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deRoux-Smith, June Ann, Ph.D.

Andrews University, 1987

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**Andrews University
School of Education**

**THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE TO THE
VOLUNTARILY CHILDLESS COUPLE**

**A Dissertation
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy**

**by
June Ann deRoux-Smith
July 1987**


**THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE TO THE VOLUNTARILY
CHILDLESS COUPLE**


**A dissertation
presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy**

by


June Ann DeRoux Smith


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ABSTRACT

**THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE TO THE
VOLUNTARILY CHILDLESS COUPLE**

by

June Ann deRoux-Smith

Chairperson: Selma Chajj

ABSTRACT OF GRADUATE RESEARCH

Dissertation

Andrews University

School of Education

Title: THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE TO THE VOLUNTARILY
CHILDLESS COUPLE

Name of researcher: June Ann deRoux-Smith

Name and degree of faculty adviser: Selma Chaij, Ph.D.

Date completed: July, 1987

Problem

The literature is replete with findings to show that childlessness is a contemporary and growing trend. However, no known study has been done to explore what marriage means to the couple who chooses childlessness. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the meaning of marriage to the voluntarily childless couple.

Method

This study was done with a purposive sample of 42 couples. These couples were selected from referrals made through contact with a local radio station. Some were selected from referrals made by church pastors who were aware of couples in their congregations who are voluntarily childless, and others from referrals through

a snowballing effect, i.e., from some of the subjects themselves and personal contact made by the researcher. The couples were purposively selected to represent a wide cross-section of the American population (two were from Canada and one from Portugal) with specific reference to demographics, economic level, religious values, and occupational orientations. This study used the qualitative approach and the major research method was in-depth interviews.

Findings

The findings of this study revealed that:

1. There are three main motivations for the choice of childlessness, (a) painful experiences in childhood, (b) fear of the future, and (c) tension between personal goals and parenting.
2. Childless life-style promoted autonomy.
3. Childless marriages lacked disturbances often brought on by teenagers.
4. Childlessness promoted a one-to-one marital relationship.
5. Childlessness fostered companionship between spouses.
6. Childless couples are usually professionals and usually lived in the city.
7. Childless couples are well-adjusted and are socially approved individuals who seem concerned about saving children from the abuse and pain they often face.
8. Childless couples often have pets but do not see pets as a substitute for children.
9. The choice to be childless appeared to be developmental.
10. The life cycle of the childless couple was found to be divided into four stages.
11. Voluntarily childless couples had a higher percentage of discretionary income.

12. Childless couples enjoyed their life-style--they saw their involvement in their careers as their social investments.

Conclusions

One may conclude that the choice to be childless was reactive. It was an attempt to reduce anxiety created by a perceived dysfunction in one's family of origin or perceived fear from the lack of control one has over the things that impact parenting and its outcome.

*This research is dedicated to the memory of two of
my brothers, Dale and Dennis deRoux, both of
whom I lost tragically during the time I
was completing my course of study.*

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PREFACE

My interest in this study was stimulated by the double bind I found myself in, pressure to become a parent on the one hand, but the desire to be an individual and answer my inner being on the other. Coming from the West Indies, I have been acculturated to think that a woman's place is in the home and, more specifically, to have children and be supportive of her husband, if she has one, both physically and emotionally.

I grew up in a home where my father, though a wonderful man, was the dominant figure, but where my mother impacted every decision he made. My parents are happily married, but as a child I resented the role my mother played in our family. In one respect, I felt sorry for her and in every respect I cherished her and enjoyed the strength and determination she often displayed. My mother--a bright and creative woman--seemed trapped by the demands of a husband and eight children. Being married at 20 years of age in the 1950s, I imagine the route she took was approved by the culture and the standards of society at the time.

As I matured, however, I realized my mother had actually sacrificed her life to raise her children and it seemed to me that there had to be more to life for a woman, who by all standards could achieve any career she chose. It was during those years of evaluating my mother's dilemma that I decided I would rather invest in a career.

After I got married, however, my double bind came, when I became aware that most people expected me to have children. Both relatives and friends kept saying, "You will make an excellent mother." In fact, they think we are the perfect

pair--my husband adores children and I am the perfect "mother profile." I love to clean and cook. I myself took pride in the idea of having children someday. Like Kaye Halverson (1980), I have several possible names for my daughter. I would love to have a son who grows as tall as my husband. But I realized the pressure we were receiving was not congruent with the timing in the agenda we have mapped out for our lives; so we kept postponing having children, hoping as soon as we accomplished the next goal we might be more prepared.

The years kept slipping by and we were no more prepared at year six than we were at year one. It seemed that each year had its own possibilities and its own challenges, and so we kept reaching for our "rainbow." By this time my husband began the doctorate in ministry and I a doctorate in counseling, and if our lives were busy before, it was worse now. By this time no one asked whether we were going to ever have children. I guess everyone concerned just took it for granted that we were both focusing on our careers and would do it some time in the future --after all, we had time; we were not even 30 years old yet.

Then, as I studied the lifespan of the adult, and read Gail Sheehy's *Passages*, and Daniel Levinson's *Seasons of a Man's Life*, as well as what Erik Erikson and Robert Havighurst have to say about the developmental tasks of the adult's life, I wanted to find out what marriage means to a couple who chooses not to have children.

I have interviewed 42 wonderful couples with an aim to explore and understand what meanings they experienced in their marital relationship. From my point of view, through observation and what they have said, these couples are all defined and stable individuals who are happily married and who would like to share their experiences with other couples who are either ambivalent about having children or who may be infertile and unable to have children.

While I believe the two populations may face different issues, I also believe there are some strengths that the voluntarily childless couple can share with the involuntarily childless couple. It appears that many women who have children or who want to have children have been conditioned to believe this is a biological mandate rather than a function of their culture. And so, if there are biological limitations to having children, they are perceived as a curse.

Having spoken to these voluntarily childless couples, I am convinced that one can be stimulated by other events in life, or be fulfilled by other accomplishments in life. I think it is very creative and fulfilling for some couples to give birth to another human being, but I also know many other couples who are traumatized by the event. I also think that generally couples don't see childlessness as an option and until recently, when voluntarily childless couples were willing to share their experiences, no one really understood what goes on in their life-style. In the late 1940s and early 1950s a childless couple was viewed as a deviant, selfish unit. Now, however, society has accepted this life-style as an alternate family form.

I have found that all the couples I have interviewed are concerned about many of the same things that parents are concerned with. They think of the children who are abused, neglected, or abandoned. They are concerned about the starving children around the world. They want to see healthy values being transmitted to the next generation. They care about the prejudices and injustices often meted out to women and minorities and about social and welfare issues. In other words, they are normal people like everyone else, except that they have the courage to choose a life-style that best fits their goals of living.

Having done this research, I think if I were to choose childlessness that I would have had valuable support from the satisfaction and happiness that the subjects I have interviewed have described. I would like to say to every couple

about to make a decision to be parents or to be childless; weigh the options, look at the pros and cons of both choices, assess them in the context of your own goals and objectives in life, but do not just make a decision because of your perception of stereotyped roles.

If parenting is what you would like to choose, then go for it--and be the most sensitive, caring, and committed parent. But if children do not stimulate you, don't choose childlessness and then live your life regretting your decision or feeling unfulfilled and less worthwhile as a person. From the experiences of the couples interviewed for this research, you can be just as satisfied and make your marriage just as happy as that of any satisfied parent.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Permit me to use this medium to express my gratitude to the people I consider instrumental in assisting me with the development and completion of this study.

The members of my dissertation committee have all offered valuable time and constructive criticisms, along with moral support for which I am deeply indebted. They are Dr. Selma Chajj, committee chairperson, and Dr. Frederick Kosinsky, Dr. Caleb Rosado, and Dr. Sara Terian, committee members. My appreciation goes to Dr. Stanley Chace, Dean of the School of Education, for the role he played; Dr. David Klein, Chairman of the Department of Sociology, Notre Dame University, who served as my external advisor; and Mrs. Joyce Jones, who edited the document.

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There are a network of family members, friends, and colleagues who were a continued support through the entire process of my course of study, all to whom I am indebted. I would like to mention my dad, Mr. Edgar deRoux, and my mom, Mrs. Rosely deRoux, both of whom gave me the motivation to accomplish the best that my abilities will allow.

My most sincere appreciation is registered to my faithful, dedicated, and loving husband Alanzo for believing in me and for the love and unqualified support he has provided.

Finally, I must thank God for His providential guidance, blessings, and unconditional love.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Voluntary Childlessness: An Alternate Family Form

Reasons motivating a person to become a parent may be quite different from the satisfaction derived from parenting. Most couples begin their lives together planning a family that includes mother, father, and children. At least until the mid-sixties, most marriages had parenting as a primary goal. However, parenting is no longer inevitable, since birth control and abortion have become more available and acceptable. Moreover, the choice to remain childless is now more widely accepted socially, and more and more couples are choosing childlessness as a viable alternative.

In 1972 the Federal Commission of Population Growth and the American Future came out strongly in favor of increasing options for men and women in the area of fertility. They stated: "Women should be able to choose motherhood, work, or other interests. Both men and women should be free to develop as individuals rather than being molded to fit some sexual stereotypes" (p. 152).

Parenting is not only irrevocable but is one role that most parents are least prepared for, and it seems that most couples who end up being dissatisfied with parenting and with marriage might have been able to find positive meaning in marriage had not the demands of parenting been overwhelming. Since society once placed such a high value on having children, however, many women do not recognize

the possibility of not having children and many who would prefer to remain childless have children because of the social pressure they encounter (Houseknecht, 1982).

The percentage of couples without children has doubled in the last two decades. In 1960 only about 13% of married women between ages 25 and 29 were childless; in 1985, 29% were. In the past, motherhood was virtually the only option for married women. Today one out of four ever-married women between the ages of 25 and 34 has never had a child--a total of nearly 3.3 million women--compared to one out of ten women in 1960 (National Center for Health Statistics. 1985).

While the number of childless couples climbs, the percentage of women who are unable to have babies has been falling--from 11.2% in 1965 to 8.4% in 1982. Thus, it is clear that more and more couples are actively deciding to remain childless. Even among the childbearing couples, fewer children are being born. It was not uncommon in the third world countries during the 1940s and early 1950s for some families to have 16 and 18 children. According to sociologist Andrew Cherlin, in *Newsweek* (Sept. 1, 1986), each generation has had fewer children for the last 150 years; probably, he explains, "because we have moved from a rural, agricultural society to an urban, industrial one and children are not needed as much" (p. 69). Faced with new options, many wives decide motherhood is not an essential or even desirable role. A UCLA population expert and sociologist, Judith Blake, said in an interview for *Newsweek*, "Women who are very career-oriented suddenly find themselves impaled by the demands of child rearing" (*Newsweek*, Sept. 1, 1986).

Bunnie Burman, a UCLA researcher cited by Cherlin (*Newsweek*, Sept., 1, 1986) in the previous article, found that couples who decided not to have children rated higher on a marital-happiness scale than couples who chose parenthood. She says, "while children can be very satisfying they can also be more stressful" (p. 71). While many couples may be happy with their decision not to have children,

they must contend with the legacy of the 1950s when, says sociologist William Simon, those who did not want children were an embarrassed and embattled minority. It was almost evidence of a physical or mental deficiency. The assumption was that those who did not want children could not have children.

It may be more acceptable to be childless today, but many people still feel plenty of pressure, according to Margaret McGuire, a Boston computer software tester. She finds that some childless couples feel uncomfortable after their decision, and when asked why they are childless, they often become defensive; quite often they say they are still trying to have children (*Newsweek*, Sept. 1, 1986).

Though many couples are impelled by their personal need to remain childless, they often need the support of their significant others. For many couples, however, marriage remains satisfying and fulfilling only if it produces children. It is noted by this researcher that many women have sought counseling because they have undergone much stress and rejection as a consequence of their inability to bear children. A woman who had been married for six years describes the early years of marriage as "wonderful days." She and her husband had a very special relationship, but things changed after she had a hysterectomy. Her husband was very supportive for a while, but now she describes her life as total misery. She discussed with her husband the possibility of adoption which he declined. He wanted his own children. Finally, he asked her for a divorce.

While some couples have this problem, others cherish the freedom to explore eclectic interests. A couple whose hobby is rock climbing says, "If we had kids, we wouldn't be as active." They add: "We guess we are just not ready to sacrifice our time to a kid." Ann Christie, a Los Angeles family therapist, says that when she goes home at night she enjoys the comfort of her life. Her house is full of barriers to children. The ivory silk upholstery on the couch is so fragile that no

one brings red wine into the living room. Husband and wife have cars with only two seats. "In a funny moment," says Christie, "we laughed that if we did have a child, the only place we could keep it would be the entryway" (*Newsweek*, Sept. 1, 1986).

Statement of the Problem

The literature is replete with findings to show that childlessness is no longer viewed as unacceptable, rather it is a contemporary and growing trend. Since procreation is stereotyped as one of the primary functions of marriage, this role impacts the meaning of marriage to couples who are parents. It, therefore, becomes necessary and significant to explore the meaning of marriage to couples who are childless. It is one of the assumptions of this researcher that people interact with each other through meaningful symbols; thus meanings evolve over time from social encounters or social interactions. It is assumed that meaning is not static, but is dynamic and contextual. socially and symbolically constructed, always evolving and relative to one's own frame of reference. Thus, the meaning of marriage to the voluntarily childless couple is also socially constructed. This research is seeking to explore and to understand that meaning.

Meaning

The question "What is meaning?" has been repeatedly asked, and answered in various ways, throughout the history of philosophy and other disciplines. Along with the nature of time, free will, etc., it has seemed one of the ultimate metaphysical puzzles, for meaning in psychology, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy cannot be defined in simple terms (Louw, 1982).

Meaning, therefore, has to do with a multiplicity of relations by which people communicate. So, to best explore the meaning of marriage to the voluntarily

childless couple, in the context of the delimitations of this research, the dynamics of the marital relationship, from the couples' own frame of reference, were observed and recorded.

George Herbert Mead laid the foundation for symbolic interactionism, which is one school of thought that studies meaning. Herbert Blumer (1969) expanded the concept and postulated three premises on which the construct lies. The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the thing he encounters.

To ignore the meanings of the things toward which people act is seen as falsifying the behavior under study. The two traditional ways to explain meaning, according to Blumer (1969), are: (1) to regard meaning as being intrinsic to the thing that has it, as being a natural part of the objective makeup of the thing; and (2) to regard meaning as a psychical accretion brought to the thing by the person for whom the thing has meaning. Thus, the meaning of a thing is usually perceived as the expression of the given psychological elements that are brought into play in connection with the perception of the thing. Symbolic interactionism, on the other hand, views meaning as having a different source than the views expressed above. It sees meaning as arising in the process of interaction between people. Thus, symbolic interactionism sees meanings as social products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact. According to Blumer, the expression of meanings by a person in his action involves an interpretive process.

Meaning in the context of this study was, therefore, perceived as the "reason for" or "the significance of," the marital relationship: in this case, for couples who have chosen to remain childless.

Theoretical Framework

Erik Erikson (1963) posited eight stages of development. Each one centers around a salient and distinct emotional concern stemming from biological pressures from within, and sociological expectations from without--the person. These concerns or conflicts may be resolved in a positive and healthy manner or in a negative and unhealthy manner. According to Erikson, each conflict has a unique time period during which it transcends and overshadows all the others.

In order for the later stages of development to proceed smoothly, each earlier stage conflict must be resolved satisfactorily. Between the ages of 35 and 65, for example, a chief adult concern is to assist the younger generation in developing useful lives. Erikson describes this phase as "Generativity versus Stagnation." During this phase, he explains, healthy development is centered on the successful rearing of children. The unhealthy outcome is stagnation or the feeling of having done nothing for the next generation. He suggests that childless couples often need to find substitute young people through adoption, guardianship, or close relationship with children of relatives or friends.

It was out of this theoretical framework that the researcher was motivated to investigate how childless couples fulfill this need and to explore whether this theory applied in all cases.

Because of the rapid rate at which the population of childless couples is growing, more research is needed to explore the dynamics of their marriages, thus providing significant information on the meaning of marriage in their own context.

The research question that this study consequently explored is: *What does marriage mean to the childless couple?* Since meaning is relative, for this study it was interpreted from the subjects' own frame of reference and as observed by the researcher.

Purpose of the Study

Considerable interest in alternative marital and family forms has been expressed by family scholars and sociologists in the past decade. Demographers suggested that permanent childlessness will reach levels of 20% to 25% among those now just entering their childbearing period. However, already since 1985, 29% of women between 25 and 29 years of age are childless (National Center for Health Statistics, 1985).

This makes exploration of the outcome of childlessness among the population of today more important in the light of the potential impact on future cohorts. Since the nuclear family form exists at any one time in only 12% of the population of the United States (Bureau of the Census, 1980), research with specific reference to what marriage now means to people in alternate family forms seems to be of greater value.

The primary purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore and interpret the meaning of marriage to childless couples from their own frame of reference and in their own context.

Significance of the Study

Alternate family forms are a growing and widely accepted trend in the United States today. From the statistics quoted above, it is evident that childlessness as a viable option is on the increase. Many couples are faced with rejection from spouse, family, and friends when they discover infertility problems,

and they undergo great emotional pain as they seek to understand their own issues as well as to relate to the social pressure that they encounter.

On the other hand, there are many couples who are choosing to be childless. It seems necessary, therefore, to explore the dynamics of their relationship in order to understand what marriage means to them.

The findings of this study will be significant to therapists, family members, and professional organizations that work with families such as Planned Parenthood, the American Fertility Association, and the American Association for Family Studies. It will also stimulate the awareness of the couples themselves as they focus on their own issues and provide information for researchers and society in general.

Definition of Terms

Deviance is defined as the product of a transaction that takes place between some social group and one who is viewed by that group as a rule-breaker.

Generalizability refers to whether the findings of the study hold up beyond the specific research subjects and the setting involved.

Goodness of Fit, in this study, is the tendency to view validity as a fit between what is recorded as data and what actually occurs in the setting under study.

