

**Hegemonic Motherhood:**  
Reconceptualizing Femininity and Family through the Lens of Voluntary  
Childlessness

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## **ABSTRACT**

Social discourse on motherhood has evolved into a taken-for-granted understanding of what is ‘natural’ and constitutive of healthy feminine identity (Gillespie 2000). Transformations in women’s economic potential, advances in birth control technology, and a shift in conceptions of femininity became the impetus for social change in the domestic realm. Challengers of the voluntarily childless lifestyle proclaim that individuals who marry with the intention to remain childless are selfish, and subvert a natural responsibility to reproduce. Yet, research findings suggest that this decision is one fraught with personal, economic, social, and political ramifications for childless couples. This study provides a synopsis of important research on voluntary childlessness with a focus on how a belief in hegemonic mothering has hampered conceptual and methodological development in the domain of voluntary childlessness. I demonstrate how a mother-centered conception of femininity has inhibited our ability to understand the impetus for, decision, and ramifications of voluntary childlessness. I also propose a direction for improving the literature through a reconceptualization of femininity and family.

## INTRODUCTION

Policies aimed at defining and defending marriage and marriage-based initiatives have increased in recent years. Central to the notion of marriage and family is the concept of motherhood, specifically, what it means to mother and who can mother. In pronatalist societies, motherhood is perceived to be the crux of feminine identity (Gillespie 2003). This pronatalist discourse dictates that couples marry with the intention to bear children, and form families that are defined by children. Women are believed to possess a natural mothering instinct, regardless of desire to mother, capacity to have children, or even having children (Park 2002). Lacking this instinct elicits shame, anger, and even abandonment. Childless women of childbearing age are socially ostracized as selfish, immature, and subversive; yet research suggests that voluntary childlessness is fraught with personal, economic, social, and political ramifications that couples do not take lightly (Park 2002; Letherby and Williams 1999). Voluntary and involuntary childlessness influences the life course and quality of those concerned yet this issue has garnered relatively little attention, in part due to global interest in population control in developing countries (Balen 2000). Demographers have been concerned with issues pertaining to high fertility, and existing theories of fertility decline do not adequately account for the decision to be childfree (Heaton, Jacobson, and Holland 1999).

This paper will present a detailed assessment of current literature on voluntary childlessness with an emphasis on how hegemonic motherhood has hampered conceptual and methodological development. Reviewing the literature, I reveal how a mother-centered conception of femininity inhibits our ability to understand the impetus for, the decision and the ramifications of voluntary childlessness for both men and women. After a critique I propose a new direction for improving the literature through a reconceptualization of femininity and

family. As our political initiatives simultaneously advocate marriage while striving to constrain the definition of marriage and family it is particularly intriguing to consider the fate of voluntarily childless couples.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Census data indicate that childless couples have more than doubled since 1960 while at the same time advancements have been made in treating infertility. Data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) characterize childless women as temporarily childless, voluntarily childless, or involuntarily childless. Among the 61.6 million women ages 15-44, 42% are childless: 33% are temporarily childless, meaning they intend to have children in the future, 2.5% are involuntarily childless, meaning they do not expect to have children and have either impaired fecundity or are surgically sterile for reasons other than contraception, and 6.2% are voluntarily childless, meaning they are fecund and expect to have no children or are surgically sterile for contraceptive reasons. Percentages of voluntarily childless women have increased from 4.9% in 1982 to 6.2% in 1988, and decreased slightly from 6.6% in 1995. About 10% of non-Hispanic white women expect to remain childless, followed by 7% of Black women and 5% of Hispanic women.

Table A illustrates the fertility intentions of childless women ages 15-44 from the most current wave of NSFG data (in percentages). In this sample of currently childless women, there is a general trend of greater intention to *not* have children as age increases, with the exception of a slight dip in the 20-24 year age range. By age 40, more than half of the women have solidified their decision to forgo parenthood. The youngest and oldest age ranges represent the greatest proportion of the total sample of women who do not intend to have children (22% and 29% respectively).

