STIGMA MANAGEMENT AMONG THE VOLUNTARILY CHILDLESS

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ABSTRACT: *Individuals who choose not to be parents are viewed in terms of negative stereotypes and experience social pressures to alter or justify their status. Data were collected from in-depth interviews with twenty-four voluntarily childless women and men and a focus group that included seven of the interviewed individuals. Inductive analysis discovered the techniques that individuals used, in self-interaction and social interactions with various audiences, to manage stigmatized identity and preserve a good self. Strategies included passing, identity substitution, condemning the condemnors, asserting a right to self-fulfillment, claiming biological deficiency, and redefining the situation. Primarily defensive, reactive techniques accepted pronatalist norms, intermediate techniques challenged conventional ideologies, and proactive techniques redefined childlessness as a socially valuable lifestyle. Use of these strategies was part of the "identity work" that individuals engaged in to reject discreditable identities as voluntarily childless individuals.*

Individuals who possess a stigmatized identity are faced with the ongoing tasks of accepting it themselves and negotiating it in interactions with others who may view their character and behavior as incomprehensible, strange, or immoral. One less acknowledged basis on which individuals are stereotyped is family size, defined by the number of children that they are raising through birth, adoption, foster parenthood, or stepparenthood or by whether they are voluntarily or involuntarily childless (Callan 1985; Ganong, Coleman, and Mapes 1990; Mueller and Yoder 1997; Polit 1978). This article examines techniques used by voluntarily childless women and men to validate and manage their deviant identity in a pronatalist social context. The major analytic framework is Goffman's (1963) discussion of information control among individuals with discreditable identities. Sykes and Matza's (1957) "techniques of neutralization" for those violating dominant norms and Scott and Lyman's ([1968] 1981) "accounts" that are used to excuse or justify behavior are also applied. Other scholars generally have analyzed volun-

tary childlessness as deviant behavior or as a stigmatized identity (see esp. Veevers 1972, 1975, 1980; Mueller and Yoder 1999). I extend this discussion by applying identity management techniques to actual self and social interactions, as well as by identifying additional strategies that emerged from the data.

PRONATALISM AND SOCIAL EVALUATIONS OF THE VOLUNTARILY CHILDLESS

As Veevers (1980) has observed, the deviance of the voluntarily childless lies not only in the fact that they do not *have* children, but primarily, and especially for women, in the fact that they do not *want* them.[1] This is in contrast to the involuntarily childless, who embrace the parenting role in principle. Furthermore, deviance is perceived not only in terms of this action but also in terms of the total personalities of the childfree (Houseknecht 1987; Veevers 1980). Goffman (1963:5) made the same point, observing that once individuals have been stigmatized "we tend to impute [to them] a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one."

   Negative evaluations of the intentionally childless derive from a social environment that continues to be strongly, albeit sometimes subtly, pronatalist. Heitlinger, writing in a context focusing on women's experiences, defined pronatalism as an ideology that

> implies encouragement of all births as conducive to individual, family and social well-being (De Sandre 1978:145). Pronatalism can then be seen as operating on several levels: culturally, when childbearing and motherhood are perceived as "natural" and central to a woman's identity; ideologically, when the motherhood mandate becomes a patriotic, ethnic or eugenic obligation; psychologically, when childbearing is identified with the micro level of personal aspirations, emotions and rational (or irrational) decision-making (by women or couples)[;] . . . and on the level of population policy, when the state intervenes, directly or indirectly, in an attempt to regulate the dynamics of fertility and to influence its causes and consequences. (1991:344–45)

A pronatalist context offsets the advances of more reliable contraceptives and expanding female work opportunities that make childlessness possible and desirable for women and, to a lesser extent, for men. Procreation within marriage traditionally has been prescribed by all major religious groups (Veevers 1980), has been seen as a central developmental stage in adulthood (Duvall 1962; Gutmann 1975), has been seen as conferring full adult status and as demonstrating patriotic citizenship (Tyler May 1995), and has even been associated with sexual competence (Veevers 1972) and good health (Rainwater 1965).

   Furthermore, pronatalist pressures may have been stronger in the 1990s and at the turn of the twenty-first century than they were thirty to forty years ago in the United States. Voluntary childlessness received some cultural support from the political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, including the early years of the second wave of feminism, environmentalism, zero population growth, and the movement for reproductive choice, as well as the New Left's renunciation of 1950s domestic ideology (Tyler May 1995). The spirit of the times was reflected in

the 1971 publication of Ellen Peck's *The Baby Trap*, which exhorted women to forgo mothering in favor of marital and sexual satisfaction. In 1972 Peck and other childless advocates founded the National Organization for Non-Parents (NON), which raised consciousness about rampant pronatalism, environmental destruction, and the benefits of a childfree lifestyle. For the first time women began to speak openly about their fears or convictions that mothering could not be combined well with career ambitions (Tyler May 1995). The organization attracted about two thousand members in its heyday in the mid-1970s, although it never became a truly viable political movement (Lisle [1996] 1999).

The lesser influence or changed focuses of these movements today combine with political and social emphases on "family values" to remove the voluntarily childless option from cultural discourse. Lisle ([1996] 1999) argued that rising pronatalism in the 1980s was needed to nudge ambivalent or delaying aging baby boomers into parenthood. When combined with projections of population decline's negative effects on the economy and the nation, such appeals were ultimately successful. In addition, motherhood is now more available to women traditionally excluded from the status for biological or social reasons, especially infertile women and lesbians and other women outside of traditional family structures. This increasing availability of motherhood intensifies pronatalism until very few are exempt from its influence (Lisle [1996] 1999). Snitow (1992) and Orenstein (2000) have described how medical information is a new weapon used against younger women, who are told that to delay for "too long" or to be childless is to risk becoming infertile or contracting endometriosis or reproductive cancers. DaCosta (1995) argued that for single women in their twenties, the romantic ideal of marriage has been replaced by the ideal of traditional motherhood, which is seen as producing self-nurturance and providing the all-encompassing love they do not expect to find with a man. Drawing on a snowball sample of two hundred interviews with young women throughout the United States, Orenstein (2000) concluded that for most the childless choice is unfathomable, full of fears of social isolation and of the need to constantly justify that choice.

Of course, generalized pronatalism exists alongside selective antinatalism in the contemporary United States. That is, dominant cultural norms and government policies discourage childbearing among young and unmarried women, with substantial state resources allocated to preventing teenage pregnancy. Antinatalism also discourages low-income individuals, lesbians and gay men, and physically and mentally disabled individuals from becoming parents.

