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9-2-2012


# Choosing to be Childfree: Research on the Decision Not to Parent

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## Repository Citation

Blackstone, Amy and Stewart, Mahala Dyer, "Choosing to be Childfree: Research on the Decision Not to Parent" (2012). *Sociology School Faculty Scholarship*. 5.

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# Choosing to be Childfree: Research on the Decision Not to Parent

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## Abstract

Decisions about whether to have or rear children, as well as perceptions of people who choose not to parent are linked to a variety of social processes and identities. We review literature from a variety of disciplines that focuses on voluntarily childless adults. Early research in this area, emerging in the 1970s, focused almost exclusively on heterosexual women and utilized a childless rather than a childfree framework. Later work saw a shift to a “childless-by-choice” or “childfree” framework, emphasizing that for some, not being parents is an active choice rather than an accident. While more recent research includes lesbian women and gay and heterosexual men, greater diversity within studies of adults without children is one suggested focus for future work in this area.

## Introduction

Increasingly, fewer women and men in the United States opt to have or rear children than in the past. In 2002, 18 percent of women in the United States ages 40–44 had never had a child (Osborne 2003). By 2006, that number had risen to 20 percent (Dye 2008). These rates show a clear increase from the 10 percent of women ages 40–44 who had never had a child in 1976 (Dye 2008; Osborne 2003). As for men, 23 percent in the same age group were childless in 2002 (Biddlecom and Martin 2006). Rates of childlessness have also increased among younger cohorts. In 1998, 28 percent of women aged 25–29 had not borne children; this number was just 16 percent in 1976. Finally, 20 percent of 30- to 34-year old women were childless in 1998 while only 11 percent were so in 1976 (Paul 2001). While national data do not distinguish chosen childlessness from that which is not chosen, nor do childbearing rates account for adoptions, these trends are at least suggestive of the conclusion that increasing numbers of women and men are choosing not to become parents.

In this paper, we review studies of adults without children with particular emphasis on voluntary childlessness. Throughout, we use two terms to refer to adults who have chosen not to rear or bear children: voluntarily childless and childfree. Because some studies of adults without children do not explicitly attempt to disentangle voluntary childlessness from that which is involuntary, we do not limit our review exclusively to literature on the childfree. We do, however, pay particular attention to childfree studies, bringing in sources that focus more broadly on “childlessness” when those findings are relevant to the voluntarily childless and in the case of research that is fundamental to this area of study.

To begin, we outline the development of scholarship in this area and examine how and why terminology has shifted over time. We then consider pathways to becoming

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1 voluntarily childless and describe predominant explanations offered by researchers in the  
 2 area. Next we describe work focused on issues of deviance and stigma management  
 3 among voluntarily childless adults. Reflecting recent developments in the literature, we  
 4 then briefly describe findings on how the voluntarily childless fare as they age. We con-  
 5 clude by offering several suggestions for future research in this area.

### 6 7 8 **The study of voluntary childlessness over time**

9 The 1970s saw an emergence of research focused on voluntary childlessness. These studies  
 10 appeared in the scholarly journals of a variety of disciplines, from sociology (Ritchev and  
 11 Stokes 1974; Veevers 1973a,b) to psychology (Houseknecht 1979b; Russo 1979), from **2**  
 12 biology (Barnett and MacDonald 1976; Gustavus and Henley 1971) to economics (Marci-  
 13 ano 1978), and in interdisciplinary journals as well (Houseknecht 1977, 1979a; Ory 1978;  
 14 Silka and Kiesler 1977; Veevers 1979). By and large, early studies tended to frame volun-  
 15 tary childlessness as a form of deviance. These studies focused on the unique attributes of  
 16 individuals who had chosen not to have children, such as their social class and educational  
 17 backgrounds. This body of work largely asked why adults, and in particular adult hetero-  
 18 sexual women, would choose not to have children. Early research also considered the  
 19 economic and demographic consequences of increasing rates of voluntary childlessness  
 20 (Bloom and Pebley 1982).