Meaning of Marriage refers to the significance of the marital relationship to the spouses from their frame of reference.

Nuclear Family refers to a married heterosexual couple with a child or children where the male is the head of the household and main provider.

Value refers to a commitment to an idea or goal. It is the capacity of an object to satisfy a human desire.

Assumptions

One assumption of this study was that human behavior is not random or idiosyncratic. Thus the researcher's concern is with the question of "to which other settings and subjects the findings can be generalized," rather than "are the findings generalizable?"

This study assumed that people interact with each other through meaningful symbols; thus, meanings evolve over time from social interactions. It was assumed that meaning is relative and unique to the context of each couple. To minimize subjectivity the researcher selected a random sample of the subjects interviewed and asked them to criticize the findings of this study. The purpose of this was to make sure the researcher's understanding of the meanings they experienced were congruent with their own self-understanding.

Finally, another assumption of this study was that the presence of the researcher influenced the behavior of the subjects under study. Almost all research is confounded by this problem. Asking people to fill out a questionnaire changes their behavior. Might not asking someone to give an opinion create an opinion? Qualitative researchers label this change in subjects' behavior "observer's effect." To counteract this, the researcher interacted with the subjects in a natural, unobtrusive, and non-threatening manner. The data were interpreted in context. When the researcher has an intimate knowledge of the setting he/she is better able to understand the researcher's effect on the subjects.

Organization of the Study

Personal reasons that motivated this study were explained in the preface. Chapter 1 documents the reason for the study and outlines the purpose, statement of the problem, and significance of the study.

It is necessary in any study to review the literature that relates to it. Chapter 2 documents the records of relevant studies that have been done and critiques them. An outline of the methodology used for this study appeared in chapter 3.

As the study progressed it was observed that the process of choice to be childless had distinct developmental stages. The couples identified a distinct life cycle as they dealt with the issues impacting their choice. Voluntary childlessness can be seen as a value. This concept was discussed, along with the above-mentioned stages in chapter 5.

The findings, conclusions, recommendations, and applications, as well as ideas for further research are discussed in chapter 6.

Issues regarding marriage, motherhood, and the relationship to society surfaced in most interviews so it became necessary to go back to the literature to see how these concepts impacted childlessness. The issues that surfaced most are discussed in the epilogue.

Summary

Researchers in the social sciences are constantly seeking to explore meaning and to perceive interactions. This researcher explored the meaning of marriage in the context of the voluntarily childless couple--thus to understand, from their frame of reference, the real significance of their conjugal relationship. This chapter documents the purpose for this study. The concept of meaning being so relative was discussed to provide a framework for this research. It further outlines the assumptions and organization of the study.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

With the swing away from the nuclear family form to more diverse and in some cases socially inappropriate family forms, for example, concubinage marriages with multiple partners, what marriage means to the different groups becomes a question of grave concern. While some have little faith in the stability of the family as a viable institution for the future (Lasch, 1975), others are convinced that the family is stable, effective, and well-equipped for the future (Bane, 1976). However, in spite of the polarity that exists concerning the stability of the family, a study on what marriage means to couples who choose to be married, but not to have children, therefore transforming the nuclear family form, seems to be greatly needed.

Industrialization led to the redefinition of the family's roles and functions. With the growth of industrial child labor in the 19th century, working class families continued to recognize the economic value of motherhood, as they had in rural societies. Children were socialized for industrial work at an early age and began to contribute to the family's work effort at a lower age than specified by law. They were considered assets. Parents viewed their efforts in child rearing as investments in future social security (Walsh, 1982).

Under such conditions, childbearing and work were not governed by individual decisions. Mate selection and the timing of marriage were regulated in

accordance with collective family considerations, rather than individual choice. The major historical change in family values has been a change from a collective view of the family to one of individualism and sentiment. These have led to an increasing emphasis on individual priorities and preferences over collective family needs. This shift in values has contributed considerably to the "liberation of individuals" (Walsh, 1982). No longer do women have to fill the role of motherhood because it is expected of them; instead they may choose to be childless and still be socially appropriate. Childlessness is a status that has only been validated in the last two decades.

Until the 1960s children were considered a major goal of marriage. They were a source of pride for families and society and a sign of a man's potency and of a woman's femininity. The role of children in adult married life has been so widely accepted that their function is hardly questioned (Bram, 1974).

The research to date can be classified into six areas of study. These studies have concentrated on (1) trends towards smaller families, (2) sociological factors associated with childlessness, (3) characteristics of the voluntarily childless, (4) the stereotypical role of woman, (5) the value of children in the early society, and (6) attempts by theorists to explain the origin of the need to have a child.

Among the earliest studies on the issue is a study of 1,977 white married couples in Indianapolis (Whelpton & Kiser, 1946). Of the 322 childless couples, 44.4% of the sample said they preferred not to have children. This study explored several untested ideas about fertility behavior, including the relationship between fertility behavior and (a) economics, (b) psychological factors, (c) attitudes towards children, (d) married adjustments, (e) family background, and (f) social network.

The study cited above can be criticized for lack of a theoretical framework, but it did spur further research, and is particularly useful in suggesting areas of

interest in studying the childless. None of the specific psychological constructs related to the meaning of marriage but some of the attitudinal variables did. It was concluded, for example, that a woman's liking for children is not translated into a desire for more children; rather, she is more likely to contracept and desire a smaller family (Bram, 1974).

Freeman, Whelpton, and Campbell (1959) found that, of all the 51 childless couples married 15 years or longer in their sample, only 4% were voluntarily childless. Thus their study, *Growth of American Families*, does not add very much to one's knowledge of the childless couple, since it concentrated primarily on the demographic dimensions of occupations, religion, and education. However, its large national probability sample of 2,400 white wives, aged 18-39, does provide a wealth of important information in the past and expected childbearing behavior of the subjects. A replication of the study, with an additional national probability sample of non-white wives, further increases understanding and historical perspective on the demographic variables related to family planning (Bram, 1974).

The proportion of childless marriages has in fact increased since the 1940s, reaching a high of 29% in 1985. Between 1905-1909 the highest rate of childlessness recorded among ever-married white women was 20%. The rate then dropped to about 10% for the 1925-1929 cohort (National Center for Health Statistics, 1985).

A Trend Towards Smaller Families

Among younger women, ages 20-25, the proportion of childless women has been increasing since the 1940s birth cohort. The percentage of couples without children has doubled in the last few decades. In 1960 only about 13% of married women between 25 and 29 were childless. However, 29% of ever-married women were childless in 1985. Medical advances have made it easier for women to

have healthy babies well into their late 30s or even early 40s, and many do; however, there are not enough women over 35 having children to make up for all the younger women who are deciding not to have children. The percentage of women who are unable to have babies has been falling, from 11.2% in 1965 to 8.4% in 1982. Thus more and more couples are actively deciding to remain childless. The result is a generation of contrasts. Of the 76 million people born between 1946 and 1964, there are more potential mothers and fathers than ever before. Although many are having children, they are having fewer children than their parents did.

Kingsley Davis (1971) attributes the trend towards smaller families to three major factors: (1) the trend toward bearing fewer children, (2) new household arrangements, and (3) the distribution of age groups in the population. Couples beyond the childbearing age now often live apart from their children in their own households. Nonfamily households, in which one person or a group of two or more unrelated persons live together, increased by 69.7% during the 1970s.

According to Davis (1971) this phenomenon is related to the fact that the age group most likely to innovate their life-style and set up such unusual households are those between ages 16 and 19, which has increased by 44.3%, and the population 20-24 which has increased by 51.6%. Thus, several major changes in the population have occurred in the last two decades, with a trend toward fewer nuclear family formations.

Sociological Factors Associated with Childlessness

Veevers (1971) studied the rural-urban differences in the incidence of childlessness in Canada and found that the percentage of married women remaining childless is nearly twice as great in urban as in rural areas. She suggests that urban areas select a sample of women less oriented toward childbearing and the

family life which is facilitated by suburban and rural communities, but her study made no reference of what this means to the marriage of voluntarily childless couples.

Veevers (1971) found the major sociological factors associated with childlessness to be residence, age at first marriage, race, wife's education, and husband's income. The influence of age at first marriage upon incidence of childlessness is shrinking. Among wives in the 1921-25 cohort, for example, the population of childlessness for those marrying at age 25 or older is 20%. Veevers' data suggest that "at least for women who marry for the first time before age 35, most of the variation in incidence of childlessness can be explained in physiological terms" (p. 294). She suggests two factors that may have contributed to the lower birth rate: (1) less traditional attitude toward marriage and motherhood among the later married, and (2) the existence of alternative modes of satisfaction experienced through education and participation in the labor force.

Until the 1970s there was a greater proportion of childlessness among blacks than among whites. Thus race may have been an important sociological variable in predicting childlessness in the United States. Kiser and Frank (1970) found that 80% of black women over 25 years of age who have a college education or are married to professional men tend to have a fertility rate that is lower than that of white women in similar circumstances. While only 1% or less of white wives in the United States have said that zero children is ideal for the average American family, or that they would choose to have no children if they could relive their lives, as many as 5% of blacks interviewed have given these answers (Pohlman, 1970).

Harrington (1969) found that in Canada the more education a wife had, the greater were her chances of remaining childless. On the other hand, the higher the husband's income was the less likely he was to have children. Neither of these

studies, however, looked at the impact these issues had on the meaning of marriage for childless couples. The decision to remain childless, then, appears to be socially significant. Examples of the increasing awareness of this problem are found in the very recent spate of articles, books, and organizations devoted to enhancing the image of the childless today.

Among the more current books are Vicky Love's *Childless Is Not Less* (1984); Jean Veevers *Childless by Choice* (1980); *Pronatalism: The Myth of Mom and Apple Pie*, edited by Ellen Peck and Judith Senderowitz (1974); Silvia Feldman's *Making Up Your Mind about Motherhood* (1985); and Marian Faux *Childless by Choice* (1984). Actions such as the liberalization of adoption regulations and the Supreme Court ruling legalizing abortion further suggest a growing sense of urgency in the issues of fertility decisions.

From a review of the literature it appears that childlessness is not only socially accepted in the United States as an appropriate family form, but it is gaining widespread acceptance in Canada, Australia, and England. In Australia, Victor Callan (1983) did a study which attempted to determine whether childless marriages among the deciders or voluntarily childless, through postponement, are less happy and less satisfied. Using the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, he found that across the four sub-scales and total scale, the two types of childless couples scored similarly.

Elaine Campbell (1983) interviewed 34 Scottish couples (mean ages of husbands and wives 31 and 29 years, respectively) and 10 other wives in voluntarily childless marriages to obtain a detailed biographical account of the situations and motives influencing their decision to remain childless. She found that 50% of the childless females and 30% of the childless males disparaged the daily tasks of

parenthood; 27% of the childless females and 10% of the childless males belittled the mechanics of pregnancy and childbirth.

Parenthood being viewed as a loss of control over self and the future, as financial deprivation, as too heavy a responsibility, and children as objects of dislike were other factors in the decision to be childless. Campbell further found that the spouse who decided to be childless prior to marriage tended to come from families that deviated from the nuclear ideal and to reject parenthood, but those whose decision emerged after a partnership had been formed tended to have created alternative life-styles and wished to protect the advantages of living without children.

Perceived Characteristics of the Voluntarily Childless

Voluntarily childless women were found to be more non-traditional than childless women who plan to have children in the future (Baum, 1984). Baum (1983) reviewed data relating to voluntary childlessness in Australia to assess the possibility of an increase in the incidence of this life-style. Baum found that economic change, developments in contraceptive technology, and attitudinal change are seen as influential in determining rates of childlessness.

Jane Myers and Sally Navin (1984) in commenting on the decision to have or not to have children, said that older women with no children--hence less familial support--do have specific needs. According to them, when childlessness is viewed in terms of Erikson's (1964) developmental stages and R. J. Havighurst's (1972) developmental tasks of early adulthood, childless women are unable to reach mature levels of development because the stages in these frameworks assume that marriage and children are necessary for development.

Myers and Navin found that older women may be more at risk for physical problems, and that the social role losses that childless older women experience can be devastating. The loss of social status and contact that were part of a job may be difficult for a childless woman to replace. Childless older women have fewer supports to help them cope with these losses in old age, and thus there is a greater tendency to become isolated, lonely, and depressed.

While Myers and Navin report that childless couples lack mature adult development as a result of the lack of a parent status, Keith (1983) found that when he compared the personal and social resources and correlates-- of psychological well-being of parents and the childless (based on interviews with 103 childless persons and 438 parents; all subjects were white and aged 72-96 years of age) parents and nonparents reported similar resources.

Victor Callan (1983) found that childless women were more nonconforming, self-fulfilled, materialistic, intelligent, and individualistic. He found that an analysis of the positive and negative comments about childless persons revealed that the intentionally childless were regarded as selfish, unusual persons, and more likely to be pitied than applauded for their alternative social reality.

He concluded, however, that children did not assure subjects less loneliness, more positive appraisals of life, or greater acceptance of death, and that the presence or absence of children does not appreciably alter the lives of the very aged.

Peterson (1983) acknowledged in the findings of his research that childless couples are viewed by others as less well-adjusted or misguided in their choice, but his findings are inconsistent with the majority of published data on the childless spouse. On the other hand, Houseknecht (1982), in an examination of census statistics, found that the commonly anticipated increase in voluntary childlessness

due to increased career opportunities for women has been slower than expected. Her research indicates that the voluntarily childless are viewed as deviant and described as being more selfish, less mature and responsible, more socially deviant, and less well-adjusted than those of other parental status.

In fact, the voluntarily childless shows no less psychopathology and no greater role equality than do couples with children, or nonparents. Thus, she concludes that the high values that all sectors of society place on having children need to be balanced by an increased awareness of reproductive choices and responsible decision making.

Fulfilling Stereotypical Roles in Conflict with Contemporary Trends

Though far from being a "perfect contraceptive population" (Bumpass & Westoff, 1970), 95% of American women do contracept at some time or another (Blake, 1966, p. 522). Contraception is practiced with increasing regularity and effectiveness as desired family size is approached. Bumpass and Westoff, using data from the 1965 National Fertility Study, found that one-fifth of all births occurring between 1960 and 1965 were unwanted and one-tenth of the births occurring to white women with college degrees during the same period were unwanted.

Kagan (1964) found that through the socialization process girls are taught from infancy that their expected adult role is that of mother. However, with the increased awareness of women and the impact the feminist movement has had on women, it was not surprising that in a pilot study conducted by this researcher, of 50 girls between the ages of 13 and 18 from a small private secondary day school who were asked what they plan to do in the next 10 years, 49 responded they would like to become an astronaut, a doctor, a psychologist, or a lawyer. Only one girl

said she would like to be married and be a mother of two children. The relative universality of the desire to have children is thus explained, not by invariable characteristics of the female personality, but by the relative cultural universality of sex role standards and the socialization process (Blake, 1966).

According to Broom and Selznick, cited in Fortney (1971), a large share of the working population in 1910 were either farmers or farm laborers (30.9%) or low paid blue-collar workers (37.1). The role of the farmer's wife was, and still is, clear cut; she was usually expected to carry out some farm chores in addition to household chores. She was expected to preserve the fruits of her husband's labors, and on occasion to feed the enormous number of people involved in seasonal farm work. To fulfill these role expectations the wife of a farmer, even today, must work as hard as her husband.

Since her children were also expected to do their share of work and because their play on the farm was relatively safe and required no supervision, very little of the farm wife's time was spent in child care. Today the percentage of the work force who are farmers or farm laborers has dropped to 6.3%, and the hard-working farmer's wife is an endangered species.

During the Industrial Revolution and prior to the development of unions, wages were so low that it was necessary for wives and children of industrial workers to seek employment. There was little time to spare for mothering in this group either, since both child and mother shared domestic duties.

Starting the early 20th century, technology was developed such that the time and effort necessary to perform household tasks was significantly reduced. Technology produced not only the vacuum cleaner, washing machine, and canned goods, but also effective and aesthetic contraceptives. So wives were freed from excessive childbearing as well as from domestic chores (Fortney, 1971).

Other factors that may have contributed to the rising trend of childlessness are the goals of the women's movement, of the Equal Rights Amendment, and the Affirmative Action ruling of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to increase the educational and career options available to women. There has been an increase in the percentage of advanced degrees awarded to women in 1980. The increase between 1964 and 1970 exceeded that of any previous 10-year period. The proportion of degrees awarded to women during that period were 39.8% of the masters and 13.3% of the doctorates. There are also strong indications that women's desires for higher education and for careers are increasing more rapidly than men's. In almost any college or university in the United States the percentage of women in the freshman class is higher than that of men.

The concern among young people with the population explosion may provide a reason, or at least a rationalization, for the decision not to have children. In a survey of 144 undergraduate women at the University of Michigan, 13% reported that they planned not to have children (Hoffman & Hoffman, 1973). A similar survey done through a pilot study for this research found that of 120 college women at Andrews University, 28% of the respondents said they would like to remain childless.

LeMasters (1957) documents the "crisis of parenthood" in a study of middle-class parents interviewed within five years of the birth of the first child, where the wife did not work. Eighty-three percent of his subjects described a severe crisis in adjusting to the child. LeMasters concluded that parenthood is "romanticized" more than marriage in the American culture and is a greater source of conflict and discontinuity than any other life change (Bram, 1984). While more recent studies of the transition to parenthood dispute this conclusion, his findings are worth mentioning.

Rossi (1968) analyzed the phenomenon of parenthood and underlined the lack of preparation for this demanding role, especially in the socialization of women. She posited that the role of motherhood requires behavior that is antithetical to the stereotypical female style: mother is active rather than passive in nature and requires a woman to be independent, rather than dependent in her decision making. Parenting, unlike any other role, is irrevocable in American society.

Lopata (1971) discussed 10 years of research on black and white lower class to upper-middle-class housewives in several suburbs of Chicago. She calls the process of becoming a mother "the event causing the greatest discontinuity of personality in American middle-class women"; particularly if it is not followed by a return to full-time involvement outside the home (p. 200).