The persistence of pronatalist beliefs is evident in the negative evaluations of the voluntarily childless that are documented in many studies (Callan 1985; Ganong, Coleman, and Mapes 1990; Houseknecht 1987; Mueller and Yoder 1997; Polit 1978; Veevers 1980). Such stereotypes constitute in part the "stigma theory" or ideology that "normals," in this case individuals who are or plan to be parents, construct of stigmatized individuals, in this case the intentionally childless (Goffman 1963:5).

In a study of family size stereotypes, Polit (1978) discovered that the voluntarily childless and parents of one child were rated most negatively by residents of two representative American communities, with the former rated slightly more nega-

tively than the latter. Compared to parents, the voluntarily childless were seen as less socially desirable, less well adjusted, less nurturant, and more autonomous, and respondents expressed a desire for more social distance from them. Women were viewed slightly more negatively than men. Using Australian respondents and a methodology that allowed subjects to provide relevant psychological dimensions, Callan (1985) discovered that overall, the fewer children one had, the fewer attributions of positive personality traits one received. The voluntarily childless were seen as more likely to be materialistic, selfish, individualistic, and career oriented than the involuntarily childless and than parents. There were no significant differences in the evaluations received by women and men.

In a review of twenty-six documents on family structure stereotypes, Ganong, Coleman, and Mapes (1990) concluded that overall, parents were not perceived more positively than nonparents, except when compared to the voluntarily childless. The authors maintained that increasing variation in family structure has not translated into greater tolerance for members of different family forms, as the traditional nuclear family is still perceived most positively. They suggested further that stereotypes related to competence may be less pronounced than personality-based stereotypes.

In contrast to the above findings, Shields and Cooper (1983) discovered that childless undergraduates exhibited no stereotyping of a hypothetical "intentionally childfree" woman, who was evaluated only slightly less positively than a happy pregnant woman and much more positively than an unhappy pregnant woman. Respondents of both sexes believed that the childless woman had a happy marriage, saw her own life as exciting and rewarding, and would be a good parent were she to have children. It is difficult to interpret these anomalous results. Perhaps the students' strongly negative images of the unhappy pregnant woman deflected criticism that otherwise might have been targeted at the childfree woman.

Mueller and Yoder (1997) surveyed college undergraduates' stereotypes of the personal characteristics of women who conformed to or deviated from current family size norms (defined as two-children families). Respondents evaluated "voluntarily childfree" women less favorably than normative (two-child) mothers on six of eleven personal characteristics, and they described childfree women's lives as less rewarding than those of all the mothers presented. Childfree women also were judged to be less happy in the near future and in their elderly years than were mothers. In contrast to previous findings, single-child mothers were evaluated positively, as were mothers of eight children, although the latter were no longer glorified.

As Ganong, Coleman, and Mapes (1990) have suggested, the childfree may be more negatively evaluated on personality dimensions than on measures of competency, as childless women in particular may be seen as more instrumental than expressive in orientation. Etaugh and Kasley (1981) examined this issue using undergraduate evaluations of a job application and an article written by a hypothetical applicant. They discovered that applicants without children (who were not, however, identified as voluntarily childless) were generally rated higher than applicants with children, with female respondents rating childless female

applicants as more dedicated than female parents. Male applicants without children were seen as more effective in changing opinions than were fathers, and articles by married childless applicants received higher ratings than articles by married parents. This finding relates to Goffman's (1963:49–50) concept of the perceived focus of a stigmatized attribute, that is, "conceptions, whether objectively grounded or not, as to the sphere of life activity for which an individual's particular stigma primarily disqualifies him." For example, a "normal" might not hesitate to visit a childless physician but might be skeptical about a childless individual's capacity for friendship, due to the status's perceived effects on personal warmth and generosity.

There is little empirical support for the existence of common stereotypical traits among the childfree, particularly among childfree women, who have been more often studied (Landa 1990; Mueller and Yoder 1999). Exceptions exist on the characteristics of autonomy and career orientation. Childfree women have been found more autonomous than women in other parent status categories (Burnside 1977; Houseknecht 1977). Findings on autonomy for males are limited but mixed. Magarick and Brown (1981) found voluntarily childless men more independent than fathers in their decision making, but Silka and Kiesler (1977) found no difference. Career commitment, measured either directly or inferred from high levels of education and occupational status, consistently has been found to be related to voluntary childlessness for women (Bachu 1999; Jacobson and Heaton 1991; Nason and Poloma 1976). Intentionally childless men appear to have more varied levels of career commitment than their female counterparts or than fathers (Jacobson and Heaton 1991; Veevers 1980).

Deviant reference groups are needed to uphold social norms (Durkheim [1895] 1982), in this case the norm of parenthood and convictions of its "naturalness," "rightness," and "selflessness." Merton (1968) observed that nonconformity is sanctioned even by "orthodox" members of the social system who have no social relations with the nonconformist and little to lose by his or her violation of role expectations. According to Merton, this sanctioning arises from the threat that such deviance is seen to represent to cherished moral values. Indeed, Polit (1978) argued that negative labeling of voluntary childlessness and of other non-normative family structures (e.g., one-child families) may serve as a mechanism to enforce parenting and the creation of families of particular sizes. Veevers (1972) suggested that parents find the voluntarily childless threatening as their lifestyle challenges parents' sense of distributive justice, their convictions that the rewards of their choice offset the sacrifices and that marriage and children are the best routes to personal happiness.

Stigmatization of the intentionally childless also may stem from the association of their lifestyle with growing individualism, family breakdown, and the predominance of impersonal, rationalized roles and relationships in society. McMahon (1995) argued that motherhood is juxtaposed to this backdrop and symbolized as caring, tenderness, and self-sacrifice. Since children are also constructed as sacred objects, with their concerns defined as dominant social problems, mothers are idealized as "guardians of the innocent" (p. 190) and motherhood emerges as a significant moral enterprise, although one that is seen as increasingly threatened.

Houseknecht (1982) invoked Becker's (1960) concept of "normative reactions to normlessness" to argue that in the late 1970s renewed concern over the health of the traditional family diminished both the practice and the acceptance of intentional childlessness. This argument seems equally relevant in the early twenty-first century.

While the rhetoric of committed fatherhood dominates today, research continues to discover the greater importance of the parent identity and role for women than for men, even when men perceive themselves as very invested in their children (Hochschild 1989; McMahon 1995). Although findings are not entirely consistent, child-free women appear to be more stigmatized for their childlessness than do their male counterparts (Goetting 1986; Houseknecht 1987). This finding makes sense as motherhood is seen as the very essence of femininity and healthy, mature womanhood, whereas masculinity continues to be defined fundamentally by occupational achievement. In addition, women generally may be more likely than men to be labeled as norm violators (Schur 1983).