**Table A. Percentage of fertility intention among childless women 15-44 years of age**

<b>Age</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Don't Know</b>	<b>Total</b>
15-19	90 38.5	9 22	0.6 10	1 35
20-24	92.5 29	6 11	1 15	1 26
25-29	87 15	9 8	4 3	1 14
30-34	79 10	17 12	4 23	1 11
35-39	57 5	39 18	4 14	1 7
40-44	33 3	65 29	2 7	1 7
<b>Total</b>	83 1	15 1	2 1	1 1

Table B illustrates the same trend of fertility intention among currently childless men ages 15-44 from the most current wave of NSFG data (in percentages). In this sample there is a consistent general trend toward greater intention to *not* have children as age increases. Again, by age 40 the majority of men have solidified their decision to forgo parenthood. Men ages 35-39 and 40-44 represent the greatest proportion of the total sample of childless men who do not intend to have a child (25% and 27% respectively)

**Table B. Percentage of fertility intention among childless men 15-44 years of age**

<b>Age</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Don't Know</b>	<b>Total</b>
15-19	94	5	0.7	1
	34	11	20	31
20-24	92	7	1	1
	27	12	24	25
25-29	92	8	0.6	1
	17	8	8	16
30-34	76	22	2	1
	10	17	24	11
35-39	61	37	2	1
	7	25	17	10
40-44	48	51	1	1
	4	27	7	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
	1	1	1	1

Demographic characteristics of voluntarily childless individuals are consistent across the literature. Voluntarily childless individuals tend to be well-educated, live in urban areas, have little or no religious affiliation, and ascribe to non-traditional gender roles (Somers 1993; Gillespie 2003; Heaton et.al. 1999; and Boyd 1989). Though childlessness emerged as a choice for the first time following changes in sexual norms, contraceptive advancements, and the women's movement, this choice still elicits confusion and necessitates explanation. Existing literature indicates that voluntarily childless couples are viewed as selfish, immature, irresponsible, abnormal, and unnatural (Callan 1983, 1986; Gillespie 2003; Letherby and Williams 1999; Park 2002, and Somers 1993). While existing demographic data helps to establish general trends, it does not capture the complexity of the decision to be childless nor the ramifications of this decision.

## Theories of Voluntary Childlessness

Existing theories of voluntary childlessness tend to emphasize a rational choice approach or an ideational approach (Heaton, Jacobson, and Holland 1999). Rational choice approaches focus on the costs and benefits of having a child, while ideational approaches focus on values and norms unique to the demographics of voluntarily childless individuals. Investing time, resources, energy, and money in children, and sacrificing one's career to ensure 'successful' parenting may impact fertility preferences. Economic theories of fertility suggest that individuals evaluate the costs and benefits associated with having a child. These costs typically include monetary investment for clothing, food, and education, and may include loss of earnings and work opportunities, especially among women. In their work "Why do Americans Want Children?" Schoen, Kim, Nathanson, Fields, and Astone (1997) argue that the fundamental question of what sustains fertility, in spite of female labor force participation and the economic costs of children, is rarely addressed. Economic theories that emphasize the benefit of children, and 'wealth flow' patterns from younger to older generations fail to account for the shift from agricultural to industrial economies (Robinson 1997). Schoen et.al. (1997) argue that this shift suggests that "the economic benefits of children virtually disappear, while their costs- in terms of education and other expenditures- increase dramatically" (p. 333).