In listing some of the major effects of becoming a mother, such as being tied down, becoming more mature, having more responsibility, and the like, Lopata makes an interesting point about the effect of motherhood on the marriage relationship. She says that among the middle class who are more accustomed to a companionate relationship during the childless stage, the onset of parenthood with the concomitant divergence of interests of the spouses is a source of interference in the relationship (Bram, 1984). While all these studies have provided lots of clues about intentions, attitudes and feelings of the issues that impact the life-style of the childless couple, none has explored the meaning of marriage to this population.

History of the Value of Children

The most inclusive model developed so far on the meaning of children is found in a paper by Hoffman and Hoffman (1973) entitled "The Value of Children." Among those values considered to serve as motives for childbearing are: (1) adult status and social identity, (2) expansion of the self, (3) morality, (4) primary group ties, (5) stimulation, (6) creativity and competence, (7) power and

influence, (8) social comparison, and (9) economic utility. A major thrust of their paper is that these values could be satisfied by sources other than children in the life of the childless couple.

Another theorist who has developed an understanding of the role of children in American society is Martha Wolfenstein (1953). She describes the history of the concept of children. The child is seen as a modern-day symbol of the libido. For example, at the turn of the century, when puritanical views of sexuality prevailed, mothers were encouraged to cover up their children from head to toe, not to expose the genitals for fear of encouraging masturbatory activities. During the libertine 20s, however, mothers were encouraged to let their children run free. Finally, in the 50s, the decade of "imperative hedonism," one was encouraged not only to behave freely, thus to encourage masturbation and nudity in children, but also to affect an enjoyment of sex and of children. This was the era of the "happy mother," who enjoyed diapering and bathing her child and also enjoyed simultaneous orgasms with her spouse.

Through extensive investigations of early iconograph, artwork, and literature, Aries (1962) traces the evolution of the concept of "childhood" in medieval and renaissance France. He theorizes that the concept of "childhood," of younger people with different rights, privileges, habits, needs, and customs developed with the emergence of the family as the new locus of power replacing the feudal king (Rainwater, 1965). In order for the father to maintain his new and tenuous position as master of the household, it was imperative that he define those under him, primarily his wife and children, as of lower status. As part of this effort, schools were founded which further defined children as ignorant (until educated) and prolonged the period of helplessness for increasing amounts of time, until today

the uppermiddle-class person does not fully enter into adulthood until she or he is age 25.

Things have changed since a decade ago when social scientists would document the childless couple as "abnormal." For example, Rainwater (1965) found that in a sample of married couples and single individuals there was universal rejection of the childless couple as "neurotic and selfish." Veevers (1972) has found that the childless adult, especially the woman, was-- apt to be stereotyped as abnormal, unnatural, immature, sexually inadequate, or unhappily married. Data on the marital stability of parents and of childless couples refute this latter point (Monahan, 1955). Since the choice to be childless is now open to women as an acceptable and viable alternative, not every woman or couple chooses to be a parent or to be childless. However, those that choose should be free to do so.

Towards an Exploration of the Origin of the "Wish for a Child"

At the end of World War II, the impact of culture gained new credence in psychological and even in psychoanalytic circles. Thus, Karen Horney (1969) stands out as the heroine of the female cause in this respect. She suggested that culture played a large role in one's psychosexual development, in order to explain the female syndromes found in her therapeutic work. She thinks psychologists have taken an androcentric position with regard to women and, in Bram's (1974) opinion, may have erred in the opposite direction by going out of their way to find parallel "inadequacies" in the male sex. She posited the existence of the "femininity complex" in men, marked by "womb envy." She even advocates that this complex is stronger in men than is the "penis envy" complex in women, and it is responsible for the achievement orientation of most men in society, as well as the need for

power and the creative impulse. Some concrete evidence of the existence of "womb envy" is found in the literature of Bruno Bettelheim (1962) and others.

Alfred Adler (1927) differed from psychoanalytic theorists in stating that the sense of inferiority in women might not be the result of physical "inadequacies," but rather, might result from the unnatural relationship between the sexes in society, with the male dominating. When the female resists this power differential, she is said to be manifesting a "masculine protest," a phrase which carries both neurotic and healthy implications for Adler.

Among the neurotic symptoms of this protest are "dysmenorrhea, vaginism, frigidity, few children" (p. 49). Adler assumes that there are positive outcomes of the "masculine protest," as well, such as "more thorough training . . . greater energy (p. 49)."

Sandor Rado (1933) spoke about the origins of "penis envy" in women. Helene Deutsch (1945) stated that motherhood is biologically motivated and inescapable. She believed that childless women manifest a "masculine complex." Josselyn (1956) wrote a paper on the "drive toward fatherliness." However, work on the origins of the male reproductive motivation is notably lacking among psychologists.

While psychoanalysts have formulated various theories about the development of the wish for a child, they cannot explain the variations that occur in this wish. Wyatt (1967) attributes this lack to the simplistic view that "motherhood" refers to one concept and one desire. He suggests that the wish for a child may be broken down into numerous categories, including the "wish to give birth," "the wish to have a dependent," and "the wish to manifest oneself."

Rather than looking at early sexual development to explain the persistent wish for a child, Wyatt suggests that one should consider a more existential notion of "inner duality." This concept refers to a universal tendency for the self to be

reflective; i.e., to split and relate to itself subjectively. When the energy, or love, an individual directs toward himself or herself overflows its own boundaries, a love object is sought and a relationship with another is developed. This is usually greater in females than in males, argues Wyatt. He sums up the psychotherapeutic literature on women by saying they are more narcissistic, masochistic, and passive. Thus their less rigid egos have a greater need to go beyond themselves to another love object, the child. This explains why women desire to become mothers more than men desire to become fathers (Bram, 1974).

Psychoanalysis posits that both boys and girls follow similar patterns of psychosexual development in the first two stages of their development cycle (oral and anal), but they develop individual patterns of growth during the phallic, oedipal, and latency stages. Both boys and girls share similar sexual needs centered on the genital organ, until the phallic stage is reached. When the girl recognizes the absence of a penis, however, she blames her mother for her "deficiency," and turns to her father for love. It is this "penis envy" which is developed at the age of about three years that is responsible for the woman's wish for a child, which Freud believed is a substitute for a penis.

In the boy the Oedipal complex, marked by fear of the father and a desire for the mother, is resolved with the identification with the father and the internalization of the masculine traits comprising the super-ego. According to Freud there is never a complete resolution of the Oedipal complex, thus the wish for a penis, or a child, continues throughout life.

Erikson (1964) emphasizes the interaction of culture and the individual "instincts," though he argues with the psychoanalysts on the general principles of biological determinism and the salience of the psychosexual stages early in life. In his essay, "Inner Space" (1964), he agrees with them that reproduction is the primary

role of a woman's life, and he believes that the woman who does not fulfill this task is likely to be neurotic.

Thompson (1964), Parsons and Bales (1955), Kagan (1964), and Bardwick (1971) conceived of penis envy only as a symbolic expression of female envy of the attributes of the male role in western society. However, Bardwick also stated that "the only way" to achieve a feminine sense of identity, if one has internalized the general norms, is to succeed in the role of wife, helpmate, and mother, and this takes years. But when self-esteem within the traditional roles has been won, we may perceive a switch to an internalized sense of self and sense of confidence.

Wilhelm Reich (1972) concluded, in accordance with Horney, that the female need not be controlled by her anatomy. He encouraged sexual freedom for both sexes, in the physical arena as well as in the choice of sexual roles.

Pohlman (1966) stands out as a heretic in the field of psychology as he objectively examines the freedom of choice afforded women to remain childless. In his book *The Psychology of Birth Planning* and numerous articles, he brings to bear a realistic attitude toward the fertility decision. He gives equal consideration to both the positive and negative aspects of having children. Among the negative factors he lists the financial costs, the interference with life-style, mess, noise, and confusion, the interference with the marital relationship, health costs, and the psychological costs of guilt and responsibility for children's failures. Furthermore, he examines some of the positive motivations for remaining childless: prolonging enjoyment of other aspects of the feminine role, such as the role of wife, maintaining work and leisure interests, and keeping down overpopulation.

Phyllis Chessler's (1972) emphasis on emotional disturbances in women touched on the role of motherhood. Chessler stated that although clinicians share the idea that women need to be mothers and that children need the exclusive care

of a female in order for both to be mentally healthy, mothers are generally diagnosed as unhappy and inefficient, and are blamed for the neuroses, psychoses, and psychopathic behavior of their children.

Judith Birnbaum (1971) found evidence of discontent among fulltime mothers in her study of "gifted women" who were 15 to 25 years out of college (i.e., age 35 to 45 years). In contrasting homemakers with children, professionals with children, and single professionals, she found that the homemakers had the lowest self-esteem. They felt lonely as often as the single subjects, had poorer mental health, and more negative assessments of their marriage than the married professionals. Furthermore, they were more likely to see childbearing as an achievement task and themselves as martyrs, with little psychological distance from their children and their children's accomplishments (Bram, 1974). The professional mothers, on the other hand, felt better about themselves as women. They were less lonely than the others, had happier marriages, saw rearing children as an interesting but not over-involving task, and were more objective about their children's achievements.

Summary

It is apparent from a review of the literature that there is an increase in the proportion of childless marriages in the last two decades. It appears that the rise of the feminist movement and the sexual revolution contributed heavily to this increase, i.e., women now have more options and increased opportunity for education and career development outside the home.

Many studies suggest that the higher the educational attainment of a woman the less likely she is to choose motherhood; and that the satisfaction and fulfillment derived by couples from parenting is often replaced by work and social activities. It is clear that there is increased awareness of reproductive choices and responsible

decision making among contemporary families and that much research is needed to explore the dynamics of these alternate choices.

The literature suggests that in the 1950s parenting was romanticized more than marriage in the American culture and that it is quite often a great source of conflict and discontinuity. However, more recent studies dispute this conclusion. The fact that the American society tends to promote smaller families and, in particular, the trend towards childlessness suggests that parenting no longer has precedence over marriage.

A review of the literature provides many clues about attitudes, feelings, and intentions of the childless couple but it is void of what marriage means to them. There are many contrasting views of the characteristics of childless couples, while some researchers have found childless couples to be selfish, abnormal, and deviant. Others find them to be well-adjusted, stimulated, and altruistic. Thus there is a continued need for more study to be done on the childless population.

Since meaning is so relative and marriage has different meanings it is necessary to explore what it means to the voluntarily childless couple.

CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

Type of Research

This study was done using the qualitative approach. This approach is frequently called naturalistic because the researcher visits the locations and scenes where the events in which he/she is interested naturally occur. The data are gathered by people engaging in natural behavior--talking, visiting, looking, eating, and so on (Guba, 1978; Wolf, 1979).

**Reasons for Choice of a Qualitative
Approach to This Study**

The roots of qualitative research lie in many disciplines and harbor a long and rich tradition. The qualitative method was used for a number of reasons. First, this strategy best explores the research question defined. In agreeing with symbolic interactionism as proposed by Blumer (1969), the researcher assumed that meanings evolve from social interactions and that meaning is dynamic and relative and must be interpreted in context. Therefore, it was assumed that the strategies of the qualitative approach would facilitate the exploration of the meaning of marriage for childless couples through focused interviews, where the researcher was not only able to record the responses of the subjects under study, but was able to observe the nonverbal communications and interaction and interpret the definitions of meanings from each couple's own frame of reference.

Second, in the qualitative approach the natural setting is the direct source of data and the researcher is the key instrument (Bogdan & Bilkin, 1982). This approach facilitates a better understanding of meaning since it is observed in the setting in which it occurs. To divorce the act, word, or gesture from its context is, for the qualitative researcher, to lose sight of significance. Thus, when this approach is used it is assumed that human behavior is significantly influenced by the setting in which it occurs, and whenever possible the researcher goes there. Consequently, the researcher visited the couples in their homes.

A third reason for the choice of this approach was that it is descriptive. In most cases the data collected are in the form of words. The written results of the research contain quotations from the data to illustrate and substantiate the presentation. The data collected were not reduced to pages of numerical symbols, but rather were interpreted with their richness as clearly as possible in the form in which they were recorded or transcribed. This researcher approached the study with the assumption that nothing is trivial, but that everything has the potential of being a clue which might unlock a more comprehensive understanding of the meanings of marriage to the sample under study. Nothing is taken as a given, and no statement escapes scrutiny.

Fourth, this approach was chosen because it is concerned with process rather than with products. Its focus is on how the couples negotiate meaning, how they interpret and/or define the significance of their relationships, and how these definitions are translated into daily activities, procedures, and interactions. A fifth reason for choosing this approach is that it allows the researcher to analyze and/or interpret the data inductively. That is, the researcher does not search out data or evidence to prove or disprove hypotheses held before entering the study; rather the abstractions are built as the data that have been gathered are grouped together.

Thus, any emerging theory comes from the bottom up (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), from the many pieces of collected evidence that are interconnected. The researcher formulates important questions as the study progresses.

Finally, meaning is essential to the qualitative researcher. Subsequently this approach adequately fulfills the need for a research strategy that is able to accurately explore the meaning of marriage to childless couples. The researcher is concerned with the subjects' perspectives. It is important to accurately capture these perspectives. The data were organized around questions like "What meanings are you experiencing in your relationship?," "How do you interpret your experiences to assess the real significance of your marriage?," and "How do you structure your social world?" The primary goal of the researcher was to explore the couples world through their views, their biases, their experiences with the aim to understand what marriage means to them, in their context, from their perspective.

Population Sample

Research in the social sciences has gone beyond the quantitative, empirical approach and has developed new methods through which the behavior of human beings can be explored to gain an understanding of the meanings they experience in the context of their natural setting, from their own frame of reference. This researcher attempted to explore what marriage means to voluntarily childless couples.

The first several interviews (10-12) helped the researcher to identify the relevant issues, while the remaining 30 interviews were used to test the commonalities and patterns that were observed, thus providing a measure of consistency, subsequently validating the data gathered.

A careful attempt is made to document direct quotations of the subjects to make illustration of their issues from their frame of reference. Thirty of the couples (71%) decided they do not want to have children although they are

biologically capable. With six of these couples (14.2%), one spouse discovered there was a medical problem that needed to be corrected in order to provide a biological possibility of having children, but the couple chose to remain childless rather than correct the problem. The other six couples (14.2%) decided they would not have children, but one spouse developed infertility--a condition that could be helped by surgery. For example, one husband discovered that his sperm count was low, and according to him, his doctor said it could be helped by an exploratory surgery, but he decided he did not want to use that method, especially since he had decided to be childless.

Seventeen of the couples (40.5%) interviewed were white Americans, 15 couples (35.7%) were black Americans, two couples (4.8%) were of Hispanic origin, and one couple (2.4%) was from Portugal (see Figure 1). The age range of the

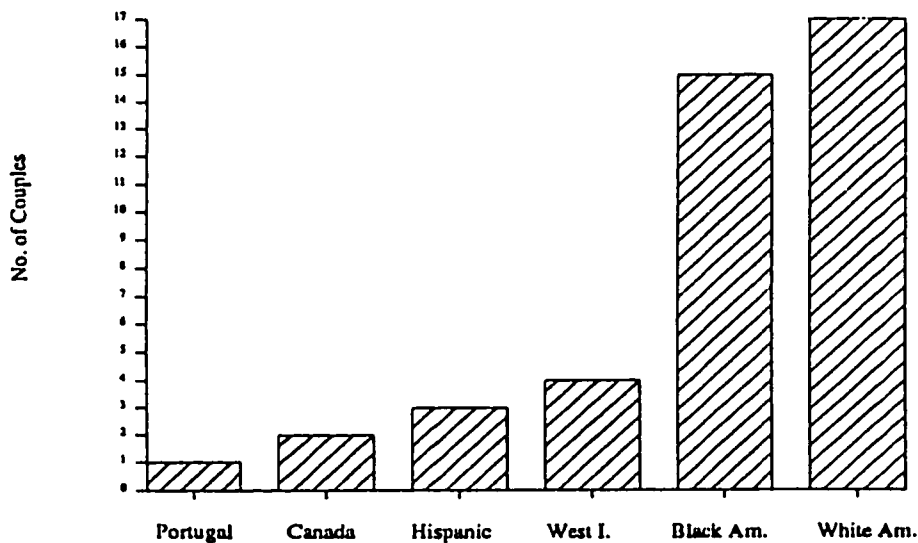


Figure 1. Ethnic Distribution of the Sample

couples interviewed was from 30 to 65. Two of the couples were between 30 and 34 years of age, 7 were between 35 and 39 years of age, 14 couples were between 40 and 44 years of age, 11 of the couples were between 46 and 49 years of age, six couples were between 50 and 54 years of age, one couple was between 55 and 59 years of age, and one couple was between 60 and 65 years of age. The median age of the sample was 44 years.

Of the 42 couples interviewed, 35 professed a religion. The other seven couples believed in God, but were not affiliated with any particular faith. Twenty-seven of the 35 professed church goers were active members who attended the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Seventh-day Adventist, and Baptist churches.

The couples that comprised the sample for this study were from a wide cross-section of America, with some from Canada and Portugal. All 42 couples presently reside in the United States. More of the couples live in the midwestern states (See Figure 2).

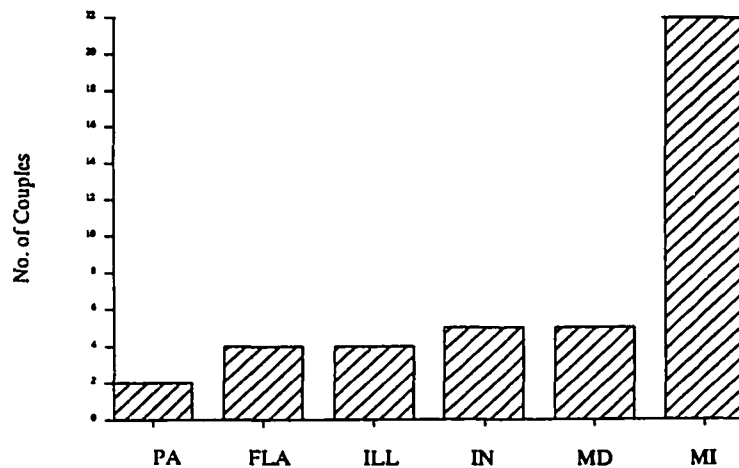


Figure 2. Demographic Distribution of Sample

All the couples interviewed in this study were "career oriented," that is, both spouses were educated professionals who are actively engaged in gainful employment. The concept of "career oriented couples" may be linked with the term "dual career family" coined by Rappaport and Rappaport (1971).