21 Moving into the 1980s, scholarship's focus on the unique attributes and demographics  
 22 of the voluntarily childless continued (Bartlett 1996; Baum and Cope 1980; Boyd 1989;  
 23 Bram 1984; Callan 1986; Kiernan 1989; Ramu and Tavuchis 1986). This decade also saw  
 24 increased attention paid to voluntarily childless heterosexual couples (Baber and Dreyer  
 25 1986; Burgwyn 1983; Callan 1984). In addition, an emerging scholarship on older people  
 26 without children developed around this time (Houser et al. 1984; Johnson and Catalano  
 27 1981). Moving into the 1990s, scholars also began to consider the role of religiosity in  
 28 the decision not to have children (Heaton et al. 1992; Krishnan 1990).

29 By the 2000's, the aging population of adults without children become an increasingly  
 30 popular point of focus for researchers (Abma and Martinez 2006; Albertini and Kohli 2009;  
 31 DeOllos and Kapinus 2002; Dykstra and Keizer 2009; Kohli and Albertini 2009; Umberson  
 32 et al. 2010; Wenger et al. 2000; Wenger 2009). While research on how childfree lives chal- **3**  
 33 lenge gender norms appeared prior to the 2000s (Baber and Dreyer 1986; Bram 1984;  
 34 Morell 1994), the past decade has also seen increasing attention to the gendered nature of  
 35 voluntary childlessness (Gillespie 2003; Hird 2003; Hird and Abshoff 2000; Maher and  
 36 Saugeres 2007). Further, recent studies have examined the impact of family-friendly work-  
 37 place policies and cultures on people whose family forms do not match the traditional vision  
 38 called up by the term "family-friendly" (Casper et al. 2007; Wood and Newton 2006).

39 In addition to the shifting points of focus outlined above, the terminology used to  
 40 describe adults who choose not to have children has also changed over time. Early studies  
 41 used the term "childless" to refer to adults without children (see, e.g., Houseknecht  
 42 1977, 1979a,b; Mosher and Bachrach 1982). This however left no way to distinguish  
 43 adults who did not have children but wished to from those who had made an intentional  
 44 choice not to have them. Studies published in the 1980s show increasing use of the terms  
 45 "voluntarily" and "intentionally" associated chosen childlessness (Baum and Cope 1980;  
 46 Barnett and MacDonald 1986; Bloom and Pebley 1982; Bram 1984; Calhoun 1980;  
 47 Callan 1982, 1983, 1986; Den Bandt 1980; Feldman 1981; Ramu 1985). **4**

48 Over time, as more individuals began making the choice to remain non-parents (Bachu  
 49 and O'Connell 1998), some scholars began using the term "childfree" as a more accurate

1 expression of the choice it describes (Bartlett 1996; Defago 2005; Gillespie 2003). Today,  
 2 the terms “childless-by-choice” and childfree are more commonly seen than “childless”  
 3 when referring to individuals who have made the explicit and intentional choice not to  
 4 have or rear children. Because a predominance of the literature we review here uses the  
 5 term voluntarily childless, and because we also wish to acknowledge more recent termi-  
 6 nological developments, we use the terms voluntarily childless and childfree throughout  
 7 the paper to describe the individuals upon whom we focus.

### 8 9 **Pathways to being childfree**

10  
 11 There are a variety of pathways adults may take to making the decision to remain child-  
 12 free. In this section we examine both *how* adults come to identify as childfree and expla-  
 13 nations for *why* some choose to do so. In terms of the question of *how*, some adults  
 14 choose early not to have or rear children and stick with this decision throughout the life  
 15 course. Others may postpone childbearing decisions for such a period of time that even-  
 16 tually biological reproduction is no longer an option. Still others may intend to bear or  
 17 rear children but never actually do so. Those in the latter two categories may eventually  
 18 come to identify as childfree, along with those who knew early on that they would not  
 19 have children.

20 In their study of childbearing patterns among a nationally representative sample,  
 21 Heaton et al. (1999) found that while some adults indeed remained “consistently child-  
 22 less” over time, others who initially intended to have children later changed their minds  
 23 and decided against doing so. Most quantitative investigations in this area do not distin-  
 24 guish between the voluntarily and involuntarily childless and this is sometimes intentional  
 25 (Keizer et al. 2008); yet these studies are nevertheless instructive for researchers interested  
 26 in those who explicitly identify as childfree. One pattern found in pathways to “childless-  
 27 ness,” be it chosen or not, is that this process may differ by gender (Keizer et al. 2008).  
 28 Quantitative investigations have also found that differences in transitions to adulthood  
 29 may play a role in pathways to parenthood and non-parenthood. Focusing broadly on  
 30 “childlessness” rather than specifically on voluntary childlessness, Hagestad and Call  
 31 (2007) found that two transitions in particular – leaving one’s parents’ home and  
 32 marrying – played a role in whether or not one would become a parent.

