

Perceptions of the Voluntarily Childless:

The Negative Stigma of an Unconventional Ideal

Alyssa N. Hook

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

Abstract

This study examined the potential implications of religious affiliation on perceptions of voluntarily childless couples. Undergraduate students were given a vignette about an adult couple that either had children or that was childless, and were subsequently asked to complete questionnaires that rated the couple on a variety of personality dimensions. It was predicted that individuals who identify with pronatalist religious sects have more negative perceptions of those who are childless. There was a significant contrast in the views that Christian individuals held toward couples that were voluntarily childless versus those that had two children, suggesting that this religious affiliation is associated with perceptions of those who stray from the standards of the pronatalist society. Recommendations for furthering this field of research may include exploring the role of religiosity on perceptions of individuals who generally stray from traditional gender roles.

Perceptions of the Voluntarily Childless:

The Negative Stigma of an Unconventional Ideal

Social stigma is defined as an accumulation of personal experience, societal settings, and normative expectations (Goffman, 1963). According to Link and Phelan (2001), the idea of the *stigma* is conceptualized as a convergence of the “identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labeled persons into distinct categories, and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination,” (p. 367). This application of the term allows for a general understanding of the formation and potential effects of the presence of a stigma. Furthermore, there are three distinct forms of stigma that should essentially be noted. There are physical attributes that warrant peculiarity, faulty or unnatural personality characteristics, and those of race and religion (Goffman, 1963). These three main categories are the foundation for countless other acute varieties of stigma.

Among the numerous forms of social stigma, a less explored area includes the corollary of pronatalism. A pronatalist society is one that “encourages childbearing by members of a civil, ethnic, or national group,” (Brown & Ferree, 2005). With a generation that has become increasingly more accepting to the developing roles of women and the evolving characteristics of womanhood, there is an inevitable variation in lifestyle and priorities. However, there is still a pull from this historical norm of pronatalism to challenge the more modern ideals of choosing not to have children. More specifically, adults who are voluntarily childless in an overwhelmingly pronatalist society are certainly considered part of the out-group. This nontraditional choice of childlessness, which stems from the newer outlooks, can elicit negative perceptions of those in the out-group. Religious involvement typically has an impact on personal

motivations and beliefs, however, a more acute look at how it affects and shapes perceptions of others would be a more novel analysis in this field of study.

Voluntarily Childless in a Pronatalist Society

The concept of the traditional American family is constantly evolving based on personal preferences, societal models, and familial expectations. The word family represents a multifaceted range of realities, and has become loosely attributed to many different groups of people who consider themselves connected to one another (Popenoe, 1993). Regardless of the transformation of this historical norm, there are still foundational characteristics to define a family. Popenoe (1993) describes a family as:

A group in which people typically live together in a household and function as a cooperative unit, particularly through the sharing of economic resources, in the pursuit of domestic activities (p. 529).

This broad definition allows for the inclusion of the modern and varying groups of individuals that claim to be a family, as it does not narrow down to any particularly specific characteristics. However, in a pronatalist society there is the characteristic, yet unspoken, pressure to include children as members of the family (Park, 2002). Heitlinger (1991) conceptualizes pronatalism as a manifestation of ideals on three levels: cultural, ideological, and psychological. The cultural component reflects the nature of having children as an instinctive and central part of a woman's identity. Ideologically, motherhood is seen as a societal standard and expectation, and the psychological correlate of childbearing emulates personal motivations as the result of a mature decision (Heitlinger, 1991). While the United States is most certainly a pronatalist society, there has been a steady decrease in not only procreation, but also marriage (Popenoe, 1993). In terms of marriage, the United States ties with Sweden as the country with the highest overall rate of

family decline, which is measured on a composite of eight dimensions: median age at first marriage, percent of the population aged 45-49 who have never married, nonmarital birth rate, divorce rate per 1,000 married women, one-parent households with children under 15, percent of mothers in the labor force with children under the age of 3, total fertility rate, and average household size (Houseknecht & Sastry, 1996). Popenoe (1993) compares the average number of children from earlier generations to the contemporary woman. In the 1950s, the average woman had 3.7 children during her lifetime, and that rate has dropped to 1.9 children in the 1990s. The reproductive decline has been demonstrated in a statistical analysis of fertility rates in accordance with female wages. This non-linear relationship, with fertility rates decreasing as wages increase, represents a sensible reason as to why women cannot do both. The current economic trend of higher education and a career-oriented female identity is forcing women to assess the value of their time (Butz & Ward, 1979). If women find more value in earning an income, they must consider how other activities may consume that resource. There may be a challenge between career and family with the scarcity of time, and that reality may not allow for both. This forces women to take an earnest look into genuine desires and ambitions for the future, and assess what is most important.