How do the voluntarily childless themselves perceive how they are viewed by others? While most studies have indicated that the childfree perceive negative social evaluations and report pressures to alter their status (Ainsworth 1995; Mueller and Yoder 1999; Somers 1993), awareness does not always translate into concern about these judgments (Callan 1983b; Houseknecht 1977; Veevers 1980). Houseknecht (1977) discovered that although both women intending to remain childless and those desiring children were aware of negative sanctions for childlesslessness, the first group was significantly less affected by them, because of their greater autonomy. In addition, a variety of coping strategies, including support networks, are used to discredit the discreditors and construct an alternative worldview that preserves a good self.

INCIDENCE AND TRENDS IN VOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS

Computing rates of voluntary childlessness is difficult, complicated by the need to distinguish voluntary and involuntary statuses, expected versus actual childlessness, and the existence of different marital statuses. The childless population includes those who are physically unable to have children, those who are temporarily childless, and those who are childless by choice. It also is important to distinguish the expected childlessness rates of wives and women of all marital statuses, as rates are significantly higher for nonmarried women, who include widowed, divorced, separated, and never-married women. Finally, some studies compute statistics on women across the childbearing years, whereas others limit their investigation to women of later childbearing age.

Abma et al. (1997) concluded that 8.9 percent of all women between 15 and 44 in 1995 were and expected to remain childless. Of this total group, 6.6 percent were voluntarily childless, as they were either fecund or contraceptively sterile. This represents an increase from the 4.9 percent in 1982 and 6.2 percent in 1988 of all women who were voluntarily childless. Focusing only on women in their later childbearing years, Bachu (1999) documented that childlessness among all women ages 40 to 44 in 1998 nearly doubled between 1980 and 1998, increasing

from 10 to 19 percent during this period. Clearly, many more women experience actual childlessness as they approach the end of their childbearing years than expect to remain childless when questioned earlier in life.

Examining only ever-married women ages 40 to 44, Bachu (1999) concluded that their actual childlessness rates doubled from 7 percent in 1980 to 14 percent in 1998. This percentage includes both chosen and involuntary childlessness. Yet childlessness declined among never-married women, from 79 percent in 1980 to 67 percent in 1998. Today childlessness also appears to be decreasing somewhat among later-born baby boomers (Bachu 1999). Finally, examining only currently married women, DeFrain and Olson (1999:315) concluded that 9.3 percent of wives between the ages of 18 and 34 do not expect to have children (see also U.S. Bureau of the Census 1994:83).

As the data suggest, the contribution of voluntarily childless women to the childless population as a whole has been increasing. Examining data from the mid-1970s, Mosher and Bachrach (1982) concluded that only 2.2 percent of fecund, ever-married women ages 15 to 44 were and expected to remain voluntarily childless. Whereas in the 1970s voluntarily childless women constituted 12.4 percent of the total childless population, in 1990 they increased to 25 percent (Abma and Peterson 1995). The increase in the percentage of voluntary childlessness reflects a decline in involuntary childlessness due to less sterility from sexually transmitted diseases, improved treatments for infertility, and overall better health (Heaton and Jacobson 1999; Steffes 1997–2001).

In summary, although rates of voluntary childlessness have seen a slight increase, this choice is still relatively rare. This rarity contrasts with higher projections made in the 1970s and 1980s based on improved contraceptive availability and women's increasing educational attainment and labor force participation. It demonstrates that the childless by choice seldom encounter each other by chance and that individuals of all parent statuses may only rarely interact with someone whom they know to have or who admits to having made this decision. These conclusions are important in interpreting the discussion below of social interactions between the childless by choice and other individuals.

DATA AND METHODS

This study used an inductive approach to data analysis. Early interview and focus group data were transcribed verbatim and coded qualitatively for analytic themes. These themes were empirically tested and modified through questioning in later interviews and through written follow-up questions mailed to most participants after the initial interview data were analyzed and further literature review was completed. Thus the techniques of grounded theory development (Glaser and Strauss 1967) were applied, with a cyclical process of data collection, qualitative data coding, consultation of the literature on emerging analytic themes, refinement of subsequent interview questions, and repetition of these steps. That is, general research questions guided early data collection; in later interviews some questions were eliminated while others were refined analytically based on early responses and insights from continuing literature review. Thus

follow-up questions were mailed to earlier participants for whom data relevant to emerging analyses was incomplete, as well as to participants whose elaboration was needed to probe further developing theoretical insights.

Data came from twenty-two face-to-face, semistructured interviews with fourteen women and eight men who have chosen not to have children. Two additional members of a married couple submitted written responses to open-ended interview questions. Thus the total sample consisted of twenty-four individuals, fifteen women and nine men. A purposive sample was used in which participants were selected through their acquaintance with the researcher, through references provided by friends, colleagues, relatives, and participants, and through their membership in a national childfree support organization (the Childfree Network). Two individuals volunteered their participation when they learned of the study. Additional recruitment efforts to further diversify the sample on age, social class, and racial and ethnic variables were unsuccessful.

Interviews were usually conducted in participants' homes or workplaces, were tape-recorded, and lasted between forty-five minutes and one and a half hours. With the exception of one couple who were interviewed together, members of couples were interviewed separately. Interactions before and after the interviews were recorded in field notes. Participants also completed a written survey with questions about income levels, parents' educational levels and occupations, religious upbringing and religiosity, and contraceptive use. Some of these questions, as well as the criteria for being considered voluntarily childless, stemmed from Houseknecht's (1987) discussion of methodological shortcomings and recommendations for further study after her extensive literature review on voluntary childlessness.

Additional data came from a focus group that was conducted with seven individuals who were among the twenty-four interview participants for the study. The focus group was conducted in the banquet room of a local restaurant, lasted approximately two hours, and also was tape-recorded. Many topics addressed in the focus group were similar to those in individual interviews, but the group data reflected more social interaction and participant initiation of discussion topics than occurred in interviews.