33 Quantitative findings, while generally focused broadly on both the childfree and involun-  
 34 tarily childless, suggest that childfree adults do not universally reach the decision to remain  
 35 so at the same stage of life or in the same way. Though qualitative studies are well suited to  
 36 examining processes such as how individuals come to identify as childfree, fewer qualitative  
 37 investigations focus specifically on pathways to the childfree identity. Such studies have the  
 38 potential to illuminate the quantitative patterns described in the aforementioned studies.

39 A large portion of the literature examines not how adults come to identify as childfree  
 40 but why they do so (Agrillo and Nelini 2008; Clausen 2002; Gillespie 2003; Housekn-  
 41 echt 1982; Letherby 2002). When examining why some adults remain voluntarily child- 5  
 42 less, explanations range from the impact of macro-social forces such as women’s increasing  
 43 labor force participation to micro-level motivations such as autonomy and freedom. Pre-  
 44 dominantly, explanations for increasing rates of voluntary childlessness focus on key social  
 45 changes such as the feminist movement of the 1970s, increased reproductive choice, and  
 46 women’s increasing labor force participation (Gillespie 2003; see also Bartlett 1996;  
 47 Campbell 1985; Ireland 1993; McAllister 1998). 6, 7, 8

48 Some of the literature in this area has shifted focus from the macro-level social changes  
 49 described above to more micro-level processes that explain individuals’ motives for and

1 consequences of remaining childfree (e.g., Gillespie 2003; Houseknecht 1987; Letherby  
2 2002; Park 2005). For example, Houseknecht (1987) found that the most commonly  
3 cited reason for not having children was “freedom from childcare responsibility and  
4 greater opportunity for self-fulfillment and spontaneous mobility” (350). In Gillespie’s  
5 (2003) research, themes that emerged in relation to the choice not to have children  
6 included personal freedom and the ability to develop relationships with other adults. In  
7 one qualitative study, Carmichael and Whittaker (2007) found that those had “chosen  
8 childlessness” cited the following reasons for not wanting children: an aversion to the  
9 lifestyle changes that come with parenthood, an explicit rejection of the maternal role,  
10 selfishness, and either feeling unsuited or proficient but unwilling to take on the role of  
11 parent.

12 In sum, both macro- and micro-level processes have been explored as potential expla-  
13 nations for how and why some adults come to identify as childfree. Triangulating findings  
14 from quantitative investigations of pathways to voluntary childlessness with qualitative  
15 examinations of the reasons childfree individuals themselves cite for their decision could  
16 lead to even greater understanding of the how and the why behind childfree people’s sta-  
17 tus as childfree. In addition to studies which focus on the choices and life course of child-  
18 free people themselves, the literature in this area also includes studies of others’ responses  
19 to and perceptions of the childfree.

### 20 21 **Deviance and stigma management**

22  
23 One line research in the childfree literature examines cultural perceptions of childfree  
24 adults (Copur and Koropecykj-Cox 2010; Koropecykj-Cox and Pendell 2007; Kor-  
25 opecykj-Cox et al. 2007; Lisle 1999; McAllister 1998; Vinson et al. 2010). From its  
26 beginnings, much of the scholarly literature on the childfree has considered whether, or  
27 the extent to which, the choice not to have children qualifies as a deviant act. As early as  
28 1973, Veevers (1973b) noted that perceptions of the voluntarily childless as emotionally  
29 unstable and maladjusted, while common among social scientists and the public more  
30 generally, were unfounded. In that same decade, Houseknecht (1977) found that  
31 although women who proclaimed a desire to remain childfree were aware of negative  
32 social sanctions associated with their choice, they were significantly less concerned with  
33 those sanctions than were women who desired to have children. Since these and other  
34 early studies that examine perceptions of the childfree (e.g., Callan 1985; Polit 1978;  
35 Rainwater 1960), researchers have continued to investigate issues of deviance and stigma  
36 management as they arise for childfree adults.