Furthermore, the progressive role of the educated woman is not the only explanation for the decline in procreation. The choice to have a child tends to be hierarchical, in which external, social contexts must first be evaluated and then internal, personal desires are evaluated (Morgan, 1996). Morgan identifies the three most fundamental social factors that must be initially assessed as, “schooling, establishing a career, and financial exigencies,” (p. 37). While there are some individuals who reflect on these three social criteria and then subsequently seek marriage and children, that is not the case for all young adults. The underlying motives for bearing

children can be evaluated based on a rational choice model, stemming from the values and constraints of an action (Friedman, Hechter, & Kanazawa, 1994). The constraints refer to the consequences an individual may incur by participating in a particular course of action; whereas, the values consider internal feelings and can potentially mitigate the constraints (Friedman et al., 1994). The motives for procreation must be analyzed in the context of personal values. Some positive aspects of having children include the mere love for a child, and the fulfillment and joy that comes from watching them develop into mature adults (Morgan & King, 2001). While this may appear advantageous to some, it also indicates personal and social rewards, ultimately reflecting a personal value. This sense of satisfaction from raising a child is certainly subjective, and parenthood does have significant costs.

A more stimulating inquiry examines two specific influences that shape personal values to have children. There is speculation that a maternal instinct exists, and drives the desire to bear and raise children (Veevers, 1973). While this is possible, yet empirically unsound, it is worth mentioning in terms of parental motivation in a pronatalist society. More pragmatically, religious affiliation has been widely recognized as a significant force that drives the desire for parenthood. These facets of identity are discussed in further detail regarding the ways in which they may affect personal choice.

Gender Role Identity

Gender roles are explicit behaviors that are considered either appropriate or inappropriate according to the two sexes (Bem, 1981; Holt & Ellis, 1998) and are constantly influenced by shifts in social structure. Bem (1981) identified the origin of understanding gender and identity in terms of the *schema*. The schema is “a cognitive structure...that organizes and guides an individual’s perception,” (Bem, 1981, p. 355). Deaux and Major (1987) proposed a model that

suggests our gender-linked behaviors are better understood in the context of ongoing interactions. It is a constant learning experience to internalize situations based on social and environmental cues, which helps individuals recognize appropriate masculine and feminine behaviors. Bem also (1981) proposed that sex typing – translating the abstract definitions of *male* and *female* into corresponding masculine and feminine personality traits – results once the self-concept and gender schema enmesh.

There has been a notable decline in traditional gender attitudes toward women in the workplace, as well as in the home (Thornton, Alwin, & Camburn, 1983). Historically, there have been expectations where motherhood was associated with womanhood (Russo, 1976), which has placed a significant amount of pressure on women to validate their identity by fulfilling a societal standard. In relation to marriage, Heitlinger (1991) references Sally Macintyre's conceptualization of societal norms in two domains: the connection between marriage and motherhood, and non-marriage and non-motherhood. Thus, the pronatalist community deems the concept of parenthood suitable for married women, and the idea of childlessness as anomalous and almost deviant (Heitlinger, 1991). However, Popenoe (1993) recognizes the gradual change in women's attitudes toward motherhood, reporting that when asked to describe the most enjoyable aspects of being a woman, the response of "being a mother, raising a family" has plummeted. Consequently, the equation of womanhood with motherhood does not stand as stable as before. This shift in views has allowed for a more contemporary and progressive attitude toward not only marriage and parenthood, but also the family as a whole.

Moreover, these attitudes do not simply remain internalized, and are actually manifested in the realm of family formation and parenthood. Egalitarian women, those who subscribe to a less traditional view of the division of labor within a marriage, were less likely to desire and take

on the role of parenthood than their more conventional counterparts (Kaufman, 2000). This demonstrates the active role gender identity plays in personal desires. Furthermore, gender identity affects not only personal motivations and beliefs, but also the perceptions of others. Kaufman (2000) deduced that personal attitudes are vital, for they signify the ways in which individuals internalize their roles, and can be ultimately manifested in their behaviors.