For purposes of confidentiality, names are omitted from the description of the data. The data are organized under subtitles of trends and patterns observed. The subjects were legally married and had been childless for at least seven years. The subjects were between the ages of 30 and 65. They were voluntarily childless and had not adopted or cared for foster children. The couples were heterosexual.

This study was designed to be executed with couples who are heterosexual and have been married for at least seven years. The age range of the couples was between 30 and 60. The lower limit of this range was designed to include couples who have been married for seven years and have had time to change their minds. Most women who plan to have children do so by the time they are 30. Many early deciders of voluntary childlessness have been found to change their minds just before they get to age 30 (Bram, 1974). It should be noted that the upper limit of the age range of this study, on the other hand, was designed to incorporate couples who have lived with this decision and were, therefore, able to look at the meaning of marriage over a longer span of time and, therefore, were able to describe what their marriage meant to them.

The study was done with a purposive sample of 42 couples. These couples were selected from referrals made through contact with a local radio station. Some were selected from referrals made by church pastors who were aware of couples in their congregations who are voluntarily childless, and others from referrals through a snowballing effect, i.e., from the subjects themselves and personal contact made

by the researcher. The couples were purposively selected to represent a wide cross-section of the American population (two were from Canada and one from Portugal) with specific reference to demographics, economic level, religious values, and occupational orientations.

Research Tools and Technique

The primary tool that the researcher used for this study was an audio tape recorder. The research technique that was used was focused in-depth interviewing. The in-depth interview is a purposeful conversation that is directed by the researcher in order to explore meanings, gain information, and to elicit opinions. The interview in this study was employed as a dominant strategy for data collection and subsequently used to gather descriptive data in the subjects' own words so that the researcher could record and interpret how the subjects viewed what marriage meant to them.

Some interviews, although relatively open-ended, are focused around particular topics or may be guided by some general questions, as patterns and trends become evident. In this study, the 42 interviews conducted focused on the questions described under procedures in this chapter and listed in Appendix B. The researcher facilitated free talk and relaxation in the subjects so that the interview could be conducted in as natural a manner as possible. Careful notes were taken of the subjects' responses.

Procedures

Each couple was contacted by telephone to solicit their cooperation and involvement in the study as well as to negotiate an appropriate time for the interview. This was followed by a letter to explain the purpose of the study and to assure confidentiality, and to confirm the time and date of the interview

(appendix B). At the occasion of the interview the researcher established rapport by initiating open discussion on the couple's family background and/or how they met each other. The researcher asked open-ended questions with the aim of conducting an unstructured interview as the couples responded in context, from their own perspectives. Questions such as the ones listed in the appendix A were asked at appropriate times.

Why Subjects Were Willing to Participate?

When the couples who participated in this study were asked why they were willing to participate in this research, they had varied reasons. One common reason was that they were stimulated by the topic of the study since they could identify with characteristics of the sample.

Secondly, many of them were interested to know the findings to validate their life-style. Thirdly, they were interested in sharing their lives with the public so they could better inform the society of what goes on in their system.

Fourthly, all of the couples who participated in this study were professionals who were eager to contribute to scholarship and to enhance the domain of knowledge. A final reason why some of the couples in this study chose to participate was because the experience was therapeutic. It was easy for them to open up to a stranger and thereby be given a chance to clarify the issues that impacted their decision to be childless and, consequently, the meaning of marriage from their own frame of reference.

Data Interpretation

The researcher carefully and accurately transcribed all written and taped notes. She described the key incidences in functionally relevant descriptive terms placing them in relation to the meaning of marriage to the couples under study.

The "theory" emerged from the data itself, thus enhancing the ability of the researcher to understand and perhaps devise an explanation of the meaning of marriage to childless couples that is consistent with the experiences of the subjects in the sample.

By doing this, the researcher attempted to find what explanation schemes are used by the subjects under study to make sense of the meanings they encounter. She tried to determine what theories, concepts, and categories are suggested by the data itself. In developing the "explanations" of the meaning of marriage to the childless couple, "sensitizing concepts" were used. These concepts capture the meaning of marriage and use description of the events to clarify the many facets of the concepts.

Thus, this process is a dynamic interchange between theory, concepts, and data with constant feedback and modifications of theory and concepts based on the data collected. The main concern was to gain understanding as to what marriage means to the childless couples rather than the verification of theory. The method involved constant reference to the events described by the subjects under study. Bits and pieces of the explanatory framework were modified until they finally became congruent with "the facts."

Limitations of the Study

One of the major limitations of this study was locating enough subjects in each age category. There were more couples between 30 and 47 than between 55 and 65. Since meaning is so relative, it might have been more helpful in order to arrive at a more accurate interpretation, to study the meaning of marriage for separate cohorts than to explore and understand it across a wide age span.

Another limitation of this study was the dependence on a tape recorder with the researcher as the key instrument. This makes data collection very time

consuming, and tedious. The researcher thus relied on accurate note taking and observation as the primary mode of collecting data.

Because of the wide distribution of subjects, gathering the data was costly, which limited the amount of interviews that were done.

Summary

Qualitative inquiry in the social sciences connotes a subjective process of exploring and perceiving interactions and meaning as a quest to gain understanding. It facilitates the critical thought process and mental dimensions of the human being. It arouses one's sensibilities and helps one to form questions in constructive ways.

By using a qualitative approach, one is conscious of the assumptions of this study, thereby fostering an appreciation for complexity; for only then can evidence be examined in a productive manner. Through this method of inquiry the frame of reference was expanded, but it also helps one to realize that understanding as a person, and ability to understand as a researcher, is limited.

Qualitative inquiry is context specific, so subjects under study in this research cannot be isolated from the natural settings in which they live. Through this method of inquiry, experience is studied as a whole. However, experience is only relevant when it is interpreted in terms of a frame of reference that can give form and shape to the whole concept. This chapter documents the techniques and procedures that were used to investigate the research question.

CHAPTER IV

MEANING OF MARRIAGE TO THE VOLUNTARILY CHILDLESS COUPLE

Introduction

Based on the data collected for this study it appears that couples who choose childlessness are making a positive statement about marriage. There is an attempt in this chapter to document the meanings these couples experience in their context. The couples felt that parenting was not an experience that they considered stimulating for various reasons which are documented in this chapter, and so they sought to plan their lives with other objectives in view.

Motivation for Choice

One fact that was common to all of the couples interviewed was that they all had a reason for choosing childlessness. The primary motivations that appeared to be common among the couples studied were:

1. Painful experiences in childhood. Of the couples interviewed 55% were from divorced homes. Fifty percent of the wives in this group said they decided between ages 15 and 21 that they would not put children through the experiences they had in childhood. One wife said, "My mother was such a poor model, I decided I would never want to be called mother."

One husband who was physically abused by his alcoholic father said. "I know I was very much like my father . . . though I hope I would not abuse my child. I did not want to take the chance."

Another wife said that as a child all she ever did was parenting. She raised her two brothers and one sister. At the time when her mom left home she was only ten years old. She continued by saying, "I was always bathing those kids; as soon as I turned around they were getting into mischief. I pledged then I would never have children--if this was what it takes."

One wife said her decision was motivated by observing her aunt and her mom. She said her mom had four children while her aunt never had any--and somehow her aunt was always financially stable and enjoying her life, while her mom seemed "stuck."

Many of these couples said it was out of these painful experiences that they encountered which motivated their choice of childlessness.

2. Fear of the future. Thirty percent of the couples said their reason for choosing childlessness was out of the fear of the future. They said they don't believe life will get any better here on earth and they think it is inhumane to introduce children to the chaos that presently exists. One husband who is a teacher by profession said, "As I work with children daily I feel sorry for the challenges that are ahead of them. I am doing my best to prepare them for the future, but I am really scared."

One wife said that after she looked at the movie, "The Day After," she really felt great that she did not have children. She went on to explain that all the talk of nuclear war is frightening enough for her and she would not want her children to have to deal with all of that. One couple who claims to be Christian said they understand that in "the Judgment" they will have to give an account for the sins of their children and they are not prepared to take up that responsibility. Another husband said he has spent all his life studying in pursuit of self-fulfillment

and he has still not been fully satisfied. He said, "My experience has been hard enough for me; I wouldn't want to put my child through it."

3. Tension between personal goals and parenting. The third reason, given by 15% of the couples, for choosing childlessness was that being parents did not fit into their "life plan." Many of them explained that after they got married and mapped out their professional goals that they intended to pursue, there was no time in the plan that they could accommodate children. One husband said that he got married one year after he graduated from college and that he and his wife both went to graduate school and finished a Ph.D. By the time they finished they were not about to be tied down with the demands of parenting. His wife said, "We thought about it at one stage, but I didn't see how I could study and raise a child. For one, we were living off a fellowship and just could not afford it."

One husband explained, several times during their graduate studies they thought about becoming parents.

For one, we were being pressured by her mom; but for me I needed more than just being a father. We lived in a trailer house at the time. It was just big enough for both of us--once a child came it would mean a new life-style. So we decided against it and kept studying.

He said that he does not think his mother-in-law has ever forgiven them. Then, he explained that unfortunately his wife developed a problem and finally had a hysterectomy, so his mother-in-law stopped applying the pressure.

Another wife said:

My decision was reinforced when I saw what happened to my sister. She was a smart girl, made much better grades than I did, but once she became a mother her focus shifted and she lost all interest in her career. She now has four children and finds time for nothing else.

She went on to explain that her niece was born with a physical defect and it has been very painful for her entire family.

Though this was not a pattern nor a trend with the couples studied, it is worth mentioning that one husband said. "Frankly, I don't like children. For others it's OK; they have a choice and the right to make it, but I find children disruptive, destructive, and just a pain." His wife did not share his feeling. She said that she loves children but she didn't want to have her own. It may be significant that she played with a teddy bear throughout the session. This may be the substitute child. None of the couples interviewed had a childless clause in their marriage contract. However, 14 of the couples decided to be childless before they got married.

Childlessness and Social Support

Eighty percent of the couples interviewed said they felt accepted, and except for the occasional pressure from parents, they were comfortable with their decision. Twenty percent of the wives said they have often been told that they are selfish, unfulfilled, and missing out on life. In cases where the husband is the only son or first child, it appeared that the parents were more concerned. Maintaining the family name seems to be the major factor that gave parents most concern.

Most of the couples said no one questioned their decision within the first five years of their marriage, except in two cases where the couple got married after 30 years of age. Most often the pressure the couples received was overt. For example, they are often asked, "When are you having a baby?" One wife said, "I could tell the second question once we are introduced to someone for the first time will be, 'Do you have kids?'"

Another wife said that when she meets past schoolmates, one of the questions she has to face is "Where is the family?" or "How many kids do you have?" Many wives said they experience negative feelings when their decision is questioned.

They indicated, however, that the negative feelings diminish with time. The husbands said having their decision questioned did not disturb them at all.

When asked, "How do you respond to or feel around people who brag about the achievements of their children?", 90% of the husbands said it did not make them uncomfortable. Eighty percent of the wives, however, said they resent it. One wife said, "On one occasion a friend was bragging about the achievements her daughter made in music but she went on and on about how great it was to be a mother, and then she asked me if I saw what I was missing." She continued by saying that although this woman was a friend, for the first time she felt like telling her to "shut up."

One wife said that she is more relaxed around couples who don't have children, even if she is meeting them for the first time. She explained that they have more in common to talk about and they can better identify with the issues they face. Her husband said that it did not bother him whether people supported his decision or not because he realizes he cannot please everyone.

Parenting Is a Choice: Not a Product of Tradition or Our obligation

Of the 42 couples interviewed, 90% expressed strongly that parenting is not an obligation. They all saw parenting as a choice that a couple makes. They felt that traditionally couples are expected to have children once they get married. However, they think society is changing and families are choosing alternate lifestyles.

One husband said that in his opinion many people who have children do not plan for them, while others have them because they are expected to have them. Another wife explained that children often romanticize parenting as the ultimate goal to reach. She said she can remember as a girl that she used to dream about getting married and having children. She went on to explain that two decades ago

many storybooks and novels were built around a romance in which eventually the couple gets married, have children, and live happily ever after.

Several husbands agreed that their "life plan" is important. They suggest that when one gets married one should not just fall into a routine but should have a plan or a course of action that one's life will take while realizing that there is no guarantee that things will go just as one desires. But a plan is helpful, and if in that plan there is no desire for children, it should be all right.

Many couples suggested that maybe if more couples had considered the alternatives to parenting they could have avoided some of the child abuse that is now of such great social concern. They say society is now faced with the dilemma of unwanted and neglected children. One wife said she was sexually abused by her father and that when she told her mother, she was rejected and made to feel that she was only trying to make trouble. She said that even though she is an adult she is still suffering from the emotional pain of her childhood.

Many of the voluntarily childless couples that were interviewed explained that the freedom to choose to be a parent or not to be a parent has facilitated a sense of independence and autonomy which is characteristic of their relationship. Several couples explained that parenting is irreversible and for them they would not want to do something over which they are powerless; once a parent, always a parent. To many it appeared as if their was only a 50% chance of being a successful parent and a successful individual simultaneously.

Advantages of Voluntary Childless Couples

Childlessness Promotes Individual Autonomy

For 60% of the couples interviewed, a common theme was that they saw parents as individuals who have very little autonomy over their lives. It appeared

as if children not only manipulate their time and space but determine to a large extent their geographic location and their commitment to a career. In other words, children interfere with significant personal development.

Many of the childless couples interviewed said that they deemed highly the need to have autonomy over their lives. They cherish the freedom of movement and the power to choose a life-style that promotes individual growth and development but minimizes stress. One husband said, "It is frightening to try to transmit values and to socialize children in this era. Even at a very early age they insist on their own way and they rebel if prevented, turning to drugs and everything deviant." He continued to explain by using examples of several friends that he has who are very disillusioned by choices their children have made.

Several couples agreed that they think parents do try to produce healthy individuated children but that there are many other factors impacting the life of a child that parents often have little or no control over. Ninety-five percent of the couples found traveling to be very stimulating and seemed to use it as their main mode of relaxation and fun. To be able to plan a trip and not worry about children appeared to be very satisfying to many of them. One husband said that at the rate he and his wife travel, he could not imagine what their lives would be with children. His wife said, "We can go some place and not have to worry about a child who needs to get to bed because school is at 8:00 a.m. Our program is very flexible as we are both self-employed."

When the couples were asked whether their desire for autonomy could be perceived as selfish, many felt just the opposite. Several couples agreed that they saw their attitude as altruistic. One wife said, "To think of the other person's welfare seems to be very desirable. Why should I use a child to fill my needs?"

Or why should I have a child without thinking of the implication for me as well as for the child?"

Many couples said it appeared that the socioeconomic state of many families who have children does not allow them the quality time that children need for adequate and positive training. Therefore, it seemed in the interest of children for these couples to be childless.

Several couples found that in their marital relationship the lack of parental responsibility and the demands that would be placed on them had they been parents gave them more time and energy to focus on their own issues, thereby promoting a more healthy and open marital relationship. One wife said:

I could see how my marital relationship would suffer if we had children. With my busy schedule I just could not find time to do the things we do together, and I would not want to exchange that for anything or anyone.

Generally, these couples felt their marriage style afforded them more individual autonomy.

Childlessness Facilitates a One-to-One Relationship in Marriage

Of the couples interviewed, 90% said they have experienced a healthy and positive marital relationship. The interviewer was conscious of the "researcher's effect" upon the behavior of the respondents and, therefore, did not place much weight upon the physical display of affection. The congruence between the definitions they gave to the meanings they experienced in marriage and their nonverbals were significantly observed.

Many of the couples expressed the satisfaction they achieve in the depths of the relationship they develop on a one-to-one level with each other. For many of them, their spouse is their best friend. For many couples the domestic responsibilities were shared. They both took care of what needed to be done

without ascribing roles to tasks. Several wives talked about mowing the lawn and fixing things around the house, while the husbands cooked and did the laundry.

In many of the cases the couples interviewed shared much of their leisure time doing things together. One wife described their overnight trips and weekend activities as very helpful and stimulating to her marital relationship. She said it did not cost very much to go on vacations, because they could always arrange to stop overnight with a friend or a relative and not feel as guilty about infringing since there are only two of them. The wives valued the independence that they enjoyed and did not see themselves as clinging or smothering.

Many couples acknowledged that their marriage was not without its problems but they thought problem-solving or conflict resolution was enhanced since there is often no one else around to use as a scapegoat. Several couples agreed that in many cases children in a relationship are often used as "cement," and once the children leave home the marital relationship is in for hard conflicts.

Many of the couples saw their relationship as facilitating personal growth and individual development. All the couples that responded to the request for participation in this study were professionals, and thus their academic achievements appeared to be a strong factor. In many cases husbands spoke of the satisfaction they experienced from seeing their wives achieve personal goals.

One husband saw his one-to-one relationship as enhancing his spiritual life and giving him a chance to work with his wife's spiritual needs. He said, "If I can help my wife to reach heaven, my living would not be in vain." He continued to explain that the task is hard enough to accomplish between him and his spouse. He would not want to be responsible to train a family of two or three children.

Several wives said it helped their self-esteem to know that their husbands loved them because of who they were and that their relationship was not dependent

on a role they filled or on a function they performed. They said that it is not unusual to have marital relationships based on the fact that one partner is the mother or the father of the children.