37 More recent research on perceptions of childfree adults shows that parents are per-  
38 ceived as warmer than non-parents (Copur and Koropecykj-Cox 2010), that women  
39 have more positive attitudes about “childlessness” (be it chosen or not) than men (Kor-  
40 opecykj-Cox and Pendell 2007), and that couples who are viewed as unlikely to have  
41 children are regarded more negatively than those who are seen as likely to become par-  
42 ents (Koropecykj-Cox et al. 2007). Race also plays a role in perceptions of childfree  
43 women; African American mothers are viewed more favorably than childfree African  
44 American women whereas perceptions of white women vary less based on parental status  
45 (Vinson et al. 2010). Interestingly, much of the aforementioned perceptions data come  
46 from samples of college students rather than parents or adults who themselves identify as  
47 voluntarily childfree.

48 Other perception studies focus on the stigma associated with remaining childfree (Mol-  
49 len 2006; Mueller and Yoder 1999; Park 2002) and attitudes about childlessness (Caron



1 and Wynn 1992; Koropecj-Cox and Pendell 2007; Koropecj-Cox et al. 2007).  
 2 Those who report feeling stigma as a result of being childfree note experiencing pity and  
 3 criticism (Mollen 2006), being criticized for being too involved with work activities  
 4 (Mueller and Yoder 1999), and being perceived as selfish, cold, and materialistic (Park  
 5 2002; see also Kelly 2009).

6 Beyond defining the childfree status as deviant, several studies consider how childfree  
 7 individuals manage the stigma of their “deviant” status. Veevers was among the first to  
 8 do so in her 1975 examination of the “moral careers of voluntarily childless wives” (see  
 9 also Veevers 1980). Veevers (1975) noted that voluntarily childless heterosexual wives  
 10 employed one of two strategies when subjected to negative social sanctions associated  
 11 with their status as childfree: either they engaged in symbolic gestures that suggested con-  
 12 formity such as noting adoption plans or they proclaimed moral views that were explicitly  
 13 at odds with motherhood. Years later, Park (2002) identified several other strategies that  
 14 voluntarily childless women and men employ to manage the stigma associated with the  
 15 childfree status. Noting that our cultural context of pronatalism leads to negative evalua-  
 16 tions of the childfree, Park (2002) found that the techniques childfree women and men  
 17 use to manage stigma range from defensive or reactive such as “identity substitution”  
 18 (33) to proactive (such as redefining “childlessness” in a positive way).

19 An additional strategy employed by some childfree adults to manage the stigma associ-  
 20 ated with their status is to surround oneself with supportive others. Houseknecht (1977)  
 21 noted early on the importance of forming a supportive reference group as one strategy  
 22 for managing the stigma associated with the childfree status. The “emerging childfree  
 23 movement” (Park 2002, 39) demonstrates that childfree adults recognize their status as  
 24 stigmatized and challenge the characterization of their choice as a deviant one. Increas-  
 25 ingly, the internet and social networking sites have facilitated efforts of the childfree to  
 26 connect with like others (Basten 2009). Of course, the extent to which members of  
 27 childfree groups share enough in common to support a continued movement remains to  
 28 be seen. While research indicates that these groups have the capacity to draw wide appeal  
 29 and that they have formed internationally (Basten 2009), it is possible that the heteroge-  
 30 neity of childfree organizations may make sustaining a larger movement challenging (see  
 31 Basten 2009’s discussion of Ramu 1985). In any case, this organized response to construc-  
 32 tions of voluntary childlessness as deviant is certainly notable and is likely to gain increas-  
 33 ing attention in the literature.