Theories that emphasize the direct economic and opportunity costs of children fail to account for fertility levels in industrialized countries that have remained at, or somewhat below, replacement level. We still lack any coherent understanding of variations in fertility intentions and behavior in low-fertility populations. Schoen et.al. (2001) criticize a number of possible explanations: 1) that children provide a source of intrinsic, non-substitutable pleasure; 2) that family 'completeness' is a normative concept that is subject to change; and 3) that children

create access to critical material resources through ties of kinship and other personal relationships (Cleland and Wilson 1987). They argue that ‘value of children’ studies are inconsistent and conceptually problematic, and have not been integrated with more general theories of fertility. ‘Children as resources’ theories have been more successful in explaining fertility intentions by characterizing children as investment capital: the more children parents have, the greater their potential social return. However, these theories have failed to fully explain why individuals, who can gain capital through education and other social insurance venues, would still want children.

Explanations rooted in ideational approaches presume that social and economic changes (e.g. increased availability of contraception, diverse family forms, and women’s participation in paid labor) have expanded options, other than motherhood, available to women (Gillespie 2003). These approaches still fail to address why only a small proportion of women choose to be childfree, and they do not account for what aspects of motherhood are being rejected by childless women (Gillespie 2003).

### **Why Do We Care About Childless Couples?**

Robert Rowthorn (2002) makes a compelling argument that marriage is a signal to society of a couple’s security, fidelity, maturity, and strength of commitment. Marriage stability is considered a function of two individuals joining together in a symbolic covenant of their intention to bear children and form a new family. Rowthorn (2002) notes that “every divorce...reduces the credibility of marriage as a signal of permanence...committed couples and society at large have a common interest in discouraging modifications to the marriage contract or forms of behavior that undermine the reputation of marriage” (p. 142). Absence of children in marriage may undermine common conceptions of marriage as family-centered. Following



Rowthorn's (2002) logic, committed parents should be concerned that voluntarily childless couples undermine family sanctity by redefining it in an undesirable manner- a bond without children. Fear that marriage is being undermined is not just targeted at unstable couples and homosexual couples; it is also directed toward those who forgo parenthood.

### **Hegemonic Motherhood**

Research on childless couples not only relies upon traditional conceptions of marriage and family, it also relies upon conceptions of femininity that I label hegemonic motherhood (Kenkel 1985; McQuillan et.al. 2003). I define hegemonic motherhood as the perception that women are, by nature, maternal and desire children. Scholarly literature on voluntarily childless couples often relies on assumptions that *all* women a) have a maternal instinct, b) desire children, c) will make occupational sacrifices for their families, and d) have the final authority when it comes to deciding when a couple has children and how many children they have. In this framework, ability to explore diverse life experiences is limited as narratives are often made to fit a pre-determined conception of women, marriage, and motherhood. Voices of single men and women, cohabiting couples, homosexual couples, and the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomically diverse are silenced.

## **RECONCEPTUALIZING VOLUNTARY CHILDLISSNESS**

### **Differentiating Voluntary from *Involuntary* Childlessness: Intention to Parent**

Conceptions of hegemonic motherhood dictate the types of questions asked of respondents when differentiating voluntary from involuntary childless couples. Within this restrictive framework, our understanding of why respondents *want* children in the first place, and our ability to discern commonalities as well as differences among voluntary and involuntary

childless couples, is limited. Thomson and Brandreth (1995) also argue that measures of fertility intention may only capture socially-acceptable reasons for having or not having children. Young individuals of childbearing age may proclaim a desire for children or postpone parenthood in accordance with pronatalist constraints. When operating from the assumption of hegemonic motherhood, we immediately limit our capacity to truly understand the complexity of the decision to parent, the meaning of parenthood, and the unique perspective of voluntarily childless couples because we presume that these are choices that must be accounted for.

Attempting to discern fertility intentions, Schoen et al. (1997) relies on a measure that asks respondents “do you intend to have a(another) child sometime?” Such dichotomous responses simplify the process of discerning voluntary from involuntary childlessness- couples may *intend* to have children but be hampered by infertility or lack of social and financial support. There are meanings and significance in the complexity of the decision to parent (or not parent) that are devalued and oversimplified by questions that force respondents into a category solely for comparison purposes. Such is the case in Kenkel’s (1985) study of desire for voluntary childlessness among low-income youth. His measure of fertility intention is similarly imprecise in differentiating voluntary from involuntary childlessness. Respondents are asked “in all, how many children would you like to have?” with possible answers ranging from “no children” to “some children.” This question is flawed because it teeters on an assumption of parenthood.