One wife observed that in her marital relationship it was easy for her to accompany her husband on his business trips and so they have an opportunity to get to know each other more intimately. She said that it was the focused attention and the time they have spent together that has bonded their relationship. She described the relationships of many of her friends in which the family rarely spends time together. She said the fathers are often not home and very frequently the mothers complain of their loneliness and unfulfillment. Generally, the childless couples felt their marital relationship was enhanced by their childlessness.

Childless Marriage Promotes Companionship

Many of the couples interviewed said that for them marriage means companionship. In many cases their spouse is their best friend. They share mutually their time and space with each other, promoting their individual development and personal support as they seek to be integrated in a world of career and normal living.

Several wives had a tubal ligation, while others had had a hysterectomy; some husbands had a vasectomy, while some couples were using other birth-control methods. For many, the opportunity to be sexually active and not be fearful of pregnancy was a real relief. one wife explained that for the first two years of marriage they were undecided about their parental status and they were constantly tense during sexual relationships. She said:

I could not relax because I was always scared I would get pregnant. We were in graduate school and could not afford for that to happen at that point; we were having difficulties financially as well as pressured by our own

adjustment issues and with the demands of school . . . I could not handle a child.

Another wife said that she decided before she met her husband that she did not want to have children, but it took him 5 years to fully make up his mind, and during this period she was on birth-control pills. She said that she lived in constant stress, fearing pregnancy and awaiting her husband's decision about childlessness. She said that she was depressed and suffered from severe headaches.

This woman said after counseling with her doctor she stopped taking the pills but used a foam gel while her husband used a condom. She said:

This was the most frustrating time we have spent in our relationship. I had an emission and oh--it was so messy. Finally, we decided this was not working out--so after much discussion and negotiation he agreed that children could not fit into our "life plan." I eventually had a tubal ligation. Now we can have intercourse and not fear pregnancy.

One husband said he had spoken to a number of his friends who often say their "sex-life is not as healthy as the first two years of marriage when they were without children." In fact, he said many marriages end in divorce because once children arrive, somehow there is not enough attention paid to each other. He believes sharing companionship with each other is vital to the survival of marriage. One husband said, "Even God recognized this when after He created man, He said, it is not good for man to be alone, let us make him a helpmate." However, he continued, "It was not until after the fall that children were created." He said this in humor, but it may be significant to mention.

For many of the couples, sexual fulfillment was important. They do not want to live with the threat of pregnancy or of unwanted children. One wife told of a friend who was very depressed after she discovered she was pregnant. Her last child was 18 and she was very near menopause. She said that her friend was not only emotionally disturbed but ran the risk of having a retarded baby. Another couple explained that they were very active sexually and were relieved by the peace

of mind they enjoy since the wife had a tubal ligation. "We can be very spontaneous; it just makes life a lot more fun," she said.

One woman told of her unhappy childhood and expressed that she looked forward to marriage to supply the love she missed as a child. She said the relationship she enjoyed with her husband provides her with security and personal fulfillment. "Basically, I am a loner," she said, "you could say I am an introvert . . .but my husband is my best friend, and I love it! We do have two dogs and a cat," she said laughingly.

Independence and Freedom Vs. Stereotyped Roles

Of the women interviewed, 90% said they opposed the assumption that women have prescribed roles. One woman said it appears that women are not only expected to work hard at sharing the expenses of the budget in a family but also to carry fully the domestic responsibilities of the home. Of the couples interviewed, 100% of the wives were professionals and they felt they are as involved in their careers as are their husbands and that their life duties are mutually shared with each other. Most of the couples did not see themselves fitting into stereotypical roles, rather they were more independent and free to negotiate the duties they chose to perform.

Of the husbands interviewed, 95% said that they supported women in the issues they often face with regard to equal rights, job discrimination, professional achievements, and wage inequality for comparative work done. They all seek to promote independence and autonomy as their wives strive for personal growth and development. Most of the men agreed that their wives achievements stimulate creativity and initiate satisfaction and fulfillment which is their mutual goal in their marriage relationship.

Many of the couples said they are very happy with their marriage. They acknowledged that their relationship is not void of challenges and that there is always room for growth. Some couples expressed concern that their desires for freedom and independence are often interpreted as selfish and deviant and seen in contradiction to the traditional roles of men and women. However, they suspect that many women in traditional family forms are confronted with similar desires for freedom and autonomy, but they are controlled by the demands of children and live unfulfilled lives.

Several couples expressed an appreciation for the growing trend toward social acceptance of childlessness. Many of the couples said that if given the opportunity to make this decision again they would do it the same way.

Social Contribution

All the couples studied expressed their desire to make a social contribution. Many couples explained that they have a desire to help needy children. One wife said she began to help indigent children when she was a freshman in college. She explained that she sent money to an organization which sponsors the feeding of children in poor countries.

Many couples said they see their social contribution expressed in the careers they pursued. They feel that through these various mediums they will be able to make a mark on society. One husband who is a professor at a university says he impacts the lives of several students and in some respects he is able to be of service to more people. Other couples talked about their involvement with church activities and other missionary endeavors.

Generally, however, all the couples saw making a social contribution as a priority. Most of them were in people-oriented professions (e.g., teaching, nursing.

social work, the ministry, and medicine). This appears to be consistent with Erikson's generativity.

Pre-Marital Deciders Vs. Post-Marital Deciders

There are many cases where the decision to remain childless is made early in childhood and cherished throughout adolescence. However, in 50% of the cases where one spouse decided before marriage he/she wanted to remain childless, it was not fully decided until after marriage. In 20% of the cases involving "pre-marital deciders," both partners decided to be childless during childhood, and by chance found each other.

Of the couples interviewed, 66% decided to be childless after marriage. Six of these couples had medical problems that eventually made them biologically incapable of having children, while six others developed problems that, if corrected by surgery, would have permitted them to have children, but they decided against surgery and thus to be childless.

The pre-marital deciders appeared to be more secure in their decision and were less affected by social pressure, since many of their relatives and friends knew of their decision before marriage. One wife said that she made sure to explain to her in-laws that they were not going to have children. They did not welcome the idea, she said. but they did not have a choice.

The post-marital deciders negotiated with their spouse in some cases. They also faced more social and familial criticism. Others said they did not plan it. They delayed having children until finally for reasons mentioned earlier their decisions resulted in childlessness.

Leisure Activities and Interests

All of the couples interviewed were meticulous housekeepers. They took much pride in decorating and designing their houses. Of the couples interviewed, 86% gave a tour of their house and even took time to show the interviewer their keepsakes. Some collected mugs, others spoons; one husband had the walls of his basement covered with hats. The couples all seemed to be very stimulated by their life-styles. They talked about the peace of mind that they enjoyed to be able to keep their house in order, to leave things in place, and return to find them there.

Several couples took time to show the researcher pictures of their families as they talked about their background. Most of these couples have traveled extensively and find that this promotes a one-to-one relationship. They spend quality time with each other which, they said, helped to strengthen the satisfaction that they both gained out of the relationship.

Leisure and social interaction appear to be highly valued by the couples interviewed. Although they were actively involved in their careers, they all took vacations together and enjoyed taking time to do fun things together. They seemed to enjoy the freedom to move about without the responsibilities of children.

Do Childless Couples Use Careers as a Substitute for Children?

Most of the couples interviewed for this study chose their career or had planned to pursue a professional career before they decided to be childless. In fact, childlessness was chosen by some, who, after they got involved in their career, decided that children would not fit into their life-style. While many couples admitted that if they had children they would have less time to invest in each

other, they did not believe that their career or their profession was a substitute for children.

The couples said they love children but they did not have a need to raise their own children. Several of them spend quality time with nieces and nephews or even, in cases when they are teachers. with their students. Generally, however, they do not see the activities of their life as a substitute for children.

Summary

The individual and marital focus presented from the data suggest that there is an independent development structure that requires the spouse, the couple to develop new modes of relationships. The history of literature and art suggest that the family is the crucible for human development. However, the data suggest that the marital relationship between childless couples facilitate individual development through an activation of introjective and projective processes.

It could be implied that one of the major purposes of the marital relationship of the voluntarily childless couple is to provide a structure in which disassociated and fragmented aspects of the spouse can become projected into the other as well as introjected from the other.

Children view the world and develop their values through the eyes and experiences of their parents. The data suggest that the impact of negative experiences in one's family of origin has a lasting influence. Other issues that motivated the choice of childlessness among the subjects of this study were a fear of the future and a tension between personal life-goals and motherhood.

For the voluntarily childless couple marriage means a mutual relationship to which each spouse is committed with the purpose of providing a medium which promotes personal growth and individual development. Specifically, each spouse aims at independence and autonomy and seeks to maximize an in-depth one-to-one

relationship between each other. The marriage lacks distractions often brought on by children and its focus remains on the relationship between each other.

The couples seek to make a social contribution by being committed to their career and by attempting to respond to social needs. The sample was divided into "pre-marital deciders" (i.e., those who thought of childlessness before they got married), while others were termed "post-marital deciders" (i.e., those who made the choice to be childless after marriage). Several of the couples decided on a career before they chose childlessness. They do not see their profession as a substitute for children.

CHAPTER V

STAGES AND OUTCOMES OF MARRIAGE TO VOLUNTARILY CHILDLESS COUPLES

Developmental Stages

Couples who chose to be childless appeared to go through developmental stages of choice. As they described the factors that precipitated their individual decision, they seemed uncertain until they were both agreed. The developmental process may be described as being divided into three stages: (1) cognitive, (2) ambivalence and emotional disequilibrium and (3) acceptance and resolution.

Cognitive Stage

The cognitive stage may begin with those who decide before marriage as individuals or it may begin with the couple when the decision is made after marriage. Couples explained that their decision to be childless remained a preference and eventually went through the next two stages before they finally decided that was how it would be. They both have reasons why they don't want to be parents, but these reasons are now subjected to parental pressure, social approval, emotional needs, and the pressures from family and friends. Many of them said that these pressures were sometimes very covert, often expressed in questions like "What are you both waiting on to have children?" or statements like "Don't wait too long to start a family." According to one wife, "People never ask if you plan to have a child, they rather inquire *when* are you planning to have a child?"

The cognitive stage is described by the couples as the stage that produced the most anxiety. Often the spouse made the decision to be childless early in life and then must find someone who will support this decision if he or she chooses to be married.

The cognitive phase is also experienced by couples who are classified as post-marital deciders. When the issue of childlessness first surfaces it remains a cognitive choice as the decision vacillates between both spouses. The decision remains cognitive for at least three to five years. As one spouse approaches the 30s he/she faces greater ambivalence which leads to an emotional disequilibrium, characteristics which mark the second stage of the process of choice.

Ambivalence and Emotional disequilibrium

The ambivalence and emotional disequilibrium stage can be described as the crucial stage of the process of choice. This phase begins about age 30 and may last as long as into the early 40s. While the couple is adjusting to the pressures of the cognitive stage and developing coping skills for the issues that they face, they are also in the last years of childbearing. They re-evaluate their decision, for if they must chose to have children, this stage is the last of the safe period, since the risk of birth defects is greater as the female approaches menopause.

During this phase, both parents and friends become more overt and inquire of the couple what their parental status will be. Some couples say they have been made to feel guilty. They wonder if they may regret their decision. One husband said that when he told his parents that he and his wife had decided to be childless, his father was furious. The husband continued to explain that he is the only son of his father, who is an only child.

Couples going through this emotional disequilibrium try to make excuses for their decision. Rather than openly saying, when asked about their parenting

status, that they are choosing to be childless, they may make statements like, "We are not ready yet," or blame their childlessness on some physical problem. One wife explains that she sometimes says, "People are having children at an older age these days, so we do have time." As the wife faces the latter part of this stage she is confronted with the biological limitations that are ensuing and she often panics about her decision. Couples re-examine the goals of their marriage during this phase and evaluate the meaning that they are experiencing through their marital relationship.

Thirty of the 42 couples interviewed described this phase as real ambivalence. They explained that as they face the challenges of mid-age they are suddenly aware that the decision they made to be childless can no longer be reversed. Most women are going through midlife at this stage which often makes life more complicated.

By this time both family and friends of the couple have accepted that their decisions are final and tend to be more supportive. Their ambivalence is strengthened, however, as the couple face the challenges of a career and of life in general. They measure their achievements with their peers who have children and say that they are usually more financially and professionally stable. As they begin to acquire a success identity, they are faced with guilt that they may have deprived their parents of grandchildren or they become concerned about old age and what the implications of their decision will mean to them then. As their emotions vacillate they are ushered into the third phase of this developmental decision process called acceptance and resolution.

Acceptance and Resolution

As the couple end this ambivalence and disequilibrium they begin to realize that the decision they made to be childless is really what they wanted to do. They

begin to enjoy the success they have achieved as they evaluate the meanings they are gaining from their marriage as compared with their friends who have children. If their experience has been positive, they move on to the third stage of the choice which can be described as the acceptance and resolution phase.

During latter middle age, as the couple progresses towards 50, they become fully accepting of their decision. One spouse may arrive at this phase before the other, however. If the couple achieves their "life plan" they experience this phase with great thrill. If not, they may regret their decision and argue that maybe if they had children life may have turned out differently.

The developmental stages of choice appear to be the same for the "pre-marital deciders" as for the "post-marital deciders" of childlessness. Progress through each successive stage depends on the successful achievement of the couple's professional objectives and the intensity of familial support for each spouse. Of the 42 couples in the sample under study, 36 acknowledged that they have arrived at an acceptance and consequently, resolution stage.

Suggested Life Cycle of the Childless Couple

The life cycle of the traditional nuclear family has been viewed from a developmental point of view (Duvall, 1948; Rodgers, 1964; Hill & Rodgers, 1964; Duvall, 1971 in Okun & Rappaport, 1980). There has been little consideration given to the life cycle of the childless couple. It appears that the stages of the life cycle of the voluntarily childless couple are different from the life cycle of the traditional nuclear family. This theory is based on the data collected on the couples interviewed for this study and needs to be validated on a larger sample before it can be taken as conclusive.

Adjustment Cycle

The first phase of the suggested cycle that voluntarily childless couples go through may be termed the adjustment cycle. This cycle begins with marriage and lasts for approximately 5 years. During this cycle the couple seeks to establish their own system. They set up rules between them. They set rules between their relationship and their parents. They set rules between them and their in-laws. They set rules between them and their friends and possibly between them and their work relationships. They define and redefine their relationship as it is impacted by all these other systems. While this defining process is occurring, it involves establishing the patterns of communication that they are comfortable with. How major decisions will be handled, how finances and the budget will be implemented, how conflicts will be resolved. and the routes and modes they will use to achieve their career goals are often established. In essence, then, the couple sets up the structure for control, for relationships, for communications, and for their professional objectives.

During the adjustment cycle the decision to be childless is still cognitive. For post-marital deciders it is during this phase that major negotiation of a childless state is achieved. The couple may receive little pressure from parents and friends since everyone expects that children may come later. If both spouses are agreeable as far as their decisions to be childless, the transition between this phase and the next is more easily achieved. The main tasks of this phase are adjusting to the new marital system and to the rules that impact this relationship.

Establishment of Identity

The second phase of the life cycle of the childless couple may be called the establishment of identity. This stage may begin at the end of the first 5 years and last for 8-10 years. During this phase the couple reviews the rules that were

negotiated in the adjustment cycle and either decides that this pattern of living is acceptable or renegotiates the rules. Couples explain that after 5 years of marriage, they have established an identity as a childless couple. Both family and friends become aware that the couple's decision to be childless is going to be permanent and are more willing to accept it than they were during the first 5 years.

It is during this phase that professional goals are realized or at least stabilized. The couples' main focus is on achieving a successful career as they establish an identity and provide support for the satisfactory and personal development of his/her spouse. Very often during this phase the couple has to realign their social relationships, for in many cases, some couples explained, their friends become parents or are less involved in a profession. The childless couple tends to befriend other childless couples because the dynamics of their relationships may be similar.

The couples interviewed found that the marital relationship tended to be closely bonded during this phase as each spouse seemed to focus on supporting each other in their climb for establishing themselves in their profession. There is not often a wide network of friends with a similar family structure and this, they believe, contributes to a deeper quality relationship between them. Every childless couple interviewed knew at least two other childless couples and in many cases were close friends with these couples.

It is in this phase that the parents of the couples come to terms with the choice of childlessness that their children have made. The parents soon realize that their children are biologically at risk and so the parents don't often apply pressure during this stage. However, they may suggest options like adoption. If the couple successfully achieves a well-defined identity during this phase they progress to the third phase.

Career-Achievement and Goal-Directed Phase

The third phase of the family life cycle of the childless couple can be described as the career-achievement and goal-directed phase. Both spouses have by this time completed the training they need to pursue their career of choice and are now developing security. The phase can be identified at the end of the first 7-10 years and may last until retirement. During this phase the couple's main focus is stabilizing and maximizing their input into their career. They become more concerned and involved in social issues. One wife explained that she organizes a community project once a year in which she stimulates public interest and gets people to send gifts for children in an orphanage.

Another major issue that the couples face during this phase is the decline of their aging parents. It is during this phase that they often become aware of their own death and the need to plan for their retirement. They take time to plan for old age, establishing trust funds and securing medical insurance and other plans. The marital relationship is at its peak. Both spouses are at the climax of their careers and their individual development. They both progress, attempting to achieve their life goals as they invest their lives in each other and in the environment. The couple then moves on to the next phase of the life cycle.

Retirement and Old Age

The final stage of the life cycle is retirement and old age. During this cycle the couple re-evaluate their "life plan." If they have successfully completed the tasks of their plans they begin this phase feeling satisfied and fulfilled. If, on the other hand, they consider that their "life plan" was a failure, they may despair and regret having made the decision to be childless. They may speculate that if

they had had children things might have been different. None of the couples interviewed regretted the decision to be childless.

It is during this phase that they face the death of their spouse and close friends and must adjust to being a widow or widower. Life at this stage of the life cycle of the childless couple is much like life at this stage for couples of a traditional nuclear family.