Although voluntary and involuntary childlessness are not always discrete categories, a failure to distinguish adequately between them sometimes has plagued previous research on this topic (Ainsworth 1995; Houseknecht 1987). This problem has been especially pronounced in aggregate-level surveys that lack data on respondent motivations (Houseknecht 1987). Voluntary childlessness is defined by a combination of choice, commitment, and permanence regarding the decision not to parent (Houseknecht 1987; Nason and Poloma 1976). In her 1987 review of the literature, Houseknecht maintained that most researchers conceptualize voluntary childlessness in terms of the absence of biological children, future intentions, and choice. She argued that such indicators are necessary but not sufficient, and fewer studies have supplemented these criteria with reinforcing indicators such as absence of biological reasons, attitude certainty measures, a length of marriage requirement, and an age requirement.[2]

In this study voluntary childlessness was conceptualized through several criteria that participants were required to meet. Individuals were required to be mem-

bers of a heterosexual couple who were either married or in a long-term relation-ship with their partners for at least five years or single, heterosexual, and over thirty years old. They had to have no children currently and to have no plans to either bear or adopt children in the future. They could not be significantly involved in raising children who were not biologically their own (e.g., stepchil-dren, adopted children, or foster children). In addition, their decision to remain childless could not have been made primarily for biological reasons, such as infer-tility, or could not be due primarily to their own health problems or those of their partner, such as chronic illness.

Brief elaboration of some of these criteria is necessary. The study was restricted to heterosexuals as gays and lesbians face social norms and legal obstacles that complicate their ability to be parents. The criteria did not exclude individuals who had once been but no longer were parents due to the child's placement in foster care or having been adopted, death of the child, or some other circumstance (no participants were in this situation). The age of single participants was restricted to over thirty, since most intentionally childless individuals make the decision through "postponement" (a series of delays after marriage that result in permanent childlessness) rather than "early articulation" (an intention to remain childless relatively early in life, even before marriage) (Houseknecht 1987; Veevers 1973). Similarly, the minimum five-year time limit together for couples or spouses was included to tap the postponement pattern and as one indicator of a committed relationship.

There were two exceptions to these criteria. A single twenty-one-year-old woman was interviewed so as to include the perspectives of a young early articu-lator who was known to have strong views on this subject and also to be opposed to the institution of marriage. Also, one couple had been in a relationship for four years and ten months at the time of the interview.

STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Studies have shown that overall, compared to parents, the voluntarily childless are more educated (Abma et al. 1997; Bachu 1999); more likely to be employed in managerial and professional occupations (Bachu 1999; Crispell 1993); more likely to have both spouses earning relatively high incomes (Abma and Peterson 1995; Bachu 1999); less religious (Heaton, Jacobson, and Fu 1992; Mosher, Williams, and Johnson 1992); more likely to be only children or firstborns (Nason and Poloma 1976; Ory 1978); and less traditional in gender role orientations (Baber and Dreyer 1986; Callan 1986). While the purposive sample for this study does not claim to be representative, participants generally matched this profile, although incomes were lower because of types of occupations held and birth order analysis revealed no patterns. All participants were Caucasian. A deliberate attempt was made to include men in the sample, as they continue to be excluded from the study of vol-untary childlessness (but for studies that include men, see Callan 1984; Jacobson and Heaton 1991; Kenkel 1985; Lunneborg 2000; Magarick and Brown 1981; Veevers 1980). The age range of participants was 21 to 56 years old, with a median of 39 years for women and 41 years for men.

Participants resided in nine communities: one small and one large college town, one suburb and one exurb of two large cities, two small cities, a medium-sized city, and two large cities. The marital status of individuals was as follows: six couples married and both spouses interviewed; two couples cohabiting and both partners interviewed; five couples married, with only the wife interviewed; one couple married, with only the husband interviewed; and two single women interviewed. Two of the men who were interviewed are brothers. All of the individuals in couples had been together as a committed couple for between 4 years and 10 months and 33 years, with a median of 7.5 years.

Women's educational attainment ranged from some college (was completing the B.A. degree) to J.D. and Ph.D. degrees; the modal category was a Ph.D. degree. Men's educational attainment ranged from a bachelor's degree to a J.D. degree; the modal category was a master's degree. Many female participants were employed as social workers, psychologists, and college educators and researchers, with a smaller number in upper-level positions in career counseling and the legal and banking sectors. Men's occupations were more varied and included two self-employed artists, a self-employed landlord, two editors, an engineer, a temporary accounts payable clerk, an assistant vice president at a bank, and a housing director.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND RESULTS

A strong majority of study participants saw negative attributions attached to voluntary childlessness, although they varied in the intensity with which they thought these judgments were held. Many individuals felt that they were viewed as selfish or self-centered, cold, materialistic (e.g., "assuming that vacations and jewelry are more important to you than raising a child"), different, strange ("our friends are baffled that it [pregnancy] is just not happening"), and as "people who don't care," "who don't want to be bothered," and who are "out of the norm," because it is "the last taboo, the last alternative lifestyle." One woman believed that women especially were seen as selfish because a woman is "*supposed* to have children, that's her purpose."[3] Another woman remarked, "It's cultural, whereby if you don't like kids something is wrong with you as a person." A few felt that they were seen as sad for being deprived of a very meaningful experience. One woman emphasized inadequacy: "It's like you've done something wrong, or somehow you're not matching up, or you're a failure in some way." However, some participants also perceived that tolerance of chosen childlessness is increasing and that the stigma is less pronounced today. In addition, three individuals (two men and one woman) did not perceive negative stereotypes and in fact suggested rather positive evaluations of the childless by choice as carefree, as people who travel, live in apartments, and have fun, as an "elite group" (because of their typical urban residence and high levels of education and occupational prestige), and as "smart."

Goffman (1963:4) classified three kinds of stigma: "abominations of the body[,] . . . blemishes of individual character[,] . . . and tribal stigma through race, nation and religion." Those who are childless by choice are stigmatized by their blem-

ished characters, while the sterile or subfecund are stigmatized by their physical abnormalities (Veevers 1980). The stigmatized individual is denigrated from a "whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman 1963:37). Goffman argued that when individuals possess a discredit*able* (not immediately visible or known about) stigma, in contrast to an already discredit*ed* (immediately visible or known about) one, they must manage information about their failure. This is done by developing a code for revealing and concealing, which also constructs an attitude toward the self. Importantly, different techniques are used for different audiences, based in part on the decoding capacity of the audience.

A clearer conceptualization of identity is needed at this point. This article recognizes somewhat distinctive social, personal, and ego identities. *Social identity* reflects the characteristics "imputed to others in an attempt to place or situate them as social objects" (Snow and Anderson 1987:1347). *Personal identity* refers to "meanings attributed to the self by the actor[,] . . . self-designations . . . brought into play or asserted during the course of interaction" (ibid.). Finally, *ego identity* concerns the subjective sense of one's own situation and character that results from social engagement (Goffman 1963); it is similar to self-concept. According to Goffman, social identity relates to stigmatization, personal identity relates to information control in stigma management, and ego identity relates to one's own feelings about these matters. Thus participants engaged in identity work, the "range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept" (Snow and Anderson 1987:1348).