Thomson and Brandreth’s (1995) work offers a unique assessment of fertility intention. They argue that intended fertility reflects the combined effect of fertility demand and situational constraints on achieving desired fertility. This interaction is a function of three dimensions of fertility demand: intensity, centrality, and certainty. Intensity is akin to attitude strength and captures the extent to which individuals are invested in parenthood. Centrality refers to the

strength of fertility desires in comparison with other life goals. Lastly, certainty reflects the extent to which an individual knows how he/she feels and what he/she wants. Accounting for the multidimensional nature of intention helps elucidate issues surrounding the decision to parent that may be reconciled individually and within a dyadic relationship.

### **Social Psychological Variables Unique to the Voluntarily Childless**

Gathering knowledge about a particular phenomena or group of people starts with asking appropriate questions. Feminist researchers suggest that qualitative measures allow individuals freedom to dictate their *own* narrative rather than simplify them to fit established survey questionnaires (Park 2002; Gillespie 2003; Letherby and Williams 1999). The kinds of questions asked of individuals, as well as those *not* asked, reveal the direction of researchers' conceptual framework. Historically, we characterize voluntarily childless couples based on questionnaires that force couples to explain, rationalize, and make amends for their choice to forgo parenthood.

Using waves I and II of the National Survey of Families and Households, Heaton et al. (1999) ask voluntarily childless couples to account for their decision to forgo parenthood by noting the importance of "having time and energy for a career" and "having time for leisure and social activities" (p. 534). These questions suggest that career and socializing are the defining reasons why couples might choose to remain childless. Personal motivation for children is measured by a four-tem index that addresses the impact of stress and worry of raising children, the desire for someone to care for the respondent when he or she is old, having someone to love, and needing something to do. These questions imply that individuals do not have alternative routes for acquiring care in old age, that they need children in order to have someone to love, and that without children they would have nothing to fill their time. The limited scope of options available to voluntarily childless couples is characteristic of many national surveys, and

precludes a thorough understanding of this complex life-decision that involves numerous additional factors (e.g. religion, social support, financial capacity, childhood experience). Addressing the limited nature and number of options in quantitative data will better clarify the character of voluntarily childless couples.

Few studies of voluntarily childless couples include social psychological measures. This omission is important, in part, because social psychological measures link to theories of voluntary childlessness. In their study comparing childfree with child-anticipated married couples, Hoffman and Levant (1985) have groups rank in importance a number of aspects pertaining to marital adjustment, marital type, and sex role identification. The ability of this study to articulate definitive differences between the two groups is hampered by a focus on such broad categories of interest pertaining solely to the marital dyad when, in effect, the decision to forgo parenthood is often made *prior* to commitment and only solidified once partnered. Intentions to have children are often articulated between individuals prior to marriage in an effort to ascertain compatibility; agreement on this life-decision is typically a vital aspect of deciding whether to partner with a particular individual (Lunneborg 2001; Giddens 1992). The measurements in Hoffman and Levant's (1985) study are not unlike many other large-scale surveys that seek to capture an individual- *and* couple-level decision that may proceed from childhood experiences, pre-commitment experiences, educational and occupational aspirations, social network and financial support, and a myriad of other personal and dyadic inputs that culminate in the decision to forgo parenthood (Callan, 1987; Heaton et al., 1992; Kenkel, 1985; Seccombe, 1991; Callan, 1983; Somers, 1993; Houseknecht, 1977). Though quantitative research is necessary and beneficial for establishing general behavioral trends, comparative

qualitative work and longitudinal data can help clarify the decision-making process for voluntarily childless couples.