Voluntary Childlessness as a Value

People make choices out of their system of values. Thus a value is very relative, so that what is important to one group may not be considered important to the next. According to Milton Rokeach (1973), a value is "an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence." So by this definition, the choice of childlessness for couples is an endstate of existence that is preferable and is thus a part of their value system. Rokeach postulated five assumptions of a value. He stated that: (1) the total number of values that a person possesses is relatively small, (2) all men everywhere possess the same values to different degrees, (3) values are organized into value systems, (4) the antecedents of human values can be traced to culture, society and its institutions, and personality, and (5) the consequences of human values will be manifested in virtually all phenomena that social scientists might consider worth investigating and understanding.

The fourth and fifth assumptions cited above validate the need for this study. The meaning of marriage for childless couples may be understood and perceived in their experiences quite differently. According to Margaret (1980), values may be divided into two categories: group specific and abstract universal values. Group specific values are shared within one group or society, but have little

meaning to those not in that group. This may explain why some researchers (Houseknecht, 1982) may conclude that childless couples are selfish and could even be seen as "deviant." Abstract universal values are accepted by nearly all people. They include values such as respect for others, being responsible, and tolerance for varying views.

It appears, therefore, that the choice of childlessness may fit a group specific value and that society exercises the abstract universal value when they seek to accept and understand the issues that couples who choose this life-style face. According to Dudley (1986), values cannot be imposed upon one by outside pressures. Values have to be a free choice. Raths, Merrill, and Simon (1966) have described seven criteria of a value, organized under three headings: (1) choosing, (2) prizing, and (3) acting. They further subdivide choosing into three criteria. The first is choosing freely. "We want to be married, but not to have children," says the voluntarily childless couple. Some of them say that there are different goals for their marriage and they want to be able to choose. The second criterion under choosing is choosing from alternatives. In order for a value formation to take place, there must be at least one alternative (Dudley, 1986). For the childless couple, there are several alternatives. They could have adopted children, or cared for foster children, or chosen to be without children.

The third criterion of a value that falls under the category "choosing," is choosing after thoughtful consideration of the consequences of each alternative. All the voluntarily childless couples interviewed for this study have considered the consequences of their choice of childlessness. Many of them cited their perception of a need for children in old age. Many of the couples are conscious of the peer pressure to have children or of their parents' desire for grandchildren, but they chose to be childless.

The second category and fourth criterion of a value is prizing. When one has a value it is esteemed and cherished. Thus the couples are happy with their decision to be childless. Because the value is shared with a spouse there may be prolonged ambivalence until it becomes a common value of the couple. The fifth criterion of a value is affirming it publicly. The voluntarily childless couple is open and free to discuss his and her decision because they are not embarrassed by it.

The third category and sixth criterion of a value is acting upon choices. How the couple who chooses childlessness spends his/her time, the things they treasure, their perception of the significance of their marital relationship, and the experiences they share all go towards understanding and explaining the meaning of marriage in their context. The last criterion of a value, as Rath sees it, is repeating the choice. The couples interviewed said that they would make the same choice if they had their lives to live over. The voluntarily childless couple has established a pattern of living, they are happy with it, their marriages are satisfying and stimulating, and they want everyone else to understand the meaning they experience.

Dimensions of the Marital Experience for the Voluntarily Childless Couple

Traditionally, a family is viewed as a relationship in which the man is the head of the household and the main provider, and where the woman's main responsibility is to care for her husband and children. However, with the impact of feminism and the women's movement, as well as a shift from an industrial to an information society, the roles of men and women have been greatly transformed. This has forced the family to redefine its structure. As a result, instead of a redefinition, society has made accommodation to several family forms, better known as alternate lifestyles.

Some researchers have described voluntarily childless couples as selfish, abnormal, and even neurotic (Bernard, 1972). Others have found no evidence that these couples are emotionally abnormal (Pohlman, 1970). Of the 42 couples interviewed for this study, all the subjects appeared to be happy, well-adjusted, and to have a positive self-image. They all seemed to be stable human beings with a sense of purpose and direction. They were all professionals who were making a meaningful contribution to society through their careers. Because of the lack of extensive research on this population, however, childless couples are often labeled with negative descriptors (Houseknecht, 1982).

The sample of childless couples interviewed for this study tended to be well-educated professionals who live in cities. The average combined income was \$35,000. Of the couples interviewed for this study, 85% were from broken homes which suggests that early negative childhood experiences with their parents may predispose a person to choose childlessness. Many of the couples cited the financial demands and immobility that their parents experienced as factors that gave them concern. Faux (1984) had written that

It may be that while all parents make some sacrifices for their children, some children may feel the burden of those sacrifices more acutely than others, and those may be the ones who are most likely either to feel that childlessness is right for them or become mired in ambivalence.

Some wives interviewed for this study said that they actually parented their siblings and thus, they think it is time they enjoy some independence; therefore, they are choosing to forego parenting their own children. One important factor that was seen to be common among many of the wives interviewed in this sample was that their mothers were all deprived of maximum personal development because of the demands children placed on their time and space.

The wives in this study did not attribute the impact of feminism to their decision to be childless as was the case found in other studies; however, one may

imply that feminism had an indirect effect on their decision to be childless. All the wives said they enjoyed more freedom than their friends who were working mothers.

Marital Relationships

The marital relationships of the couples interviewed for this study were stable and defined. They emphasized the freedom to live an unstructured and flexible life-style. They all travelled extensively and could afford more luxury. This added to comfort and satisfaction in their marriage. Several of the couples interviewed planned regular vacations and also took time for mini vacations (e.g., overnight visits or weekend trips).

Many of the husbands in this study expressed a sense of pride in the professional accomplishments of their wives. They also felt that their wives were more secure in their marriage than many of their peers who had children. The wives said that they enjoyed the financial independence and the satisfaction of their personal development.

From the findings of this study it appears that the major meanings that marriage offers to a voluntarily childless couple are companionship, personal development, a one-to-one relationship, control, and freedom of choice. Most of the couples interviewed felt their goals were more easily attained by a childless life-style. When they compared their experience with that of their friends, they perceived their childless life-style as being more positive.

Another conclusion that one can make from this study is that voluntarily childless couples do not use external support systems to validate their decision. In the early years of the concept of childlessness, the National Organization for Non-Parents (NON) was organized. However, as childless couples became more socially accepted and the couples themselves became more defined in their identity, the

organization became defunct. Many couples described their spouse as their best friend, although they all attested to close friendships with their peers and others.

Only two subjects in the sample for this study saw children as hostile and cruel. Most of the other couples said that they love children and often relate to children closely through their jobs or through relatives and friends. Many of the wives were critical of some mothers, saying they believe they would have been better off not having children. They felt having a child and leaving it with a babysitter or at daycare was an unhealthy option.

Childless couples resent the assumption that once a couple gets married they will have children. In fact, no one was asked whether they would have children, but rather, "When are you planning to begin?" As a result it seems that many parents have children without considering the implications for their marriage. Others have children hoping that they will be the panacea for a bad marriage.

However, Le Masters (1957) suggested that the introduction of a child into a marital relationship promotes a crisis or a trauma (Faux, 1984). Le Masters maintained that the crisis resulted from a combination of factors that included loss of sleep, constant exhaustion, extensive confinement to home, curtailment of social contacts, loss of extra income, guilt over not being a better mother, and worry about physical appearance. These findings were consistent with the concerns that several wives interviewed for this study shared. They felt that parenting is an irreversible experience. You can give up a job or divorce a spouse, but there are limited choices in an unfulfilling parental role. For many, this lack of autonomy was overpowering.

Many couples felt the intimacy of their relationship would decrease upon the birth of a child. There are advantages and disadvantages to both choices. Studies that have reported levels of marital satisfaction before and after children

show a decrease in marital satisfaction in the middle years of marriage. Researchers have even concluded that children are a cause of marital dissatisfaction during the middle years of marriage (Rollins & Feldman, 1970).

Rollins and Feldman found that all the couples they surveyed experienced the most happiness in the period immediately after marriage. In a report of 600 suburban women in their 30s, Jessie Bernard (1972) found that women viewed their husbands first as breadwinners, second as fathers, and third as husbands.

Many women experience disharmony and dissatisfaction during the parenting years and may only experience some relief after the children leave home. On the other hand, childless couples report experiencing a high level of satisfaction during the middle years. They often do most things together and enjoy good companionship.

Faux (1984) stated that childless couples may not have happier marriages so much as they have less disruptive relationships. Parents, however, tend to gain fulfillment from their children rather than from their marriages during the period when their focus is on rearing children, and so they may not be leading dissatisfied lives so much as they are realigning the focus of their stimulation. One may imply, therefore, that childless couples may not necessarily live more satisfied lives but rather, it appears that they have less disruptions.

Among the couples interviewed for this study most felt more free to end their marriage if for one reason or the other they were not experiencing satisfaction. This suggested that divorce is easier to accomplish if children are not involved.

Financial Implications

Although all the couples interviewed for this study are working professionals, several of them felt the cost of rearing a child would impact their life-style. One wife said, "If it costs \$100,000 to raise a child to age 18 (Smilgis, 1987), I really don't think I could make that sacrifice." Many of them did not see the cost of

child rearing as a major barrier. Many of them felt that if they had children they would be willing to adapt to a less lavish life-style. They were realistic though, and realized that having been accustomed to a higher standard of living, the adjustment to meeting the cost and demands of children would be a challenge.

For many of the couples it was not so much a lavish life-style that they enjoyed as much as the freedom to use their monies for what they wanted. Many of them traveled a lot and think that it is a privilege to be able to afford it. In one study, by Campbell (1976) in which none of the subjects had high incomes, childless couples reported feeling happier with their savings and less worried about paying bills than did couples with a child under the age of six. According to the same study, couples rearing children stated that their primary concern is money. Almost all parents reported making some financial sacrifices. Research reported by Faux (1984) states that:

Most parents postpone major undertakings, such as a long vacation or refurbishing their home or acquiring a summer place and other comforts, until the departure of children. Too often couples focus on whether or not they can afford to have a child rather than on whether their marriage can afford the strain that is likely to result from making dramatic changes in spending patterns. If the bottom line looks right, they think they are willing to go ahead. Frequently, these couples are only setting themselves up for later conflict . . . for the couples who have structured their marriage around their own idiosyncratic and often lavish spending patterns, who, in short, have acquired a taste for activities and possessions that may not be so feasible--either financially or logistically--after a child is born, may have created a relationship that will be unable to stand the strain of adding a child. (Faux, 1984)

Sexual Implications

One dimension of a voluntarily childless couple's life that appeared to be more dynamic was their sex life. Many of the couples felt they could be more spontaneous and creative in their sexual activity. One couple said that they cherish the privacy they experience in the expression of their intimacy towards each other. Another couple explained that they can be relaxed and be in control of moments

when they are engaged in sexual intimacy. The husband said he takes the phone off the hook and does not have to worry about a baby screaming or another child barging in on them. Several couples expressed that their sexual experiences were more enjoyable since they don't have the fear of pregnancy. Therefore, it seems that the sexual experiences of a childless couple is enhanced by their life-style. They all expressed satisfaction about the freedom, privacy, and spontaneity they enjoy. The birth control methods most commonly practiced by the sample studied were tubal ligation and vasectomy.

Childlessness: An Either/Or Choice

There were three main reasons that the couples in this study gave for their choice of childlessness: (1) many couples had negative or painful experiences in childhood, (2) they feared the future, and (3) they saw a conflict between their career goals and the demands of motherhood. However, other reasons were listed, consistent with the idea that "Most couples who choose childlessness believe they are opting for a pleasant life-style over an unpleasant one. . . . They see childraising versus a free-wheeling life-style as an either/or choice" (Veevers, 1974).

The findings of this study revealed that the subjects were all career-oriented couples. These are characteristics which typify childless couples (Veevers, 1973a). Generally, it appeared that women either want the freedom to raise a stable family and provide support and socialization for their husband and children, or they seek the challenges of competing with the men in their culture by displaying equal competence, wit, and energy in the world of work.

According to Lindner (1987):

Some who enjoy deep intimacy with their mates, fear a child's presence would sabotage it. Others think they would sacrifice important career goals for children. . . . Motherhood and ambition have been seen as opposing forces for thousands of years.

Since studies show that most fathers shoulder little of the burden of child care (Faux, 1984), a woman who needs to earn money may reject the responsibilities of childrearing. Lindner (1987) adds that:

Women who have decided to say no to motherhood do not believe kids are compatible with self-fulfillment or necessary to happiness . . . some choose childlessness because early childhood experiences or perceptions have made them see parenthood as unrewarding or threatening. Some view pregnancy and birth as repulsive, frightening, or as dangerous. . . . Others reject parenting because they feel their parents were less happy or prosperous because they devoted their lives to their offspring. . . . Mothers who do not see their own womanhood in a positive light of who resent their maternal roles, communicate a negative sense of what it means to be a woman to their daughters.

Whatever may be the reason for a couple's choice of childlessness, they all said that childlessness is a choice.

The Implications of Childlessness for the Aged Childless Couple or Spouse

One of the concerns the childless couples interviewed for this study had that they considered a disadvantage of childlessness was that when they get old they will have no one to care for them or supervise their care. Those in the emotional disequilibrium and ambivalence stage expressed a fear that later they may feel dissatisfied with life and may regret that they did not have children. The couples who were in their late 60s and were retired are aware of the aging issues and are making provisions for them. Many of the younger couples have paid into trust funds and pension plans so that they will be financially able to meet the medical and living expenses when they are aged.

It seems, however, that parents have no more guarantee than childless couples about satisfaction in old age. In fact, many researchers have found that the subjective levels of satisfaction with life are higher among the childless (Strykman, 1981; Glenn & McLanahan, 1981); or if they have had children, satisfaction levels increase after children have left the home (Deutscher, 1968).

Connidis (1983) and Troll (1978) found that parents do not always wish to become a "burden" to their children.

According to Bram and Cope (1980) children are no guarantee that loneliness and a feeling of being unloved will not occur in old age. One cannot neglect to mention, however, that children can be of benefit to the aged. Morgan (1981) documented benefits of emotional, social, and economic support that aged parents often derive from children. It seems though that the benefits may be overstated. According to Judith Rempel (1985) many elderly find themselves without children who are capable of helping them. She found that in the United States, in a study done in 1977, 13% of a random sample of non-institutionalized elderly reported no primary source of support in times of need; of those who did, 18% did not identify spouse, child, or siblings as their source of support. Further, she found that in a large study of disability applicants only 16% of the elderly were receiving significant help from their families, and 19% of disability applicants between 18-64 years said they would never assume the care of an older family member, even if there were financial incentives. Thus, one can agree with her when she concludes that having children is no guarantee of aid when it is needed or desired.

Shanas (1967) found that, regardless of the social class, elderly Americans give more to their children than they receive. Cohler (1983) found that among those over 80 years of age, more than 50% still provide material assistance to their children. He found that the real challenge for the elderly is not the need for children to care for the aged, but for the aged to wean one's children.

Bachrach (1980) found that 70% of the childless elderly had seen friends or neighbors in the past day or two, and 20-24% had seen another relative (other than a child or grandchild) in that same period. The proportion seeing other kin (or

friends of neighbors) was unaffected by parental status (Rempel, 1985). Thus, one may conclude that the childless elderly are not lacking social contact.

Rempel also found that the childless elderly are in better health and are more satisfied with their health than are parents. She also found that the childless elderly are more satisfied with their income and standard of living and are more able to afford major necessary items.

That children can be of value to their aged parents is empirically supported and socially accepted. They often provide their parents with financial, emotional, and other support. However, research has indicated that the childless elderly have levels of wellbeing that match and sometimes exceed those of parents (Rempel, 1985).

One may conclude that childless couples produce more self-reliant, healthy, and financially secure elderly. With the potential impact of childlessness on this generation as well as on future cohorts, it is necessary that more studies be done on the outcome of childlessness on the aged. From the data collected for this study, the couples are all making plans for old age and they do not appear to fear the future.

Summary

In this chapter an attempt was made to explain the developmental process of choice that the voluntarily childless couple goes through. It is also noted that during the life cycle of the couples the issues they focused on were different from those of parents. One may postulate that voluntarily childlessness is a value. This concept was discussed in this chapter as well. Finally, an overview on the dimensions of the marital experiences for the voluntarily childless couple was documented.

The literature is replete with descriptions of and assumptions about the life cycle. Duvall (1971) postulates a cycle of eight stages through which the family

passes in its normal development. There are: (a) beginning family, (b) infant family, (c) preschool family, (d) school-age family, (e) adolescent family, (f) launching family, (g) post-parental family, and (h) aging family. Of the eight stages mentioned above, the only stage that a childless couple shares similar tasks with is the beginning family and even in that stage the issues are different. For the beginning couple who plans to have children, the rules they negotiate and the boundaries they establish between family and friends are made with an awareness of the impact they will have in their children.

For the voluntarily childless couple their focus is on their marriage and the relationship between both spouses. The life cycle as the couples described it is divided into four stages: (a) the adjustment stage, (b) establishment of identity, (c) career-achievement and goal-directed phase, and (d) retirement and old age.

The assessment of the voluntarily childless couple as a unit with a developmental life cycle is grounded in the conceptual framework of the individual life cycle. The communication styles and structure of the "couple system" will determine its success in negotiating the four development phases. Each couple unit will experience meanings that are idiosyncratic to their structure while inevitably creating transformations that will impact other childless couples.

The model for the developmental process of choice is divided into three stages: (a) cognitive, (b) ambivalence and emotional disequilibrium, and (c) acceptance and resolution. The time frame within which these stages pass is relative so one spouse may arrive at a later stage before another. Thus, continuous negotiation and processing is experienced.

The marriage of a voluntarily childless couple attempts to develop creative structures and marital identities, with which they can adapt to and experience full potential of their developing life stages and contribute to their social community.

Knowledge of the developmental phases of the process of choice and the life cycle provides a framework for the structure of the system that exists in the marital experience of the childless couple. Understanding the processes that these couples go through provides a conceptual scheme for communication between the couple themselves and between them and others. Viewing the couple from the developmental perspectives facilitates a distinction between a developmental crisis and a dysfunctional or chronic crisis.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary of Findings

The findings of this study are reported below. Each of them is discussed within the body of the study.