The childfree identity was not a dominant one for participants most of the time. Often it was a "background" identity, although one that reemerges as salient throughout the life course. It is through the responses of others in interaction or in the rehearsal of anticipated encounters, as well as in internal conversations about their choice, that participants' childfree identity is made central. In addition, in many interactions being childless is an invisible stigma, discreditable rather than immediately discredited, until circumstances require some kind of accounting for the situation or the individual chooses to make a public disclosure.

Participants received varying degrees of direct social pressure related to their childless choice. Responses ranged from several women and men who felt that it had generally been a nonissue in their lives to many who experienced occasional pressures to a couple of individuals who felt as though their lives were on display because they did not have children. In some cases the issue had never been discussed with parents, in-laws, grandparents, or other close relatives, although several participants had received expressions of disappointment about not producing grandchildren. A couple of men had heard disappointment from relatives about not producing an heir to carry on the family name. In a few cases participants interpreted the silence of parents, in-laws, grandparents, and siblings on this issue as indicating support or respect for the decision.

These observations concur with Goffman's (1963) conclusion that stigma management is primarily an issue of public life, more necessary to engage in with acquaintances or strangers than with intimates. Most stigma management by participants occurred in these types of interactions. For those few individuals who

described very rare or no occasions on which stigma management was needed, the analysis developed here does not apply. Being childless is also a socially ambiguous status, because of the uncertainty among inquirers as to whether the situation is involuntary or freely chosen. This ambiguity protects the childfree, as they may be responded to with sympathy or silence rather than disapproval.

Some individuals grappled with being childless more because of anticipation of others' reactions and, following Cooley's ([1902] 1981) looking-glass self, their own internalized stigma than the express reactions of others. For example, for Rose, a single woman in a serious relationship, being childless by choice was unheard of in her Italian-American, Catholic, and working-class home environment structured around tight-knit, extended family relationships.[4] Rubin (1994) noted that adherence to traditional norms in the working class is a way to attain social respectability in the absence of prestige-granting educational and occupational attainments. Marc described how a significant amount of time passed before he and his wife even broached the subject of not having children, because "it was something that was *terrible*—you shouldn't discuss not having children."

Techniques of Information Control

Information control is the major issue for those who are discreditable: "to display or not to display, to tell or not to tell, to let on or not to let on, to lie or not to lie; and in each case to whom, how, when and where" (Goffman 1963:42). Indeed, privacy is a major issue with which the stigmatized individual must contend, as complete strangers may feel justified in inquiring about very personal decisions or may offer unsolicited assistance (Goffman 1963). An example is Jane, whose friends suggested she call the Catholic archdiocese for help with her situation.

Passing

One may control information by passing, which is desirable because of the considerable rewards that stem from being "normal" (Goffman 1963). Passing was an option for younger participants, who were still perceived as being in their childbearing years and as capable of becoming parents. Rose, thirty-one years old and single, discussed using this technique among her friends:

> My friends and I would get together and would always talk about having children, and they would always say, "Oh, I think you'd make a wonderful mother," and I would say, "Oh, yeah, someday." You know, it's *funny* because . . . and they're very open and liberal, but I never felt comfortable saying, "I choose not to have them."

Marc, thirty-two, expressed shame that his stock response to queries about whether he had children was to pass so as to avoid being negatively labeled:

> I do feel like I kind of cop out when I'm asked. I probably should just own up to it and say no, I've made the decision, or *we've* made the decision not to have children. But I don't, because in society I'd be labeled as a bad person, so normally I say I'm not ready for that responsibility *yet.* That's usually how I put it.

Identity Substitution

Another technique of information control is presenting a stigmatized failing as another less stigmatized attribute (Goffman 1963). This strategy represents a type of identity substitution. For example, Ann's stock response to queries about having children is to inform people, "We're just not interested; I have no desire." However, if people pressure her she changes her strategy by asserting, "We can't have children," as this makes people "back off." She argued that "it's a very effective strategy because it embarrasses them a great deal." Thus the less stigmatized status of involuntary childlessness is presented to deflect the criticism that her voluntarily childless status elicits and to end the conversation.

Rebecca used this technique on just one occasion, in interacting with a woman she had not seen for a while and who had been a rival in high school for the attention of a man:

> And she asked me at this baby shower if I was going to have kids, and I guess she had just had one. And I've never used this expression after that, but I said, "I don't think it's in the cards for us." Which probably smacks of infertility, but I just used it to drop the subject.

Like passing, substituting a less stigmatized identity emerges as a primarily reactive strategy, an effort to avoid or minimize the effects of stigma without challenging the social values and norms that construct and sustain it (Siegel, Lune, and Meyer 1998).

Two participants negotiated their childfree identity by substituting another identity that they felt better equipped to defend or that audiences reacted to more strongly. Phil is an avowed atheist who made the decision to stop celebrating Christmas thirteen years ago. Compared to both of these positions his childlessness became minor, as is clear in his description of interactions with his own and his partner's families:

> I don't really know how some of my extended family members responded to that because when we gather around to "let's bash [Phil] over his lifestyle choices" they have more pressing things to draw on! [Laughs] . . . And if they [his partner's parents] were disposed to object to anything it was my nonreligion. So without intending to I think that that really preempted too much opportunity to carry this whole childless card. . . . So you can put this into the summary as "childfree, and not wanting to get disturbed? Stop celebrating Christmas, renounce the use of money as legal tender—do something else, and they won't bother you!" [Laughs]

Heather, a single woman in her early twenties, does not intend to marry because of her concerns about the institution's effects on women. She described how others react to her professed identities as a voluntarily single and childless woman for life:

> I definitely see the marriage thing as a bigger issue for most people than not wanting to have kids. Just because, well, that's what people do, they settle down, they get married, they pair off. There are so many infertile couples that can't have children. And so many people waiting until later in life to have children, that people say, well, okay, you don't want them now, and that's okay, but get married now [laughs] and you can think about the children later.

She plays these identities off each other when she perceives the audience is unsympathetic:

> It depends on the particular situation. If I think it's someone who's not going to listen to what I'm saying, I usually divert them using a bigger thing. . . . So I say I don't want to get married either, and that pretty much takes the subject off! And that one's a little easier, at least for me.

Phil and Heather were unique in this study in their consistent public proclamation of their childfree identity. Their identity work transformed their social identity from discreditable to discredited, once the information was revealed. The central life issue for discredited individuals is managing awkwardness in social encounters, whereas for discreditable individuals it is managing information about their failure (Goffman 1963). In undertaking voluntary disclosure, Phil and Heather alter their interactions so that they do not have information to negotiate but rather awkward social situations to manage. Such a declaration may be seen as a final stage in the moral career, and as one that is often experienced as a tranquil state of grace given the self-acceptance it suggests (Goffman 1963).