### **Social Pressure to Reproduce**

Feminist research suggests that understanding a group involves understanding their historical position in society, specifically, how larger institutional forces project themselves onto an individual's daily life (Veevers 1980; Tyler May 1995). Survey questionnaires seeking to understand voluntary childlessness generally neglect the impact of social pressures on the decision to forgo parenthood, and the extent to which couples, who intend *not* to have children, are forced into involuntary parenthood.

In consideration of social policy pertaining to voluntarily childless couples, Veevers (1974) makes an intriguing argument that:

the young couple who declare their intention to avoid parenthood are looked upon askance, but are granted little credibility, as it is assumed that they are too young to know their own minds and that when they grow-up they will change their views. The older couple who express a similar intention are taken more seriously because of their maturity, but they are also viewed with greater alarm. They are, after all, old enough to know better, and they are cautioned not to wait too long, lest they find later they cannot have children, and regret their lost opportunities (p. 404)

The invisible power of hegemonic parenthood operates in such a way that individuals are led to believe that they *should* want children, and will be unhappy and regretful if they choose not to have children. The assumption of hegemonic motherhood is prevalent in qualitative assessments of fertility intentions. Implicit in these stories is the belief that women do not know themselves and their bodies, and that women are incapable of making rational choices about their own lives. As Veevers (1974) notes, "it seems possible that less well informed or less committed women may be tricked into motherhood in this way by physicians who assume that they are acting in the

woman's own best interests" (p. 402). Veevers' (1974) comments suggest that our concern should focus on *involuntary* parents rather than the involuntarily childless, as these individuals may be parenting without desire to do so.

Few research studies ask respondents to consider how family, peer, and the larger social network influence their decision to forego parenthood. Studies generally focus on insular dyadic experiences as referents for fertility intention (Callan, 1987; Callan, 1986). Schoen et al.'s (1997) study is comparatively expansive in its focus on both individual- *and* couple-level factors that influence the decision to parent; yet they fail to account for the possibility of third party mediating factors involving family, peer, and the larger social network. Their study *does* consider traditionalist conceptions of parenthood and marriage, however, they lack concrete questions pertaining to those social pressures that tend to indirectly affect the decision to parent.

#### **Methodological Pathways to Knowledge: Character of Samples**

Research generally supports the use of qualitative methods in an effort to ascertain respondents' individualized, unique perspectives on life experiences. In the midst of social pressures and expectations to produce, voluntarily childless couples face a difficult and complicated decision to forgo parenthood, yet their decisions are often relegated to a dichotomous format in large-scale survey research. This approach means we learn very little about the complexities and details involved in the process of deciding not to have children when we force such a decision into a dichotomous box. Other work that is more focused on childlessness tends to focus on white, middle-class, heterosexual, highly educated couples in their child-bearing years living in urban areas (Callan, 1983; Abbey et al., 1991; Callan, 1986; McQuillan et al., 2003; Callan, 1987). The implication underlying this focus may be the concern that individuals and couples who *could* and *should* have children are choosing not to; this would

necessitate and elicit some explanation. Put another way, we do not actively seek to explain why poor, or racial and sexual minorities are not having children perhaps because we believe they should not. Granted, Black and Hispanic women *do* have lower rates of voluntary childlessness compared to non-Hispanic Whites; for this reason, it would seem even more compelling to address voluntary childlessness among these populations because it *is* so uncommon. Non-representative samples preclude our understanding of voluntary childlessness among gay and lesbian couples, racial and ethnic minorities, older couples, and lower economic groups. Providing a complete picture of voluntarily childless couples requires understanding phenomena from multiple perspectives.

### **Women's Domain**

Research on and for women focuses on giving voice to women dealing with unique women's issues. Traditionalist conceptions of hegemonic motherhood suggest that parenting is women's innate gift and the one domain in which women's voices should rise above those of men, yet, the decision to parent is often made between two people in a committed relationship; to ignore the male voice in heterosexual relationships suggests that parenting and mothering are strictly feminine functions in which men cannot and do not participate.