1. There are three main motivations for the choice of childlessness: (a) painful experiences in childhood, (b) fear of the future, and (c) tension between personal goals and parenting. Many couples said they were trapped in the pain they experienced from childhood and did not care to put a child through similar experiences. They had fears of the future, knowing they could not provide the safety and security a child should have to survive the present chaos in the world. This could be an expression of one's inability to manage his/her own fears, or an unwillingness to pass one's fears on to the next generation.

2. Some of the couples did have ambivalence in the early years of their decision to be childless. As they progressed with marriage and began to experience success in a career, however, they found it easier to resolve the issue and later to arrive at a state of acceptance.

3. One thing that was commonly expressed by the couples in this study was that their childless life-style promoted autonomy. They were free to make decisions that best provided the satisfaction they sought, without having to accommodate a child or children.

4. The couples in this study did not suggest that their marriages were perfect; however, they felt they had fewer disturbances. They were all happy for the lack of disruptions often brought to a marriage by adolescents.

5. All the couples found that a one-to-one relationship was the focus of their experience. Many spouses were best friends of each other. They did many things together and so were often allowed an opportunity to give individual attention to each other.

6. Among the couples who were between 50 and 65 years of age, being childless appeared to be greatly enjoyed. They had traveled extensively and were thrilled about the lack of responsibility they had. Some couples found that they could not include some of their friends, who were parents, in some of their social activities because many times their friends time and presence were demanded by their children. Thus, companionship was a very significant meaning to these couples.

7. All the couples studied were professionals who appeared to be happily engaged in gainful employment. Many of them were firstborns who grew up in a city.

8. The couples expressed that they do not need support groups. They disagreed with the findings of some studies that suggest they are selfish, lazy, and could be classified as deviants. They perceived that they could be seen as altruistic. Their concern was more to save the children from the inevitable pain and disruption they will face, rather than their own self-interest.

9. Voluntarily childless couples do not see themselves as finding a substitute for a child. It appears, however, that their attachment to pets and their overt commitment to their careers could be interpreted as substitutions for the "absent child."

10. The choice to be childless is found to be developmental. It begins with a cognitive stage, moves to an emotional disequilibrium and ambivalence stage, and finally attains resolution and acceptance.

11. The life cycle of the voluntarily childless couple was found to be divided into an adjustment cycle, the establishment of an identity cycle, career achievement and goal directed cycle. and the old age and retirement cycle.

12. It was found that voluntarily childless couples travel extensively and have a higher percentage of discretionary income. They quite often can afford more leisure and luxury than the average American parent.

The meaning of marriage in the context of the subjects interviewed for this study is relative to their experiences. It is necessary to replicate this study with a larger sample to explore to which other settings and subjects these findings can be generalized.

Recommendations and Applications

The findings of this study have implications in two main areas: practice and future research. Social scientists are constantly exploring and seeking to understand the family. The family, however, is a dynamic institution and is thus constantly changing its structure and function. There is today what have been called "alternate family forms," and the more one knows and understands about these various lifestyles the better will the needs of society be met.

This research holds implications, therefore, to counselors, family therapists, social workers, city planners, medical doctors, psychologists, childless couples who have already arrived at the identity stage, as well as ambivalent couples who have problems in choosing their parental status.

1. For the counselor it provides a description of the common issues that

voluntarily childless couples are concerned with; for example, a need for autonomy, independence, and personal development.

2. For the family therapist it outlines the developmental stages of choice that the couple often go through. Identification and clarification of the developmental stages can help to facilitate the therapeutic process.

3. To the social worker and city planners the study describes the characteristics of the voluntarily childless couple. For example, they are most often educated professionals who live in the city area.

4. For the medical doctor this study finds that voluntarily childless couples are often seeking permanent sterilization and the medical care that goes with the process.

5. For the psychologist this study implies that constant assessment measures are necessary to evaluate the various processes that the voluntarily childless couple undergoes.

6. For other childless couples this research highlights the issues of the life-style of the couple who has chosen childlessness, thus providing information on the various factors that impact their marriage. For example, voluntarily childless couples often seem to have an equalitarian style of marriage, where the responsibilities of the family are shared equally.

7. For the ambivalent couple this research identifies the "life cycle" that the subjects interviewed experienced, and thus provides information about the choice they may make.

8. One could infer that there are implications for parents too--as often the early experiences of a child's life impacts his/her adult life and consequently shapes the future.

9. For the minister of religion this research provides insight and awareness of the issues childless families face so the needs of these families may be better served.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based upon the findings of this study the following suggestions for research are made:

1. A correlation study could be conducted on the meaning of marriage for the voluntarily childless couple and the involuntarily childless couple. It is assumed that while some issues may be common to both groups, that both groups will have quite a different focus. One may assume that the involuntarily childless couples are constantly seeking techniques and methods of having children and thus their marriages will encounter more strain and even pain, which could lead to serious problems. Very often families without children are classified as childless and a distinction is not made as to whether they are voluntary or involuntary.

2. A cross-sectional study should be done evaluating the meaning of marriage across cultures and parental statuses. The literature is void of studies on the meaning of marriage among different cultures. In the contemporary American society with a trend towards alternate family forms in such a diverse culture it is necessary to study the meanings from each cultural framework.

3. A replication of the study could be done using a personality assessment and a marital adjustment measure. It will be helpful to measure the personality of a couple or spouse who chooses childlessness. With empirical data an accurate profile can be established for the characteristics of voluntarily childless couples. A marital adjustment measure will more accurately assess the adjustment of these couples to marriage.

4. The self-esteem of voluntarily childless couples could be compared with that of parents and other chosen alternate family forms. It will prove helpful to the social sciences to understand how each family view themselves as compared with others.

5. The characteristics of the voluntarily childless couple could be measured controlling for cultural variability. One may assume that since culture has such a profound effect upon an individual that there may be significant differences among childless couples of various cultures.

Conclusion

Understanding "meaning" involves an interpretive process. Thus, an attempt was made to interpret the meanings that were verbally and non-verbally expressed by the subjects for this study. Meaning is symbolic of the experience one has and relative to the setting and context in which it is perceived. Thus, applying the findings of this study was not aimed at how generalizable they can be, but rather, to what other settings are they applicable.

The researcher is suggesting that there are emotional tensions seeking an equilibrium within a spouse that shapes the meanings that are perceived through his/her experiences. These tensions may not cause the experience, but they contribute to the symbol of meaning that the person interpreted.

Family systems theorists posit the concept of individuation as the primary focus of the self, in which a person seeks to establish goals for his/her life that are congruent with his/her beliefs. The childless couple manifested individuation in the degree to which they assumed responsibility for their own satisfaction, happiness, and direction in life. Therefore, it was understandable that a couple can experience genuine care for children without a need to possess their own.

One could interpret that the choice to be childless inherently expressed was motivated by a duality that occurs in a struggle and tension that exist between the spouse and his/her interpretation of the tension within his/her own family of origin, and between the values he/she has chosen to guide his/her actions. Furthermore, when this tension impacted the dynamics of their couple system it produced a need for equilibrium, characteristics of which were absent in their own family or families.

Many of the spouses were from families that were divorced. It could be that a spouse may have interpreted a need for greater autonomy (for example) in one parent, which, if present, might have been able to save the family relationship. Thus, an attempt was made during the structuring of his/her own family to ensure the presence of the things that were missing in his/her dysfunctional family of origin. On the other hand, the spouse or couple who originated from a family where the kinship relationship was perceived by him/her as bonded, may have interpreted this relationship as too smothering and emotion-laden, which consequently created anxiety between his or her own values and those of his/her own family of origin. Thus, the need for individuation arose.

One may, therefore, conclude that the choice to be childless was reactive. It was an attempt to reduce anxiety created by a perceived dysfunction in one's family of origin. When this occurred in one spouse, the other compromised to create harmony, a behavior which is natural in humans.

As the developmental process of choice took place and the couple struggled with the disequilibrium within and between themselves, anxiety was not reduced until resolution and acceptance was achieved.

Whatever the psychological explanation may be, however, there are some economic issues to childlessness. It was found that childless couples spend more on luxury items and time-saving services than did families with children. Another

economic and sociological concern is that there will be fewer workers to support an increasing number of retired and elderly people. This situation will force changes in the services that provide care for the aged.

Childlessness will also impact the international balance of power, thus creating political implications. As women become more involved in the competitive careers, they, too, will create an impact. Already, the women's movement and other organizations are requesting fringe benefits for child-care services. One of the major differences between the voluntarily childless couple and a parent couple, however, is probably a larger percentage of discretionary income.

It is quite clear that there is increased awareness of reproductive choices and responsible decision making among contemporary families and knowledge of the issues that impact the lives of families will prove helpful for everyone. This research provides a framework within which the meaning of marriage to the voluntarily childless couple can be explained; however, further research is necessary to validate these findings.

EPILOGUE

MARRIAGE, MOTHERHOOD, AND SOCIETY

Introduction

In the last two decades, motherhood has been a focal issue in the tension to define women's role in society. Only through the kind of social changes brought on by the feminist movement can women obtain and secure the freedom to choose childlessness. However, most childless couples attest to a personal choice rather than affiliation with feminism. The decision to remain childless is often motivated from idiosyncratic factors, and never once, among the women interviewed for this study, was the decision to be childless made to support a social trend.

The issue of childlessness as a social option became a focus at the beginning of the twentieth century. Some people questioned whether motherhood had been romanticized. Some women believed if their lives were to change for the better and if they were to pursue serious careers, they would have to have fewer, and in some cases, no children. Thus, from 1869-1873 Elizabeth Cady Stanton toured the Midwest, encouraging women to have fewer children (Faux, 1984).

Eliza B. Duffey, a feminist writer in the post-Civil war era, quoted in Degler (1980), stated that women did not need to have children unless they wanted them. She assured women that no evil would befall them for not reproducing. She was among the first to recognize that an unwanted child suffered almost as much as its unwilling mother. She wrote:

unwilling motherhood is a terrible, a cruel, and unjust thing. . . . It embitters their lives and turns into a curse, that which was meant to be a blessing.

As a backlash to a reproductive freedom that some women advocates were promoting, many members of the establishment, according to Faux, began what they called the "race-suicide" war. In essence, this was an appeal to those who, in reaction to the voluntary motherhood movement, were afraid what might happen if the "best" women stopped having babies or even if they had fewer babies than their mothers. According to the adherents of the race-suicide theory any woman who did not willingly mother was shirking her duty and was, furthermore, selfish and coldhearted.

Faux documented an anonymous author as saying in that era:

I never had any objections to motherhood; indeed, I had always been extremely fond of children. . . . /children would/ take most, if not all of my time, and destroy my earning power and my social usefulness. My husband would have to more than double his income . . . and put all his energies into money-making, to the exclusion of his social work.

She continued to explain that their decision to remain childless was not selfish; she said:

We are not selfish and pleasure loving; on the contrary, the principal aim of our lives, as well as our standard of human value, is social usefulness. Nor are we lonely and full of heart-longings, as childless people are supposed to be. . . . We believe that to have children would be detrimental to our usefulness as members of society, detract from the happiness of our marriage, and make us lower, not nobler, people.

Harper, quoted in Gorden (1976). in response to race-suicide charges, wrote that many women had begun to think and feel happier and better off without children. She wrote:

Putting aside, however, the danger, the suffering, and all the immediate inconveniences, think what it means for a woman to give the core of her life, the beautiful years between twenty and forty-five, the time when the mental powers are at their best, when enjoyment in the pleasant things of the world is keenest, to the exacting demands of the nursery. . . . It would drive a man insane. . . . There never was a mother of a large family who was willing that her daughters should have a similar experience. . . .

Conscientious women do not base their expectations on the ground that "they can be something better than the mother of children," but rather on their right to claim a part of life for what Elizabeth Cady Stanton so aptly calls the "Solitude of Self." For the public to insist that every marriage shall result in children is an impertinent interference with private rights. . . . There are innumerable ways of benefitting the world besides bringing a child into it.

Although cries of "race-suicide" faded away, women's struggle for reproductive freedom has been ongoing. According to Faux (1984), after American women were granted suffrage in 1920, they more or less ceased their protests, naively believing that they had, in fact, achieved equality through the power of the ballot. During the 1960s, however, the women's movement regained momentum and with the publication of Friedan's book in 1963, *The Feminine Mystique*, a new wave was in motion.

One issue that became important to many women was how to place a value on women's services within the family, especially on their services as mother. Many women were now attempting to fill both the role of motherhood and that of a paid full-time employee, determined to prove that they could handle both. These dual-career couples received much criticism but also inspired many women who were ambivalent to choose childlessness (Hall & Hall, 1976). As the trend towards childlessness increases and women continue to make a contribution, society will be forced to restructure its tolerance about the single option of motherhood and instead accept women who choose childlessness.

According to Faux (1984), "childless women do not consider themselves radical or deviant, nor do studies or conversations with childless women show them to be anything other than well-adjusted, feminine women who adhere to traditional values." Many women have begun to view childlessness as an exciting new option.

Society and Marriage

Society defines the obligations and rights of marriage, much like the control it exercises over most of social life. It often legislates the interaction between male and female; it designates responsibilities for offspring, and even regulates the transmission of status and property from one cohort to another.

From a legal point of view, the American's concept of marriage is that of a contract. However, whereas most contracts can be terminated or modified if the parties involved privately agree to do so, marriage contracts can be broken only by the state. Thus marriage is much a matter of social concern.

Structural changes in societies may have unpredictable consequences. The change to no-fault divorce laws, now present in all states except South Dakota, is usually accompanied by an equal division of community property. The diminishing importance and changing definitions of alimony have contributed to the dramatically impoverished economic circumstances of divorced women and their children.

Childlessness and Social Pressure

Some suppose that the pressure to have children is often a biological instinct rather than a function of the culture. Several of the women interviewed for this study said they experienced no "maternal instinct," however. They believe parenting is a choice and that a couple can gain satisfaction in marriage and be fulfilled in many ways other than having children.

According to Margaret Mead (1975), "Every human society is faced with not one population problem but with two: how to beget and rear too many." Faux (1984) believes that policy makers have typically manipulated birth-control policy to achieve certain sociopolitical goals, such as bolstering declining work forces, reducing unemployment, colonizing other lands, or replenishing a population after a war. During those times the pressure to bear children can be overpowering.

Specific examples of government policies used to control reproduction can be cited. The Soviet Union was the first modern nation to make abortion legal. They made it illegal again when war with Nazi Germany was imminent, and then made it legal again after the war when extra wage earners were needed to boost the war-torn economy (Rick, 1977).

Rick also found that the Japanese government, after making abortion and the pill accessible to women, reversed its stand and made both illegal when the cheap supply of labor was threatened by a declining population. Cheap labor was necessary to ensure Japan's growing technological dominance in the world.

Faux (1984) believes that in the United States a desire to build up the nation's industrial strength played a role in the family oriented nature of benefits offered to World War II veterans. She says low-interest loans on houses were almost entirely responsible for turning a nation of renters with the relatively low birth rates that accompany the need to rear a family in small quarters into a nation of home-owners who were willing, with government encouragement, to fill those new homes with lots of children.

The United States government is not comfortable with women who are choosing childlessness, although demographers have said that no population growth is desirable for the United States until well into the twenty-first century. Although American women have been given official sanction to have fewer or no children and to combine career and motherhood, very little actual social support has been given to them. There is still reluctance on the part of government to support working mothers with day care and other benefits to facilitate childcare. On the other hand, some countries promote lower growth rates publicly. For example, in Rumania the government's official goal is the one-child family and 28% of all women are childless (Mehlan, 1965).

If the trend toward childlessness increases, the long-term implication will be fewer workers to support a growing number of retired and elderly people. Another implication is that declining family size in developed countries and a burgeoning Third World population could mean a shift in the future international balance of power. According to Ben Wattenberg (1986), a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, "by the year 2025, our share of the world population is going to be 7% . . . by 2075, it will be down to 4.5%."

As women become a powerful and permanent part of the work force, they will force policies to change. Already they talk about child care fringe benefits. A bill before Congress would provide for 18 weeks of unpaid leave for parents of newborn and newly-adopted children. Another implication is that the couple who is currently childless is providing a model for future cohorts, many of whom are already ambivalent.

Childlessness will have its impact on couples of mixed ages. There seems to be a shortage of men, especially aged in the late twenties and early thirties, which leaves many young ladies in that age group with the choice of marrying a younger man or an older man. For couples who marry where one spouse is older, a childless life-style is a viable option. Such a couple may want to adopt or provide foster care for a child. Childlessness will impact divorce. The couples who are childless tend to have fewer interruptions in their marital relationship. When divorce occurs, the process tends to be less complicated because there are no visitation or custody issues.

Having explored the issues in the marital relationship of the childless couple, one implication of this study is to provide ambivalent couples with the facts so they can make a more informed decision. Among the couples interviewed, once they agreed on a childless option, sterilization had the following distinct advantages:

(1) They did not have to fear pregnancy during sexual intimacy and this greatly improved their sexual relationship. (2) They often put an end to fear of the side effects of the pill or the discomfort of the diaphragm, and (3) they finalized their decision, permitting them to move on to the next stage in the process of choice. Because sterilization is largely irreversible the choice should be carefully and maturely considered, and the implications well understood.

The following factors motivated a childless life-style: (1) early experiences in childhood, especially where the child suffered emotional pain; (2) fear of the unknown; and (3) conflicts between life goals and demands of parenting.

It seems that parents can be made aware of some of the issues that impact children and prevent some of the pain they often encounter through negative parental models. On the other hand, it is implied that a child-free life-style is an option for women who choose to invest in a career. A couple can find fulfillment, stimulation, and satisfaction in activities of life other than parenting contrary to what Erikson and other developmental theorists suggest.

Some women have attempted to combine both career and motherhood only to have to cope with the superwoman syndrome. The fact that women are so much discriminated against in the work force is perhaps the greater price they pay. It appears that in many instances, even in contemporary America, women have conflicts over work and motherhood.