Accounts of Voluntary Childlessness

Scott and Lyman ([1968] 1981) classified *justifications* and *excuses* as types of accounts that individuals use in interaction for action that is prone to inquiry and evaluation. Accounts are normally used in a dramaturgical vein, during rehearsed play-acting oriented toward a successful performance, that is, one that presents a good self. Although Scott and Lyman limited their discussion to vocalized accounts in face-to-face interaction, they acknowledged that the concept also applies to those "non-vocalized but linguistic explanations that arise in an actor's 'mind' when he questions his own behavior" (p. 344 fn. 5). Participants' accounts primarily fit this category, as they were rarely expressed in social interaction but rather in self-interaction and to me, the interviewer, as the "sympathetic other," or one who shares the stigma (Goffman 1963:20).

Justifications: Condemnation of the Condemnors

Some participants constructed justifications for their childlessness in which they took responsibility for their action but denied the negative qualities associated with it. One justification was a "technique of neutralization," "condemnation of the condemners" (Sykes and Matza 1957). In using this technique, the individual "admits performing an untoward act but asserts its irrelevancy because others commit these and worse acts, and these others are either not caught, not punished, not condemned, unnoticed, or even praised" (Scott and Lyman [1968] 1981:349). Some participants reacted to the label "selfish" attributed to the intentionally childless, retorting that people may have children for selfish reasons. Marie used this technique:

> One thing people would say, oftentimes, which to me is amazing is, "What's going to happen to you in your older age? Who's going to take care of you?"

> My reaction is—and I didn't say this to people because I thought it would be tacky to say back to them—but I said to [my husband] afterward, to me that is the most totally selfish reason to have children. I just never would have children for that reason. . . . If these people are saying we're being selfish for not having children you almost could come back and say, why didn't you adopt? [laughs]

Rebecca also condemned her condemnors in discussing her investment as an aunt and as a Big Sister to an economically disadvantaged girl:

> You know, people say it's selfish to not want to have children. I think it's selfish to have children. Oh, I want to create a little product that came from me. I want to create something that I can shape and mold. No. I don't want that. I want to love somebody else's child. And just be a good adult role model for them, or something.

As a clinical psychologist, Rebecca maintained that her nurturing instincts were better put to use caring for individuals in psychological need than raising her own children. She argued, "I feel my choice is actually less selfish."

In addition, many participants constructed parenting as something that is done unreflectively by some or many people, without careful consideration of its responsibilities, costs in time, money, and energy, and how it would be combined with the demands of full-time employment. Asserting that individuals become parents unthinkingly allows the childfree to condemn the condemnors as they take on the morally superior identity of reflective decision makers. Lance believed that some individuals parent because they genuinely like children but also that "some don't even think about it; they just do it because having children is part of their definition of being a married adult. " Miles acknowledged that for some people parenting is the fulfillment of a life's dream, but "the majority of people are citizens who haven't stopped to think." Gregory agreed, claiming that, on this issue and many others, "most people don't want to behave in any way that sets them outside of the majority—most people conform without thinking through what they are doing." He concluded further that childless couples "usually" make their nonparenting decision with careful consideration but that parents "frequently" do not. Jane also maintained that a small percentage of individuals truly want to have children because they "adore" them but that many people do it "to keep up with the statistics." "We're supposed to have 2.3 kids," she continued. "Well, it's time, *she's* having one, so *we* should get pregnant now."

Constructing parents' behavior as unthinking also deflects the criticism of the childless as disliking children, as few parents are seen as arriving at parenthood out of a genuine fondness for children. Condemning the condemnors is an intermediate strategy that is nested between reactive and proactive reactions to stigma; it is not merely defensive, but neither does it represent a full-fledged attack on dominant ideologies (Siegel, Lune, and Meyer 1998).

Justifications: Self-Fulfillment

A particularly modern type of justification is self-fulfillment (Scott and Lyman [1968] 1981). After elaborating what she saw as the many freedoms of a childfree

life, Nancy summarized: "I know it sounds incredibly selfish, but it's my life. It's what I want to do. I think I've learned not to apologize for it anymore." Allen believed that although individuals are often confused by his childless choice, they eventually accept it based on the shared principle of a right to happiness and self-determination: "I think it's kind of obvious to them that everybody gets to make that choice to live their life the way they want to."

Excuses: Appeal to Biological Drives

Other accounts involve *excuses*, which differ from justifications in that they minimize or absolve responsibility when behavior is challenged (Scott and Lyman [1968] 1981). One category of excuse is appeal to biological drives, which builds on many individuals' convictions that biological factors strongly influence human behavior. Ann used her lack of a "maternal instinct" as an excuse for her childlessness:

> I do wonder what is not quite right with me that I have *no desire whatsoever* to have a child. Somehow that doesn't seem quite right. Because, you know, the persistence of the species *demands* that we procreate, to want children. And I have *nothing* there.

Margaret presented her lifelong disinterest in babies and children as the major reason for her childlessness:

> Truthfully, I think it [disinterest in children] was just always there. Like when mothers would bring babies by, and people would go ooh and aah, and I'm like *you must be joking*. . . . You know, the maternal instinct? I mean what does it feel like? I have no idea.

Redefining the Situation

In managing social reactions and affirming their childfree identities, participants sometimes redefined the situation that audiences presented in queries about their childless status. Such strategies are proactive (Siegel, Lune, and Meyer 1998) to varying degrees in that they challenge the "parenthood prescription" and sometimes assert the social contribution of alternative choices. Allen described how he feels little social pressure for parenthood in the liberal university town where he lives. However, the issue occasionally comes up in the more traditional coal-mining area where he works:

> Over there, it's real unusual to not have children. Over there people are asking me, "why don't you have children?" and I would sometimes turn it around and ask them, "Well, why did you decide to have children?" And they'll look at me strangely. "I didn't decide to have children; you get married, you have kids!" And just try to get them to think about, this is a choice. And then explain to them that my choice was to not have kids. And yours was. And they usually go away looking confused. Sometimes I think they understand what I'm trying to say and other times they don't.

In these encounters Allen redefines the situation from one of sanctioning his non-conformity to asking for an account for normative behavior. Yet as Scott and

Lyman ([1968] 1981) observed, routine behavior, in this case parenting, requires no explanation, and Allen's counterquery is met with surprise and an inability or unwillingness to enter into discussion.