### 34 **Childfree into older age**

35  
 36  
 37 As increasing numbers of individuals choose to remain childfree, attention to the lives of  
 38 elderly people without children increases. As mentioned previously, the 1990s saw an  
 39 emergence of literature focused on older people who are childfree. This line of research  
 40 continued into the 2000’s (Abma and Martinez 2006; Albertini and Kohli 2009; DeOllos  
 41 and Kapinus 2002; Dykstra and Keizer 2009; Kohli and Albertini 2009; Umberson et al. **10**  
 42 2010; Wenger 2009; Wenger et al. 2000). These studies largely focus on the later-in-life  
 43 consequences of not having reared children such as quality of life, wellbeing, and support  
 44 of and by family. In general, research on older childfree adults finds few if any negative  
 45 consequences for these individuals.

46 Dykstra and Keizer (2009) found that fatherhood makes a difference in some realms of  
 47 older men’s well-being but it does not matter to the same extent across all life domains.  
 48 In particular, while fathers had higher incomes on average than men without children,  
 49 fatherhood was not found to have an effect on older men’s life satisfaction and mental

1 health. In her study of childfree older adults in Wales, Wenger (2009) found that aging  
2 individuals without children adapted their lives to accommodate their needs in ways other  
3 than the mechanisms used by aging parents. Wenger's (2009) study participants were  
4 found to fill "voids" that might be presumed to exist by relying on other family members  
5 or on engagement in community endeavors. Similarly, Albertini and Kohli (2009) found  
6 that the support networks of "childless" older people were more diverse than those of  
7 parents, and included stronger links with a broader range of relatives as well as friends  
8 and other non-relatives. Older adults without children in Albertini and Kohli's (2009)  
9 study also tended to be more actively engaged in charity work than their counterparts  
10 who had children, thus contributing to their communities in unique and important ways.

11 In sum, research on how childfree adults fare later in life shows that few regret their  
12 decision not to have or rear children and that many find alternative ways to connect with  
13 others and engage in their communities.

### 14 **Suggestions for future research: diversity, process, and consequences**

15 Notably, prior work on childfree adults focuses almost exclusively on women and does  
16 not consider men's decisions (Mollen 2006; Mueller and Yoder 1999; Park 2005; but see  
17 Lunneborg 1999). By and large, prior research focuses not just on women only but more  
18 specifically on heterosexual women (but see Berkowitz 2007; Berkowitz and Marsiglio  
19 2007). Future researchers should therefore aim to include a more diverse selection of par-  
20 ticipants in their studies of childfree adults. Though several recent studies of how race  
21 may influences choices or perceptions exist (Koropecjy-Cox et al. 2007; Umberson et  
22 al. 2010; Vinson et al. 2010), greater racial and ethnic diversity within study samples  
23 should also be a goal of future research in this area.

24 While literature from a variety of disciplines has examined trends in rates of and moti-  
25 vations for voluntary childlessness, questions of how, rather than why, such decisions are  
26 made remains. In particular, qualitative research on pathways to voluntary childlessness  
27 would complement the extant quantitative research on these processes. Further, few  
28 researchers have considered the extent to which decisions to not become parents may be  
29 linked to gender, sexuality, and perceptions of family more generally. Work framed  
30 within the study of families in particular could make important contributions toward our  
31 understanding of how individuals construct and perceive notions of what counts as "fam-  
32 ily." Prior research on gay and lesbian families could provide a useful starting point for  
33 studies of childfree family formations.

34 Future work might also move from finding explanations for voluntary childlessness to  
35 more deliberately examining its consequences, not just for those who choose not to have  
36 children but for their communities, for the lives of other children, and, as mentioned, for  
37 families more generally. The consequences of deciding to remain childfree specifically for  
38 the lives of children have not yet been considered. What role do childfree people play in  
39 the lives of children and how do those relationships differ from parent-child relationships?  
40 What does it mean for our cultural understanding of "family" if increasing numbers of  
41 families do not include children?

42 Though the 2000's saw some research on how family-friendly policies impact (or do  
43 not impact) the lives of childfree people, future research might continue this line of work  
44 by further investigating childfree people's perceptions of family friendly policies and con-  
45 sidering alternatives to such policies that might benefit childfree people and adults with  
46 children equally. Family-friendly workplace policies are just one just one area of policy  
47 relevant to voluntary childlessness. Early on, Veevers (1974) called attention to several of **11**

1 the social policy implications of voluntary childlessness but this line of investigation  
2 remains in need of further study.