Though large surveys like the National Survey of Families and Households and the National Survey of Family Growth address men's fertility intentions and preferences, existing literature on voluntary childlessness tends to focus on women's fertility intentions as the *decisive* factor for whether couples have children, in part because parenting has arguably greater implications for women in terms of career interruption and financial gain (Veevers, 1974; Movius, 1976; Gillespie, 2000; Callan, 1987; McQuillan, et al. 2003; Callan, 1986; Callan, 1983). Lunneborg (1999) offers a compelling assessment of voluntarily childfree men. Her

work illustrates the complex decision-making process motivating a voluntarily childless life. Some of her respondents emphasized the freedom of a childfree life, about half said they did not like children, one-third made the decision early-on to forgo parenthood, two-thirds made the decision to be childfree after marriage, and still others agreed to a childfree life at their partners' behest. Though this work provides a compelling assessment of men's role in voluntary childlessness, the limited sample size of her study suggests the need for further research.

Thomson and Brandreth's (1995) study highlights how a multidimensional measure of fertility intention may differ by partner. Partners are likely to differ in the strength of their attitudes toward fertility intentions. One partner may feel more strongly than another for or against parenthood, and may have a stronger impact on the ultimate couple-level decision. Couples are also likely to differ in the strength of their fertility desires in comparison to other life goals. To the extent that situational constraints differ by gender we are likely to see individual differences within couples that may affect fertility decisions in different ways. Lastly, couples may differ in terms of the certainty with which they desire parenthood, and may defer to one another in an effort to solidify their decisions (Lunneborg 1999). Focusing on women as the proactive partner concerning fertility decisions or on men individually fails to capture how dynamics inherent to the marital dyad affect decision-making, and assumes that family and children are the insular responsibility of one partner, generally the woman.

## **DISCUSSION**

Existing literature on voluntarily childless couples is lacking in four main areas: 1) there is not a clear method for differentiating fertility intentions between voluntarily and involuntarily childless couples, and efforts to differentiate the two groups often rely on stereotypically



traditional conceptions of femininity and family that preclude the inclusion of male voices and couple-level data; 2) social psychological variables that uniquely pertain to the voluntarily childless are unclear and inaccurate; 3) the extent that social expectation of parenthood, specifically motherhood, is a major factor in decisions to parent or remain childless is understudied. In addition, women's ability to subvert and transform cultural norms pertaining to motherhood and marriage remains unclear; and 4) the majority of studies on voluntarily childless couples rely on large-scale or homogenous sample surveys to garner information on a complicated life decision faced by a diverse population of couples of various ages.

First, future research needs to clearly differentiate voluntarily from *involuntarily* childless couples in a way that embraces multiple and dynamic conceptions of femininity and family. Henceforth, research should attempt to tackle issues related to couples' intentions to parent, couples' current reality (i.e., having children or not), and any physical or psychological barriers that may preclude couples from having children (e.g. childhood experiences). Addressing and dealing with these factors will prevent incomplete and inaccurate assessments of couples' current and intended parenting status. Additionally, research will benefit from couple-level data that captures how each partner's intentions and realities affect the couple-level decision to forgo parenthood. Parenting is a decision that affects each partner in different ways, and there are different reasons why men and women may forgo having children (Lunneborg 1999; Letherby and Williams 1999). Capturing these unique qualities through couple-level data will expand our knowledge of how voluntarily childless couples jointly resolve to forgo parenthood. Previous research is largely limited to the female perspective as it is generally assumed that parenthood is women's domain and their desire to parent will ultimately determine whether a couple has children; however, parenting affects both men *and* women in addition to the marital relationship.