One could conclude, however, that every adult has a need to give to the next generation. If this need is not fulfilled through parenting, they develop close relationships with children of relatives and friends or with children they meet through their jobs (e.g., teacher-student relationships or nurse-patient relationships). All the couples interviewed for this study expressed a need to make a contribution to society in general, but they do not see this as a substitute for children.

Marriage: Trends and Implications

There are as many different concepts of marriage as there are societies, but the concept that is described in this study is limited to Western society. If there is a universal factor among societies on the concept of marriage, however, it is that this relationship is between *one* man and *one* woman. Though polygamy is a historical value in some cultures, the practice is questioned by contemporary cohorts of these cultures (Fritze, 1969).

Society controls marriage. The minister who performs marriage is given this permission by the state. The state can revoke this license at will.

The Rituals of Marriage

A marriage symbolizes the separation of the nuptial couple from their families of orientation, marks the transition from childhood to adulthood, and represents the incorporation of the newlyweds into a new family. A wedding, on the other hand, is a rite of passage. The couple thus assumes a new social status and takes on the new social rights and obligations.

The honeymoon is a medieval custom. In northern European countries, the couple drank a special "mead" or "wine" made from honey for one month after the wedding ceremony. Even though the ancient origins of the custom have disappeared, about 85% of all marrying couples still go on a honeymoon (Johannis, 1959).

The honeymoon has become a universal practice. Generally, it is considered to involve a period when the wife and husband can begin sexual intimacy away from the routines of everyday life. It is a time to get to know each other better. Rappaport and Rappaport (1964) have devised a typology of three honeymoons. One is described as the lover's nest type; it means that the newly married couple goes to a resort that caters to newlyweds. A second type is called the "Perpetuum mobile," meaning that the couple sets out without plans and simply drives anywhere

that seems appealing. A third type is called the vacation and it is structured like a vacation.

Childlessness: Patriarchal or Egalitarian

Most American marriages fit into one of two styles. They are either patriarchal, which means that the husband is dominant or they are egalitarian, which suggests that the couple shares the responsibilities (Faux, 1984). Faux suggests that marriages that are egalitarian in the early child-free years often shift into a patriarchal mode with the birth of the first child. The reasons for the shift are often psychological and physical:

The wife retires from work or takes of a protracted amount of time to care for the child; far less often does this burden fall to the husband. Without her paycheck and the sense of independence she frequently associates with it, she becomes more dependent upon her husband. To compensate for not bringing home a paycheck, she often takes on more of the household chores at the very time when she is already engaged in full-time child care . . . both partners, often for different reasons, assume that since she is home all day, she can handle all the domestic routine. The husband thinks this is simply a matter of logistics. . . . For the woman, this is a matter of compensation; without the clout her paycheck gave her, she begins to feel she can no longer expect her husband to do half or even any share of the housework. Over time, it becomes apparent that they are no longer equals in their marriage and that the marriage is no longer egalitarian.

According to Bunk (1986), 56% of Americans agree that both sexes have an equal responsibility in caring for small children, and for cleaning the home compared to 83% of the Dutch population. The childless wives say they have a sense of identity and independence and that they work at an egalitarian marriage. For couples whose marriage is of the patriarchal mode the entry of a child often reinforces the continuation of this style. The wife feels she is of greater worth once she makes her husband a father and, in turn, fatherhood reinforces the patriarchal pattern for the husband.

Many women who share their roles between motherhood and a career often experience great frustration and in an effort to feel less guilty attempt to spend more time with their children to the neglect of their husbands (Campbell & Whelpton, 1976). According to the same study, understanding between spouses was lower among women with young children than any other group of women. Problems in understanding one another and feelings of neglect may be compounded by the fact that there is far less time in which to communicate with one another after the baby is born because a couple's time together is cut in half by the birth of a baby.

Marriage as a Legal Entity

There are many legal demands placed on the marriage of two members of society. The law recognizes the social and physical differences between the sexes. Marriages without consent are usually permitted at 21 years of age for males and 18 years of age for females, whereas marriage with consent is usually permitted to males at 18 years and females at 16. Some states even permit marriages between adolescents (people between 14 and 18) provided they have the consent of their parents (Duberman, 1974).

Society also restricts marriages between members of the same family. One prohibition is based on consanguinity, or blood relationship. So, in the United States, marriage is not permitted between parents and children, between siblings, between grandparents and grandchildren, or between aunt and nephew or uncle and niece. Some states forbid marriage between first cousins. Another prohibition is based on affinity, or legal relationship. This means that in some states marriage is not permitted between a step-parent and a stepchild, or between siblings-in-law or parents-in-law. The law also takes mental and physical disabilities into account since people in this condition cannot discharge their social responsibilities.

States issue licenses to marry as a way of obtaining statistics on marriage and as an opportunity to control or refuse licenses to couples considered undesirable, for whatever legal reasons. A blood test is required by many states to ascertain if either of the couple has a venereal disease, thus protecting the life of an unborn child. When all the requirements have been met, then the marriage is considered legal and valid. Society remains interested in the marriage even after the wedding has taken place and continues to regulate the rights and obligations of the couple (Duberman, 1974).

Marriage as an Emotional Relationship

In western societies there are three common characteristics of all marriages according to Fritze (1980): (1) Each partner has freedom of entry, that is, there must be mutual consent; (2) Society has the right to consent or grant permission for a marital relationship to take place; for example, a father is not permitted to marry his daughter; and (3) The relationship having met the first two clauses must be consummated. That is, there has to be a sexual relationship between the man and woman. When all three steps are taken, a couple can have a legal marriage. However, there is a difference between being legally married and being "emotionally married." According to Fritze (1980), marriage is an emotional relationship that exists between a man and a woman. That emotion is love. Many people are legally married but not in "essence" married. It may be a legal contract without mutual love.

Many couples have had extra-marital affairs but have left the legal contract still intact. The social changes that have taken place in the society have had a great impact upon marriage and the family. Until recently it was not unusual for married couples to live, if not with parents or relatives, in very close proximity so there was a natural support system, and couples could draw on the experiences of

their elderly relatives as they faced the new responsibilities of married life. With increased mobility and an increased wave of immigration and travel, this is no longer the practice for the average American married couple.

With the growing number of divorces, the permanence of marriage is often a concern. Attitudes toward children are changing as smaller families become the norm. There appears to be a more open, liberal approach to pre-marital and extra-marital relationships and with an increase in dual career marriages the emphasis has shifted to the marital relationship rather than the almost exclusive focus on their relationship as parents.

In the past there has been a tendency to equate marriage almost exclusively with parenthood. Today we need to look more deeply at the marriage relationship and the skills and qualities needed to be a good wife or husband. (Family and Social Action Publication, 1980)

Some Reasons why People Marry

Most people would say they marry because they are in love with each other. There are actually many and varied reasons why people marry.

1. In the Western culture married people are usually adults. Thus some teenagers get married to establish the arrival of the adult status.
2. Others marry to complement one another.
3. Some people marry to gain self-worth.
4. Some marry to change their status in search of meaning and satisfaction.
5. Some people marry for companionship. They both may share religious values or economic class.
6. Others marry for sensual reasons, for sexual pleasure.
7. Some people marry for landing status. So, an immigrant may marry a citizen in order to gain residency in a country.
8. Some people marry in order to have children.

9. Many people marry because they respect and love each other. They are willing to commit to a relationship which will facilitate the intimate growth and personal development of each other (Duberman, 1974).

Whatever reasons people may have to enter a marriage relationship, marriage can be a spiritual relationship between the couple and God. Much consideration should be given to the implications for all concerned before the relationship is entered or exited.

Pronatalist or Antinatalist

Though many women opt for childlessness, the United States is mostly a pronatalist society. According to Blake (1968), in her article, "Are Babies Consumer Durables?" the views of society can be summed up as follows:

Not only are individuals under strong institutional pressure to marry and start a family, but the decision to do so, even in the face of financial difficulties, receives widespread moral (and, if necessary, tangible) encouragement. . . . In sum, although the demand for consumer durables is pegged to purchasing power, the "demand" for children is not under such monetary control. In fact, by creating public support for the dominance of family "values" over economic rationality, reproductive and social institutions are geared to prevent economic factors from inhibiting reproduction. (p. 43)

Economic pronatalist incentives are even built into the tax structure. Without spending a considerable amount of time and money on investments or owning property, the average childless couple often cannot even itemize their deductions. Faux (1984) stated that the child-free option is more likely to become attractive even to those who might have preferred to have children. If this happens, society will pay the price, because children will be needed to replenish society's natural losses and to satisfy the desires of those who choose to be parents. Faux has suggested that society should erase all bias, and make incentives available to both groups. All people would be encouraged to consider the implications of having children, and be free to choose if that is what they desire but be equally

compensated if that is not what they desire. There are cases where teenage girls have children because they will earn or receive more government aid. With equal distribution of incentives this injustice to both mother and child would cease.

Summary

Women who are ambivalent about having children usually cite their career as the drawback. Almost never, in Western society, has the care of children taken priority over a man's career. With the impact of divorce and custody law, however, there seems to be a growing trend, where men are displaying more interest in the direct care of children, and women, on the other hand, are seeking to explore their interest in a career.

In many cases, a working professional woman is still expected to work at a full-time job, do housework, take care of the kids (if she has any), and be a physical and emotional support to her husband, who on the other hand only needs to carry his job so he can help finance the demands of the family. Often, major decisions with regards to the children are made by the mother. In addition, she is expected to attend parent-teacher's conferences and transport the children to school and extracurricular activities. In an attempt to keep up with such a schedule and preserve her mental health, she either has to quit her job or work part-time until the youngest child is more independent. No wonder that for many marriage and career are considered mutually exclusive (Faux, 1984).

The number of women who have combined marriage, children, and career is fairly small. Rossi (1968) called these women "pioneers." These women were more likely to enter male-dominated professions, and exhibited a high level of commitment to their career. They saw themselves as competitive, energetic, and good at managing their complicated lives (Faux, 1984).

Middle-aged couples that were interviewed for this study said that they experienced no maternal drives and they did not regret their choice. Baum and Cope (1980) found in a survey of childless women that 52% said they experienced no disadvantages from being childless. They thought that children were no guarantee that loneliness would not occur.

Despite the expected benefits that children may represent for the elderly, the actual benefits may be overstated. First, many elderly find themselves without children who are able to help them. It appears that with the trend towards childlessness, the major question that faces any woman about to be married is, "Where is she going to place her priority, on a career or on motherhood?" If she tries to combine both, it appears that society expects motherhood to be her focus. Women who leave their children to be cared for by someone else are not usually acclaimed by society as ideal. On the other hand, no employer is willing, at the expense of production, to make constant accommodation to a female employee who needs to meet the needs of her children.

Many career women who have not necessarily chosen childlessness but who delay having children in order to attain a career are often faced with the issue of possibly permanent childlessness, since they have spent the major part of the childbearing years studying. After the completion of the degree they are then ready to begin their professional career, but they may also want to have children, so the issue is, which should they choose. If they choose motherhood, they will still have to put the career on hold or undergo great stress trying to combine both. If they continue to delay motherhood and attempt to establish a career, the choice of motherhood will be taken away--by biological limitations.

It seems, therefore, that a couple who chooses to have children should be

aware that the longer one waits the greater the tension will be between marriage, motherhood, and a career.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

Interview Questions

Interviewer:

Date:

Time:

Name:

Address:

Phone:

As I mentioned to you on the phone, this is a study of the meaning of marriage to couples who are voluntarily childless. The interview should take no more than 2 hours. All the information you share with me will be handled with greatest confidence. At no time will your name or identity be revealed. Please be free to ask any further questions.

1. How old are you? _____
2. How long have you been married _____
3. What do you do now?
 - a) Work full time
 - b) Work part time
 - c) Student
 - d) Other
4. If employed, what field are you in? _____
5. If student, what field are you in? _____
6. How fulfilled are you with your occupation?
 - a) Very
 - b) Moderately
 - c) Neutral
 - d) Most dissatisfied
 - e) Very dissatisfied
7. What motivated your choice to be childless?
8. Would you like to have children some day? _____
9. Are you biologically unable to have children? _____

10. How do you think your life would be different by having children?
11. What is most appealing about children to you?
- Why?
12. What is least appealing about children to you?
- Why?
13. How would you rate yourself as a parent? a) Excellent
b) Very good
c) Moderate
d) Poor
e) Very poor
14. How would you rate your spouse as a parent? a) Excellent
b) Very good
c) Moderate
d) Poor
e) Very poor
15. What do you think of couples who become parents?
16. Before you were married, did you
- a) want to have children some day?
b) not want to have children at all?
c) not think about it?
17. When did you decide not to have children?
- a) Before you were married
b) After you were married
c) Still ambivalent
18. What are your feelings now about your decision?
- a) Regret decision
b) Happy with the decision
c) Still wonder if you made the right choice.

19. Who was more dominant in the decision to be childless? a) Husband
b) Wife
c) Both equally
20. What birth control method did you use to prevent pregnancy?
a) Foam e) IUD
b) Pill f) Jelly
c) Condom g) Diaphragm
d) Rhythm h) Other _____
21. What impact did your parents have on your decision to be childless?
22. What impact did your friends have on your decision to be childless?
23. Would you say you received any social pressure from your decision to be childless?
24. What is your relationship with your parents? _____
25. How would you rate your mother's parenting skills?
a) Excellent c) Moderately good e) Very poor
b) Good d) Poor
26. What kind of personality type would you say you have?
a) Aggressive d) Introvert
b) Passive e) Joiner
c) Extrovert f) Leader
27. What relationship do you have with your in-laws? _____
28. Is the relationship with your in-laws impacted by your decision to be childless? _____
29. How do you view the cost of raising a child? _____
30. Do you consider the cost of rearing a child to have impacted your decision to be childless? _____
31. What does marriage mean to you? _____
32. How is your marriage different from that of your friends who have children? _____
33. What are your leisure activities? _____

PLEASE NOTE:

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36. How are domestic chores handled? a) Equally shared
b) Husband has own tasks
c) Wife has own tasks
d) This presents a problem.
37. What contribution do you see yourself making to the society?
38. Do you have a religious affiliation? _____
If so, of what denomination are you a member? _____
39. Do you have siblings? _____ What place do you take?
a) Eldest child e) One of 4
b) Last child f) Only boy
c) Middle g) Only girl
d) One of 2 h) Other _____
40. My income ranges from a) \$10,000 - \$20,000
b) \$21,000 - \$25,000
c) \$26,000 - \$30,000
d) Above: \$30,000
e) below: \$10,000
41. What did your father do for a living? _____
42. What did your mother do for a living? _____
43. How would you describe your parents' marriage?
a) Stable d) Tolerable
b) Divorced e) Other _____
c) Separated
44. How do you think children impacted your parents' relationship?
45. What is the highest level of schooling you have had?
a) High school e) Doctorate
b) Associate degree f) Professional degree
c) College g) Other _____
d) M.A.
46. How do you feel around parents with children? _____
47. When people inquire of you whether you are going to start a family, how do you feel? _____
48. When one of your childless couple friends gets pregnant, how do you feel? _____

49. If a friend should ask you to babysit for her, how do you feel?
50. Do you spend your free time:
- | | |
|-----------------|----------------|
| a) alone | d) on the job |
| b) with spouse | e) other _____ |
| c) with friends | |
51. Who makes the final decision on the following?
- | | | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------|-------------|-------------|
| | <u>Husband</u> | <u>Wife</u> | <u>Both</u> |
| a) Food expenditures | | | |
| b) Car | | | |
| c) Where to go for vacation | | | |
| e) Job husband takes | | | |
| f) Whether or not wife should work | | | |
52. What would you say are the advantages of your marriage to you?
53. What are the disadvantages of being childless to you?
54. How satisfied are you with your sex life?
- | |
|---------------------------------|
| a) Very satisfied |
| b) More often than I would like |
| c) Less often than I would like |
| d) Other _____ |
55. How would you rate your marriage compared to most couples you know?
- | |
|----------------------------|
| a) Happier than average |
| b) Average |
| c) Less happy than average |
56. How did getting married change your life?
57. Do you spend more time with:
- | |
|-------------------------------|
| a) Friends with children |
| b) Friends without children |
| c) About equal time with both |

APPENDIX B

Correspondence



ANDREWS
UNIVERSITY

1/6/87

Dear Mr & Mrs _____

This a follow-up to our telephone conversation with regards to the research I am engaged in on the "Meaning of Marriage to the Voluntarily Childless Couple." I would like to confirm our appointment for _____ at _____ p.m.

Please be assured that any information you disclose during the interview will be carefully and confidentially handled.

I appreciate your willingness to participate in this study and look forward to meeting you both. Thanks.

Sincerely,

June Ann Smith
Maplewood A-65
Berrien Springs
Michigan 49103
616-471-6754

JAS/ bf

**ANDREWS**

UNIVERSITY

2/16/87

Dr. James Dobson
P.O. Box 500
Arcadia
CA 91006

Dear Dr. Dobson:

I am a doctoral student at Andrews University who is currently engaged in research on the "Meaning of Marriage to the Voluntarily Childless Couple." I am purposively selecting subjects for this study from referrals.

The characteristics of the population sample are childless couples who are married for at least 7 years, who have not foster-cared or adopted children and who are between the ages of 30 and 65.

Would you be willing to send me a list of names and addresses or telephone numbers of any couple you may know who is willing to participate in this study?

I have enjoyed listening to your radio program and I wish you God's richest blessings as you continue to help families heal.

Sincerely,

June Ann Smith
Maplewood A-65
Berrien Springs
Michigan 49103



March 4, 1987

Mrs. June A. Smith
Maplewood A-65
Berrien Springs, MI 49103

Dear Mrs. Smith:

Thank you for writing to Focus on the Family. We appreciate your interest in our ministry.

In response to your request, we regret that we are unable to provide you with names and addresses of couples that are childless by choice. Our policy is to maintain the confidentiality of our listeners and correspondents.

We are sorry that we could not be of more help to you. Please do not hesitate to contact us if we can help you in the future. May God bless you in a special way.

Sincerely,


Diane Passno
Correspondence Assistant to Dr. Dobson

DP/CHD

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