Religiosity and the Childless

A significant amount of individuals claim affiliation with one of the central pronatalist religious sects in the United States. Lesthaeghe and Surkyn (1988) claim that religious membership in these groups can indeed have a direct influence on behavior due to their endorsement of pronatalist values, such as marriage and parenthood. Sensibly, involvement in these pronatalist groups such as the Catholic, Mormon, or Protestant Church, reflected a higher association with parenthood due to the fear of nonconformity (Friedman, et al., 1994). This established norm might not allow for individuals to implement personal motivations, and be more of an expectation than a preference. With this in mind, it is intuitive to assume the correlation between childlessness and the lack of religious affiliation. This idea has been empirically demonstrated, in which no religious association or attendance was a consistent predictor of childlessness by choice (Abma & Martinez, 2006; Krishnan, 1993; Somers, 1993). More explicitly, frequent religious attendance was more strongly related with childless couples than was religious affiliation (Heaton, Jacobson, & Fu, 1992). They elaborated on this conclusion with the inference that those who consistently attend religious services are more likely to be influenced by the beliefs of the religion. While affiliation and attendance represent the broad population of individuals who identify themselves as religious, it is worth mentioning the motivations behind participation. Allport and Ross (1967) identify two central factors in

terms of the pursuit of religion: intrinsic and extrinsic orientation. They define those who are extrinsically motivated as people who use religion for security and stability purposes, while those who are intrinsically motivated as people truly *live* the religion, and aspire to give thanks and praise for the glory they receive.

Furthermore, while intrinsic and extrinsic orientation is difficult to objectively identify, it can still have a motivational mechanism. Batson and Burris (1994) have concluded that individuals may desire to be perceived as in “good status” with their church so as to evade a negative image from others. If certain behaviors are negatively viewed by pronatalist religions, such as homosexuality, churchgoers may be more inclined to uphold such views, even if they are incongruent with their personal beliefs (Batson & Burris, 1994). They emphasize the fact that this does not only affect personal beliefs, but also enhances prejudice against others who are not doing the same. If in fact, religion can impose this type of prejudice upon others who have differing opinions, it can be safely presumed that people with a stronger religious stance will have more negative perceptions of those who do not follow the prescribed norms of affiliation.

Effects of Stigmatization

Negative stigmas often blossom in a society where there are standards or expectations for a certain lifestyle (Park, 2002), ultimately reflecting the customary ideals of pronatalism. Prior to the establishment of empirical research involving the voluntarily childless, Veevers (1973) postulates the possible implications of this form of stigmatization:

If, as many authors predict, such a stereotype does exist, it may be a significant factor in the motivation of people to have children. If the childless are believed to be unhappy, selfish, lonely, immature, and emotionally

unstable, then perhaps some people have children in order to avoid such negative traits and/or negative images (p. 201).

This assertion certainly is not representative of an “ideal” pronatalist society, for it reflects the idea that the possibility of being viewed in a negative light will prompt individuals to take on the eternal responsibility of parenthood. With the growth of research pertaining to the voluntarily childless, there was indeed a trend in personal observations. Ross (1977) found that perceivers tend to make dispositional attributions about other people based on their lifestyles, which may have a lasting impression. In a gender comparison, women who did not have children were consistently seen as less favorable on multiple personality dimensions (Mueller & Yoder, 1997; Kopper & Smith, 2001; Park, 2002; Callan, 1983). This is reasonable since the childless are essentially the out-group based on the prototypical gender norms of motherhood and womanhood.

Additionally, childless males were also rated as significantly less warm than fathers, but for potentially different reasons than women (LaMastro, 2001). He believed this effect might be due to the fact that childless males were viewed as less hardworking than fathers, for the latter has to provide a significant amount of resources for a family. In terms of the couple as a whole, LaMastro (2001) also believed that the lack of children in a committed marriage might be linked with perceptions of a weaker relationship in general, regardless of individual personality traits. These observations in previous empirical research have allowed for the impetus to take a closer look at the motivation behind these perceptions. This may be done in the context of analyzing how perceptions may potentially stem from, or be strongly influenced by, a strong religious affiliation.

Method

Design

This experiment was in a 2 (Religion: Christian vs. Non-Christian) x 2 (Condition: Two children vs. No children). The study was pilot tested with a small group of participants.