Traditional masculine and feminine identities often center on familial roles (i.e., to be feminine is to mother and to be masculine is to provide financially) regardless of whether individuals have children. Restricting research to the feminine voice precludes an understanding of how men negotiate social pressure to extend their lineage and how they navigate the decision-making process to forgo parenthood with a partner who may or may not agree with them. Couple-level data gives voice to each partner's unique contribution to the decision-making process while simultaneously highlighting dyadic negotiations.

Second, future research needs to address the dearth of information concerning social psychological variables that uniquely pertain to voluntarily childless couples. Research that considers pre-commitment, dyadic, extra-familial and larger social influences that affect the decision to forgo parenthood will provide a more complete understanding of the factors that affect the decision-making process, and ultimately strengthen theory on voluntary childlessness. Allowing voluntarily childless couples the freedom to narrate their own life-experiences will provide researchers with the knowledge to develop questions that accurately represent the perceptions and motivations of voluntarily childless couples. Qualitative research can help uncover the mechanisms that are associated with voluntary childlessness and identify the full range of motivations behind this life decision more so than a limited set of options offered in large-scale surveys.

Third, understanding how institutional forces affect the lives of individuals who forgo parenthood will help further explain the process of negotiating social pressures and creating a supportive reality. Understanding the lives of voluntarily childless couples requires asking whom and what these couples rely on for support. Couples may limit their social networks to like-minded individuals who support their decision to remain childless. Conversely, they may

experience social pressures to procreate that subsequently impact their initial decision. Answers to these questions will help explain how social pressures contribute to the tradition of hegemonic motherhood.

Fourth, future research needs to approach the study of voluntarily childless couples with numerous and diverse methodological tactics in addition to large-scale surveys. The decision to forgo parenthood is sometimes complicated by societal pressures that require individuals account for their decision *not* to have children. This decision is faced by a diverse population of individuals, however, current methodological approaches are often limited by samples of respondents who are white, highly-educated, middle-class, heterosexual individuals. Knowledge gathered about voluntarily childless couples is also limited as it is made to fit simplistic, incomplete surveys that are tailored in the tradition of hegemonic motherhood. Expanding our knowledge base to include a diverse population of individuals will further enhance our understanding of how the decision to forgo parenthood may differ by race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and age. Longitudinal and comparative qualitative approaches to the study of voluntary childlessness can provide researchers with knowledge of how the decision not to parent fits into and affects marriage and other experiences throughout the life-course, as well as psychological well-being (White and McQuillan 2006).

## **CONCLUSION**

As research expands to address a diverse population of individuals with varying life-experiences, traditional conceptions of gender, marriage, and parenthood should evolve in tandem. Exploring the lives of voluntarily childless couples reveals interesting and unique dichotomies that challenge traditionalist conceptions of feminine and masculine identities,

marital roles, and more generally, the institution of marriage. For women specifically, forgoing motherhood suggests a devaluation and dismissal of one's seemingly natural instinct to care for others. Exceptions to the rule of motherhood have traditionally elicited question, concern, and anger. Women who choose to forgo motherhood are sometimes socially ostracized as selfish, immature, and subversive (Movius, 1976), yet research suggests that the decision to forgo parenthood is one fraught with personal, economic, social, and political ramifications that couples, and especially women, do not take lightly. Further exploration of the social pressures women face to mother will illuminate not only how institutional forces shape an individual's life-course, but also how some women develop their own reality and morality to support the decision not to parent even in the face of these institutional pressures (Veevers, 1975; Park 2002).

Demographic phenomena occur within specific social contexts, and as such, should be studied as social processes. As we seek to conceptualize and measure the social environments of voluntarily childless individuals we need to consider how preconceived notions of motherhood and femininity impact the populations we examine, the type of research we perform, the questions being asked, and the conclusions that we draw from data. Qualitative research can provide a conceptual guide for future quantitative research that addresses the character of voluntarily childless couples and the impact of this life choice on fertility trends, gender roles, and marriage.

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