In some situational redefinitions participants interpreted parenting symbolically, discerning its meaning and value to the questioner and then formulating a response that demonstrated their alternative path to that desirable trait or behavior. Many situational redefinitions affirmed the social contribution of their lives despite or because of not being parents. Fisher (1991) challenged the assumption that women must bear or raise children in order to be socially valuable, describing it as another mechanism by which to condemn and marginalize women who are not mothers. She asserted that by "refus[ing] to allow the widespread disapproval of women who do not mother to narrow their lives," childless women "[call] into question the belief that [their activities] are mere 'substitutes' for mothering, which is the 'real thing'" (p. 100). For example, Janet said she felt discounted when her sister received much more recognition from their mother for her childbearing than did Janet for completing two advanced degrees. As the role of father increasingly involves more caretaking as well as economic provision, childless men may be additionally devalued for their lack of child-rearing activity.

Martha, a social worker, described her response when her clients or their families express surprise that she does not have children because she is "so good with people": "And I say to them, and stop them in their tracks sometimes, I have forty kids, all stuck in adolescence—my nurturing side is completely taken care of!" Thus Martha redefines the situation by presenting her clients as her children and her child-rearing as the caregiving that she displays through her work.

Ann disentangled the association of "woman equals mother" and asserted other routes to social value in an interaction with a physician who, when she was 34, told her that she "really needed to start having children":

> Ann: And I told him that we all serve society in different ways. That's what I told him. And I can serve society in *my* way.
>
> Interviewer: How did he respond to this?
>
> Ann: He didn't say a word. He just looked at me.

Ann, a college professor, elaborated that she serves society by being competent in her work as an instructor, researcher, and mentor for graduate and undergraduate students and by generally being a role model for a good life. In a similar vein, Helen, a college teacher and scholar, argued:

> I make a contribution to society that is just as powerful as people say motherhood is. It's also a greater *social* contribution. I'm helping make better people out of other people's kids (or those people themselves, if they are adult learners), and I'm getting them to think of how they can and should make our society a better place for everyone, not just themselves.

Several participants, both male and female, but especially women, maintained that they were more productive in their paid employment, sometimes perceived as very demanding of their time and emotions, than they would be if they were balancing work with raising children. In this way they believed that their child-

lessness benefited their workplaces and society at large. Some individuals also identified their payment of school taxes and higher income taxes than parents (because they had no dependent tax deductions) as benefits to society, although a few of these individuals, to varying degrees, perceived this as unfair.

Phil challenged the reproductive mandate with his argument that his lifestyle choice helps to stem global population growth. His strongly proactive strategy refutes the social value of childbearing by substituting a superior model for social contribution. He described the sound-byte response to being childless that he offers when he gives radio interviews as part of his job: "I've looked around at the population crisis in the world and decided that by not having kids I should be part of the solution and not part of the problem." He continued:

> And for me one of the issues that kindles a little bit of anger is, you know, we have low infant mortality, we have people living to these ripe old ages, we really don't need for everybody to have even 2.3 children. And if there were a few more Americans out there waking in the middle of the night thinking, Gee, maybe those people who aren't having kids are the real heroes [laughs].

Joan, an academic ecologist, also proactively justifies her childless lifestyle to her environmentalist friends using an overpopulation frame, arguing that "in terms of saving on resource use it's probably about the most significant thing I could do." Several other participants asserted the environmental responsibility of their choice and criticized tax deductions, or unlimited tax deductions, for bearing children. Tyler May (1995) also observed that her environmentally conscious respondents wanted credit for their decision to use fewer natural resources and consume fewer goods by not producing children.

Goffman (1963) argued that the adoption of superior identities by stigmatized individuals may serve as a model for the "wise" (normals who are sympathetic to stigmatized individuals), who may even convert to their position. Yet such arguments confront a counterideology that population decline threatens increasingly financially vulnerable elderly entitlement programs. Indeed, Ann was told by a German colleague that she put a burden on society by her decision not to have children. The current lack of public and political acknowledgment of the effects of population size on environmental sustainability (especially for affluent citizens) contrasts with the social environment of the 1970s, when population growth issues, including in developed nations, received national attention. The sentiments of Ann's colleague have been expressed in policy circles. In response to concerns about the "birth dearth" among white, upper-middle-class, educated Americans, some demographers, journalists, and policy makers have proposed a "new redistributional politics" (in the words of journalist Jonathan Rauch) from the childless to the child rearing. The resulting generous pronatalist policies are seen as necessary to increase fertility so as to "nurture our work force and safeguard our retirements" (Rauch, in Burkett 2000:146). Ben Wattenberg, a demographer with the American Enterprise Institute, dismissed criticisms that such policies were discriminatory, deriding the childless as "free riders" and asserting that "people who have no children . . . are, in a sense, cheating the system" (cited in Burkett 2000:146).

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This article has examined impression management techniques used by voluntarily childless men and women to negotiate their stigmatized identities in internal conversations and social interactions. Participants used several techniques of information control in encounters with various audiences. One strategy was passing, in which younger participants, when queried, expressed a future parenting intention. Another technique was deliberate or unintentional identity substitution. In these situations participants diminished stigma through feigning infertility, substituted their childfree identity for a more stigmatizing one that they felt better able to manage, or experienced their childless identity being displaced by other identities to which an audience more strongly responded. Participants neutralized demands for conformity, both internal and external, with justifications for their actions that condemned their condemnors. This condemnation took the forms of ascribing selfish motives to parents and claiming that parents adopt that role to meet social expectations, without adequate reflection on its requirements and demands. An additional justification for choosing childlessness referred to rights to happiness and self-determination, principles that are the cornerstone of modern societies.

In another form of account, some women excused their childlessness as stemming from an absent maternal instinct. Finally, participants altered the definition of the situation when they challenged parents to justify their choice or asserted the social value of childlessness with evidence of social nurturance, workplace productivity, public resource support, or environmental responsibility. These techniques emerge as reactive, intermediate, or proactive depending on the degree to which they accept or challenge pronatalist ideologies. The strategies derive from established cultural frames of individual self-determination and service to society and the global community, thereby confronting pronatalism with parallel culturally resonant themes.

Study of the childless is especially timely given recent popular and media coverage of the grievances felt by some single and childless workers over their exclusion from "family-friendly" workplace benefits and social policies (Belkin 2000; Burkett 2000; Lawlor 2000). Some nonparents claim that they work longer and less desirable hours, are not eligible for personal leaves, and pay more for health insurance premiums than their parenting colleagues. They also cite exclusion from workplace benefits that are available only to parents, such as on-site day care, flex time, and college tuition remissions for children. Some employers have responded with "cafeteria-style" packages that diversify benefit choices. Other childfree activists are outspoken about their dislike of children, advocating adult-only spaces in living units, restaurants, airplanes, and other public accommodations.