Participants

Participants in this study included 42 undergraduate students at a public university in California. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 56 with a mean age of 20 years. There were 52.4% male and 47.6% female. 57.1% of these students were Caucasian, 23.8% Asian American, 2.4% African American, 9.5% Latino/a, 2.4% Native American, and 2.4% of other races. 33.3% of the participants identified with a Christian religious affiliation, 11.9% Roman Catholic, 9.5% Buddhist, 2.4% Islam, 2.4% Judaism, 9.5% Agnostic, 19.0% Atheist, and 11.9% of other religions. More than half of the participants were undergraduate freshman, 57.1%, with 21.4% sophomores, 11.9% juniors, and 9.5% were of senior standing. 97.6% of the participants identified with a single marital status, and only 2.4% of the participants were married. 23.8% of the participants are currently in a relationship with a significant other, and 90.5% plan to get married someday. The majority of the participants do not have children (95.2%) and 88.1% plan to have children.

Instruments

Demographic Questionnaire. The demographic form was designed to obtain a general makeup of the population involved in the study. The questions on the form include age, gender, racial/ethnic group, religious affiliation, year in school, marital status, relationship status, plans to get married, whether or not he or she has a child, and the desire to have a child in the future.

This allows for the participant to note personal religious affiliation, which will later be collapsed into a general category of Christian or Non-Christian religious identification.

Vignette. This short and succinct vignette was designed to give an overview about a middle-aged couple. It describes Thomas and Jane as two educated and successful adults, working as a lawyer and a manager at an accounting firm, respectively. The vignette also provides a brief explanation about their family life and personal interests. There are two conditions, with one vignette identifying the couple as voluntarily childless, and the other as the parents of two children. The vignettes were identical with the exception of the variation in parental status (See Appendix).

Questionnaires 1, 2, and 3. Questionnaires 1 and 2 comprise of semantic differentials for 16 personality dimensions for Jane and Thomas as individuals, and Questionnaire 3 has semantic differentials for 10 characteristics based on the couple as a unit. The traits from Questionnaires 1 and 2 were categorized into four subcategories: positive emotionality (warm, likable, friendly), negative emotionality (selfish, lonely, boring), constraint (restricted, worried), and success (intelligent, hard-working). The traits for Questionnaire 3 were collapsed to measure general positive evaluations. These traits were drawn from previous research that demonstrated statistical relevance and significance in line with men and women who are parents and also those who are childless (Park, 2002; Callan, 1983; Bridges, 1987; Koropecykj-Cox, Romano, & Moras, 2007).

In Questionnaires 1 and 2, participants are asked to rate Jane and Thomas, respectively, as an individual on a scale of -3 to 3. The negative values reflect the negative range of the trait, and the positive values reflect the positive range of the trait; for example, unfriendly/friendly,

selfish/selfless, and restricted/free. Items were scored in the positive direction, with a positive score indicating a higher level of the trait.

The Duke University Religion Index (DUREL). Participants completed the DUREL scale, a five-question measure of religious involvement. Within the scale, there are three subcategories: 1) Organizational religious behavior, 2) Non-organizational religious behavior, and 3) Intrinsic religious motivation. Participants responded to items of a 5-point or 6-point Likert scale. Some questions from the scale include, “I try hard to carry religion over into all other dealings in life,” and “How often do you spend time in private religious activities, such as prayer, meditation, or Bible study?”

Procedure

For the purposes of the study, there were two conditions for the parental status of Thomas and Jane, either childless or the parents of two children, and the conditions were randomized. Participants were first given informed consent, and then were asked to read a short paragraph – the vignette (See Appendix). They were then asked to complete three subsequent questionnaires regarding the nature of the vignette. One questionnaire asked participants their opinions about Jane, one was about Thomas, and one was about the two of them as a couple. Following the questionnaires, participants then completed the Duke University Religion Index and a demographic form.