3 In sum, the literature on childfree, or voluntarily childless, adults is rich, representing a  
4 diverse array of disciplinary perspectives and methodological approaches. Though further  
5 questions remain about voluntary childlessness, researchers in this area will find much  
6 insight and many interesting questions raised within the existing literature on adults who  
7 make the choice not to become parents.  
8

## 9 **Acknowledgement**

10  
11 This work was supported by awards from the Feminism and Family Studies section of  
12 the National Council on Family Relations and the University of Maine. Thank you to  
13 Robert Jackson and Elleena Petersen for research assistance.  
14

## 15 **Short Biographies**

16  
17 Dr. Amy Blackstone is Associate Professor and Chair of Sociology at the University of  
18 Maine. Her research includes studies of workplace harassment over the life course, child-  
19 free adults, and activism in the breast cancer and anti-rape movements. Her work has  
20 appeared in journals such as *Gender & Society*, *American Sociological Review*, *Journal of Con-*  
21 *temporary Ethnography*, and *Law & Society Review*. She is the author of *Principles of Sociologi-*  
22 *cal Inquiry: Qualitative and Quantitative Methods* (Flat World Knowledge, 2012).

23 Mahala Dyer Stewart is a doctoral student in Sociology at the University of Massachu-  
24 setts Amherst. Her research interests include social inequality, family, education, gender,  
25 race and social class. Her current study is a content analysis of the childrearing ideologies  
26 held within homeschool and conventional parenting magazines.  
27

## 28 **Note**

29  
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31 Orono, ME, 04469, US. E-mail: amy.blackstone@umit.maine.edu  
32

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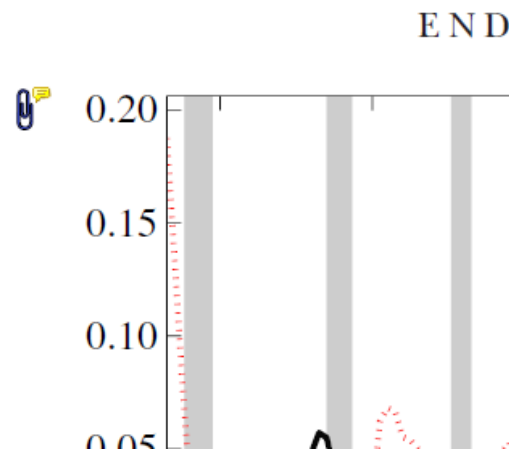
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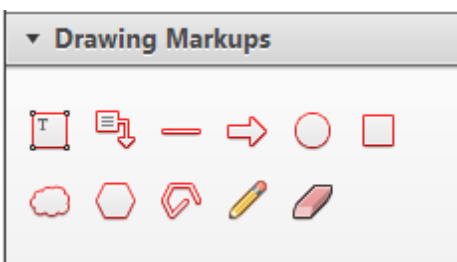
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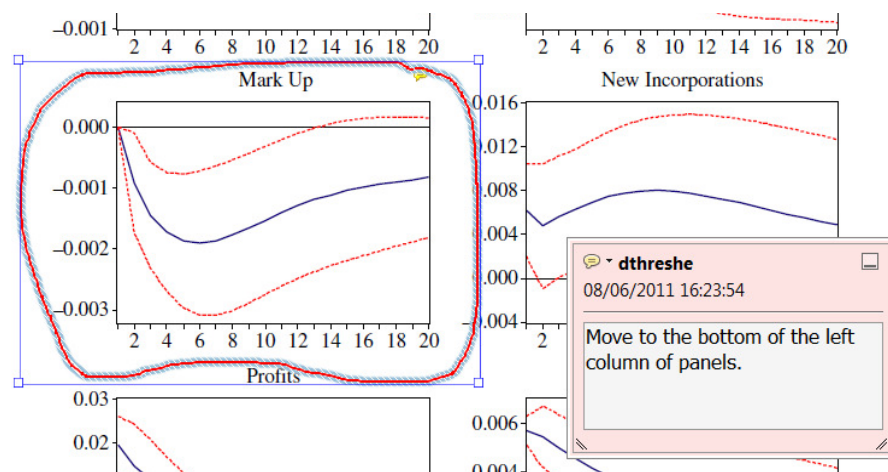


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