The emerging childfree movement has been responded to strongly by some working parents and by leaders in family advocacy organizations. In the National Parenting Association, Ruth Wooden described movement members as not grown-up and Sylvia Hewlett saw them as representative of "untrammeled individualism" (cited in Belkin 2000:62). Other critics of the movement claim that its activists overstate both the extent and the monetary value of family-friendly benefits (Belkin 2000; Harris 1997). These childfree grievances emerge in a context

in which the typical voluntarily childless individual remains culturally invisible and voiceless, living his or her decision privately, unbothered or silent about alleged discrimination for fear of being labeled "antifamily."

The ideological frames, resource mobilization, and social impact of this nascent movement warrant further study, as do its effects on pronatalist attitudes. Will the newfound voices of the more militant childfrees heighten public prejudice against the voluntarily childless in general? Alternatively, does the increasing responsiveness of employers to claims of compensation discrimination by single and childless employees signify increasing acceptance of alternative family forms, whether chosen or not? Or is the offering of cafeteria-style benefit packages merely a response to feared legal action? Although it is difficult to identify causal factors influencing pronatalism, these issues deserve further attention by scholars.

Future research also should compare the characteristics, motivations, degrees of perceived social pressure and censure, and stigma management devices of the childless by choice with those of others who deviate from dominant norms of family creation, size, or structure. The objective of such studies should be the development of meaningful generalizations about personal characteristics, social evaluations, and normalization processes. Useful comparisons with the childless would include individuals who choose to remain single throughout their lives or after divorce, to cohabit on a long-term basis without marriage, and to intentionally become single parents. Comparisons with infertile individuals, adoptive parents (see Miall 1989), and those using new reproductive technologies also would help to advance understanding of contemporary family-building meanings and processes. For example, Miall (1994) discovered that the involuntarily childless are influenced by several social constructions—that motherhood is biological and fatherhood is learned, that infertility is due to psychological difficulties or male sexual dysfunction, and that infertility is a physical problem needing medical treatment. Remennick (2000) described the profound stigma of infertile Israeli women who were unable to reject the motherhood mandate by substituting professional bases for identity and accomplishment. Women coped with their "master status" as infertile with strategies that included selective disclosure and strategic avoidance of selected settings.

Ragone (1994) illustrated how participants in surrogate motherhood arrangements highlight traditional values about family creation (and deemphasize incongruent aspects) to manage the stigma of their unconventional means to achieve it. Surrogate mothers and adoptive couples downplay the biological relatedness of the surrogate mother and the adoptive father to remove connotations of adultery and illegitimacy and to minimize the biological exclusion from the experience of the adoptive mother. In addition, surrogates and adoptive mothers sometimes build strong emotional relationships to construct pregnancy as a shared and social experience and to counter the notion of a "breeder" stratum of working-class women motivated by remuneration rather than altruism. Couples and surrogates also embrace conventional views that all adults are entitled to parenthood, that couples without children are not a proper family, and that biogenetic relatedness is central to family construction in affirming and defending their choices. It would be interesting to compare these meanings and priorities placed on family, and

their derivations from gendered constructions, with the views and experiences of childless individuals.

There is a need for further research on the subjective experiences of childfree populations that have been neglected in the literature. More research is needed on men who choose this option. Like women, men in this study used the stigma management techniques of passing and redefining the situation, including affirming the social contribution of their choice. Yet men were somewhat more likely than women to respond to queries with self-deprecating humor about their deficient characters (e.g., not responsible enough or too lazy for fatherhood) in excusing their decision. Such accounts may reflect men's greater role distance from parenthood compared to women.

More cross-cultural study is needed of the subjective experience of voluntary childlessness. Research in Britain (Bartlett 1994; Gillespie 2000; Lunneborg 2000), Australia (Callan 1983a, 1986), and Canada (Veevers 1975, 1980) often parallels American findings. Yet broader inquiry would provide useful comparisons of pronatalist influence and individual and community constructions of parenting and intentional childlessness. In addition, little interpretive study has been conducted of the experiences of African-American, Hispanic, Asian-American, or Native American women and men who choose to remain childless.[5] Tyler May (1995) suggested that the greater availability of communal child-rearing arrangements affects the lower rates of childlessness for African-American and Hispanic women. Black women more often than white women cite economic and cultural factors, instead of lifestyle factors, for their childlessness. They are also "less likely to see domesticity and children as a trap" (p. 193) and, given more difficult mobility for blacks, very concerned with financial security before becoming parents. Lisle ([1996] 1999) speculated that, given the historical context of fragmented families under slavery and forced sterilization, child rearing among African Americans may symbolize racial affirmation. Finally, interpretive study of voluntary childlessness among working-class and low-income men and women also merits greater attention.[6] Examination of socioeconomic effects is especially important as the largest recent increases in childlessness have occurred among women with less than a college education (Bachu 1999).

NOTES

1. Those who have chosen not to be parents refer to themselves and are referred to by others as voluntarily childless, childless by choice, and intentionally childless. "Childfree" is favored by some voluntarily childless individuals to counteract a perceived deficiency in the usual labels. Others view the term, with its connotation of children as a

burden from which one is liberated, as problematic. All of these designations are used here in order to respect the preferences of study participants as well as, in the case of "childfree," to employ a name that the childless by choice have given to themselves.

2. Some studies have used these additional criteria. For absence of biological reasons, see Abma et al. 1997; Abma and Peterson 1995; Mosher and Bachrach 1982; Somers 1993. For attitude certainty, see Gillespie 2000; Ory 1978. For length of marriage requirement (at least five years), see Levine 1978; Mueller and Yoder 1999; Veevers 1975. For age requirement, see Baber and Dreyer 1986; Somers 1993 (both used thirty and older).

3. Emphasis in quotations is provided by the person speaking.

4. Participant names are pseudonyms, many selected for self-identification. The idea of asking participants to choose a name comes from Ainsworth 1995.

5. Exceptions with a more popular format include Medicine Eagle 1989, on her experiences as a Crow Indian; Reti 1992, with writings from women of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds; and Jordan 1990, on her experiences as an African-American woman.

6. Morell (1994) argues that a problem with much existing research is its focus on *present* class status. Three-fourths of her thirty-four participants self-identified as coming from poor or working-class backgrounds and directly attributed their upward mobility to their voluntarily childless status. Bartlett's (1995) study of more than fifty British women contained occupational diversity along social class lines. Kenkel (1985) compared low-income males and females who desired to remain childfree to those who planned to be parents on their educational, occupational, and marriage goals.

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