Results

It was hypothesized that individuals who claim personal affiliation with a Christian religion will have more negative perceptions of a couple who voluntarily chose not to have children. This hypothesis was not just limited to the general perceptions of the couple as a whole, but also included the perceptions of the man and woman separately on different

personality dimensions. In order to test this prediction, religious affiliation was collapsed into two main categories: Christian and Non-Christian. An analysis of variance showed that there was a significant interaction at the $p < .05$ level, of religion by condition on the positive evaluations of the couple (See Table 1). Christian participants produced a greater discrepancy in their ratings of a couple as parents and those of a couple who is childless, on a seven-point scale (See Figure 1). Further analysis of these means yielded a significant one-way contrast, comparing the Christian evaluations of the couples that have children and those who are childless (See Table 2).

Furthermore, contrasts of analysis of variance were run of Christian evaluations of both Jane and Thomas by condition on the four subscales: positive emotionality, negative emotionality, constraint, and success. The positive emotionality subscale for both Jane and Thomas was found to be highly reliable, ($\alpha = .86$) and ($\alpha = .89$), respectively. The negative emotionality subscale consisted of 3 items again for both targets, Jane ($\alpha = .41$) and Thomas ($\alpha = .60$). Cronbach's alphas for the 3 constraint and 3 success items for Jane were .28 and .84, and for Thomas were .20 and .81, respectively. Finally, the positive evaluation subscale of the couple was also found to be highly reliable (10 items; $\alpha = .85$).

The four subscales by gender allowed for a more acute analysis of perceptions and gender difference of the target. There was a significant main effect for Christian evaluations of Jane on the dimension of negative emotionality, $F(1, 38) = 7.79, p < .01$, such that Christians rated Jane more negatively when she was perceived as not having children. There was also a significant main effect of Jane on the dimension of constraint, $F(1, 38) = 5.26, p < .05$. While the contrasts for Jane on positive emotionality, $F(1, 38) = 1.55, p = .22$ and success, $F(1, 38) = 1.68, p = .20$ were not significant, there was a marginal trend in the hypothesized direction. The contrasts for

Thomas on each of the four dimensions were not significant, which allows for further interpretation of the gender disparity in the results. However, the Christian evaluation of Thomas on the dimension of negative emotionality was close to significance, $F(1, 38) = 2.59, p = .12$, such that Christian participants were more likely to rate Thomas more negatively in affect.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that, as hypothesized, participants with a Christian religious affiliation rated couples that do not have children as more negatively than their Non-Christian counterparts. This conclusion can be more acutely analyzed by noticing the discrepancy in Christian perceptions of couples that have children and those who are childless. The fact that Christian evaluations of these couples were more polarized than Non-Christian evaluations insinuates something further about the driving force of religion. This finding implies a fascinating link between religious affiliation and perceptions of those who are not following the standards as prescribed by the pronatalist society.

Furthermore, the gender differences of the target certainly yielded different results. There was a significant relationship between the effects of religious affiliation on perceptions of negative emotionality and constraint on Jane as a mother, versus Jane as a childless adult. It is interesting to discover such differentiated ratings of Jane in terms of negative affect, for it demonstrates the elasticity of negative perceptions of a female who is part of an out-group. It also suggests that perceivers are more neutral in terms of positive evaluations of a target since these scores are not fluctuating as much as negative evaluations. On the other hand, the perceptions of Thomas did not yield any significant interactions with religious affiliation and childlessness. This implies that participants are not rating Thomas as significantly more positive or negative based on his status of parent or non-parent. These variations in perceptions based on

the gender of the target speak volumes regarding the impact of religion, and also raises further questions as to *why* this is occurring.

This conclusion that religious affiliation is significantly tied to more negative evaluations of those who stray from the prescribed norms is consistent with findings from previous research (Friedman, et al., 1994; Batson & Burris, 1994). Previous studies imply that affiliation with Christian-based religions can impact personal opinions and motivations (Lesthaeghe & Surkyn, 1988) and the findings from this study are certainly in line with those assumptions. The fact that Christian participants were rating the childless couples as significantly lower than couples that have children implies there is a potency of religion on attitudes. Previous research has emphasized the more negative perceptions of a woman as a childless adult than a male as a childless adult (Heitlinger, 1991), and these results are analogous based on the statistical significance of the variations in perceptions of Jane.

From the present findings, this study adds a twist of religiosity to the research on couples and voluntary childlessness in adulthood. There has been significant research in terms of how religion has the potential to influence behaviors and attitudes, however, the direct correlations of religion on these unconventional, childless couples has not been specifically explored. These significant results suggest that religion may be severely influencing the ways individuals perceive those who do not necessarily conform to the prescribed views of their own personal religious beliefs. These implications provide additional incentive to pursue a more in-depth analysis of the roles of religion on non-traditional behaviors and lifestyles.

