations" *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*: 269-282.
- Park, Kristin 2002 "Stigma Management Among the Voluntarily Childless" *Constructions of Deviance: Social Power, Context, and Interaction*
- Poston, Jr. , Dudley L., & Bouvier, Leon F. 2010 "*Population and Society: An Introduction to Demography*" New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rijken, Arieke J., & Merz, Eva Maria 2014 "Double Standards: Differences in Norms on Voluntarily Childless Men and Women" *European Sociological Review*: 470-482.
- Veevers, J.E. 1973 "Voluntary Childlessness: A Neglected Area of Family Study" *Family Coordinator*: 199-205.
- Waren, Warren, & Pals, Heili 2013 "Comparing characteristics of voluntarily childless men and women" *Journal of Population Research*: 151-170.