In addition, it should be noted that the sample is limited. With a greater sample size there may have been significant effects in the cells that produced only marginal significance. When executing the one-way contrast, the number of participants for each cell was relatively small, and

a larger sample size may have generated greater power for the analysis. Also, the sample was a convenience sample, as participants were all students from the same public university. A more diverse sample across a larger age group may have allowed for a greater possibility of generalizing to the population.

The practical implications of this study illustrate the magnitude of religious affiliation on perceptions of childless couples in a pronatalist society. These findings, however, can be transferred to a larger scale with further investigation. As noted, the gender of the target was a remarkable point, thus, studying the broad perceptions of those who stray from traditional gender roles may be of interest. It would be fascinating to explore the perceptions of males who stray from traditional gender roles versus females who stray from traditional gender roles, which can also potentially explore why females appear to be more stigmatized for this out-group identity. Furthermore, evaluations of targets by gender may also be influenced by perceiver gender identity. This construct, coupled with perceiver religiosity, may take a more in-depth analysis of the effect on perceptions of others. Finally, on a larger scale, these results raise the question of how the stigma of nonconformity can affect personal beliefs, and that would be an intriguing contribution to this field of study.

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Table 1

Univariate Analysis of Religious Affiliation and Couple Evaluations by Condition

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>p</i>
Corrected Model	3	4.36	2.80	.010
Intercept	1	1625.76	1043.66	.000
One-way	3	4.36	2.80	.010
Error	38		.64	
Total	42			
Corrected Total	41			

Table 2

Contrast of Christian Perceptions of Childless Couples

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>p</i>
Contrast	1	7.94	5.10	.008
Error	38		.64	

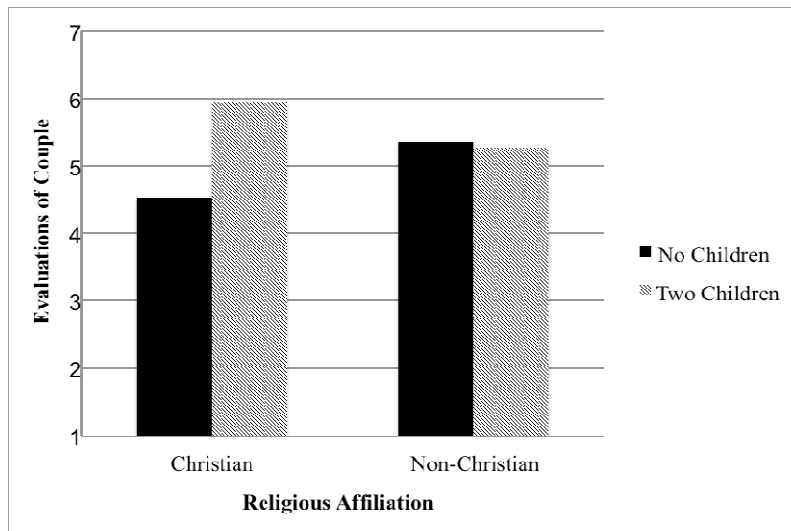


Figure 1. Mean scores of evaluation of couple of Christian versus Non-Christian participants by experimental condition.

Appendix

Vignette

The vignette presented below displays one of two conditions – the couple as childless, or the couple as having two children. The vignettes for the two conditions are identical with the exception of the single sentence regarding their parental status.

Thomas and Jane are an attractive couple in their mid-forties. They met during their third year of college, and after four years of dating were married. They were introduced by a mutual friend, and hit it off after discovering they both had ambitious career goals. After finishing their undergraduate degree, they both pursued post-graduate education. Thomas went to law school and Jane completed her Master's degree in finance and accounting. Upon completion of their graduate degrees, they moved into an elegant home in a nice area of Los Angeles. Thomas is now working as a partner at a law firm and specializes in sports and entertainment contracts. Jane works as a Senior Manager at a large accounting firm, and enjoys her job. Thomas and Jane have no children and do not plan to have any children. (Thomas and Jane have two children). They are very satisfied with their current family size and enjoy their careers. Both of their families live in Southern California, so they often take weekend trips to spend time with relatives. They also both take pleasure in cooking, hiking, traveling, and running.