

VOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS: A REVIEW OF
THE LITERATURE AND A MODEL OF
THE CHILDLESSNESS DECISION

by
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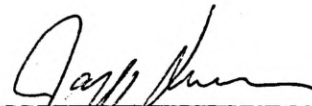
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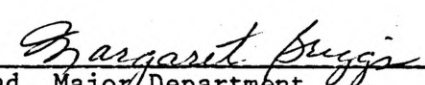
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to review the empirical research literature on voluntary childlessness and to develop a model of the childless decision. The review of the literature revealed many factors related to the decision to remain childless. These include lifestyle and demographic characteristics such as place of residence, education level, occupation, income, age at marriage and length of marriage. Personal characteristics include birth order, family background, values and attitudes, and marital satisfaction. Social factors include social norms, sanctions, and the Women's Movement. The decision-making factors influencing voluntary childlessness are awareness of choice, timing of the decision, the cost of raising children, coping with the decision, social support for childlessness and birth control. In diagraming the decision-making model it was emphasized that most of the factors are interrelated and the strength of any one factor depends upon the couple making the decision not to have children. Several conclusions were made: 1) more longitudinal research on voluntary childlessness is needed; 2) the motivations and characteristics of husbands needs further consideration; 3) studies of childlessness have the potential to further the understanding of the motivations for parenthood; 4) and, the model needs to be tested using path analysis. The use of the model in family planning and family life education is discussed.

CHAPTER 1

ORIENTATION OF THE STUDY

Introduction

In American society, married couples are expected to naturally want and have children, and most couples follow these expectations. Only select groups of people, such as people who never married or priests and nuns are expected to remain childless. In these instances, childlessness is not only expected but also socially sanctioned. However, it is not assumed to be voluntary. People still assume that if they could, most of these people, too, would have children.

A married couple who voluntarily chooses to remain childless violates the strong social norm of pronatalism. Pronatalism refers to attitudes, policies and social forces which encourage reproduction and exalt the roles of parenthood (Goodbody, 1977). Having children is perceived to show maturity and responsibility and makes one "truly male or female" (Veevers, 1973b:307). Hence, choosing nonparenthood means a person is immature, irresponsible and sexually unfulfilled. These negative stereotypes of nonparents are pervasive and function to promote childbearing (Renne, 1976; Ross & Kahan, 1983; Veevers, 1973a, 1979). Children are seen as necessary for a full and happy life and hence, all married couples should rejoice at the prospect of having children. In addition, the desire for children is assumed to be

instinctive, especially for women. Therefore, voluntary childlessness means going against nature and social norms at the same time (Veevers, 1973a, 1975).

With the introduction of more effective and convenient birth control methods, more alternatives to the motherhood role for women, the Women's Movement and concern for overpopulation, Benson (1979) predicted that the voluntary childlessness rate among married women might reach as high as 17%. However, the rates of voluntary and involuntary childlessness have never risen higher than 10-15% of ever-married women (Hastings & Robinson, 1974). Only about 5% of all ever-married women reporting childlessness are considered to be voluntarily childless (Veevers, 1979). Traditional attitudes toward having children still appear to be prevalent in American society with voluntary childlessness still considered to be a deviant lifestyle.

The result of increased employment of married women in recent years and the higher number of women continuing college and postponing marriage and childbearing have led to a voluntary childlessness rate of 27.4% for married women between the ages of 25 and 30 (Houseknecht, 1982). Some of these women are temporarily postponing childbearing and some of these postponements may become permanent. However, evidence suggests that most college women are attending college to prepare themselves for future work with the expectation of combining childrearing and housewife roles with regular employment (Van Meter & Agronow, 1982).

While the rates of voluntary childlessness have not significantly increased, factors affecting the childbearing decision have changed

(Houseknecht, 1982). Many more women are in the labor force today and many are choosing lifetime careers outside the home. The need or lure for full-time employment for married women and the evidence that employed married women receive little or no help with household or childrearing tasks from their husbands are important considerations for contemporary women and may influence their decisions about childbearing (Van Meter & Agronow, 1982). The choice to remain childless allows each spouse to focus on his/her career without the added responsibility and stress of raising children.

Although education and career aspirations and the lack of desire for children are important factors that affect the choice to remain childless, perhaps the most important factor is the woman's knowledge that she has a choice. People are usually more committed and willing to defend a choice that is consciously and rationally made (Potts, 1980). Perhaps the Women's Movement more than any other social factor, has enlightened women to a knowledge of choice in childbearing.

All of the empirical research on voluntary childlessness is correlational and, therefore, causal relationships are difficult to determine. While many of the factors related to the childless decision are known, no comprehensive description or model of the decision-making process has been developed.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to review the empirical research literature on voluntary childlessness and to develop a model of the

decision to remain childless. It was anticipated that this model would clarify the factors involved in the decision-making process and be an aid to educators and counselors who help couples make the childbearing decision. The development of the decision-making model involved the following steps:

- 1) A review of the literature on the lifestyle, demographic, and personal characteristics of the voluntarily childless couple.
- 2) A review of the literature on the social pressures that affect the decision to be voluntarily childless.
- 3) A review of the literature on the decision-making dynamics for the voluntarily childless couple.
- 4) The development of a model of the decision to remain voluntarily childless.

Limitations

1) Few empirical studies have been conducted on the motivations of couples who are voluntarily childless; hence all of the motivating factors may not be known.

2) Couples who are voluntarily childless at any given time may change their minds later and have children. Nevertheless, their motivations for not having children at a particular time in their marriage are still relevant to this study.

Definitions of Terms

1) **Voluntary childlessness:** Refers to couples who have decided not to have children but who are physically able to have children.

2) **Involuntary childlessness:** Refers to those couples who want children but cannot have them because of physical or psychological reasons.

3) **Pronatalism:** Refers to attitudes, policies or social forces which encourage reproduction and exalt the roles of parenthood (Goodbody, 1977).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter contains a review of the literature from 1968 to the present on voluntary childlessness. This review includes studies of the lifestyle, demographic and personal characteristics of the voluntarily childless couple, social pressures that affect the decision to be voluntarily childless, and decision-making dynamics.

Lifestyle and Demographic Characteristics of the Voluntarily Childless

Place of residence. Several studies show that the incidence of voluntary childlessness is higher in urban areas than in rural areas (Gustavus & Henley, 1971; Poston, 1976; Veevers, 1973b, 1979). One might expect that the availability of better medical care and a higher standard of living in urban areas compared to rural areas would tend to minimize involuntary childlessness in urban areas. Therefore, childlessness in urban areas is more likely to be voluntary. Urban communities may be more conducive to voluntary childlessness than rural areas because the social norms in urban areas tend to be less traditional and urban areas offer women more opportunities to attend college and work full-time. There is no clear reason to expect systematic differences in fertility between urban and rural populations, hence the relationship between voluntary childlessness and place of residence is not fully understood.

Education and career influences. Voluntary childlessness appears to be related to the wife's education level. In general, the more highly educated a woman is, the more likely she is to be voluntarily childless (Barnett & MacDonald, 1976; Bram, 1984; Feldman, 1981; Gustavus & Henley, 1971; Macklin, 1980; Rao, 1974; Veevers, 1973b). Many women who pursue an advanced education delay or postpone marriage and childbearing until their education is complete. The postponement of childbearing may continue after college if the occupation of the husband and/or wife becomes more important and satisfying than the prospects of having children (Gustavus & Henley, 1971; Hoffman & Manis, 1979; Houseknecht, 1982; Rao, 1974; Veevers, 1973b, 1979). Some wives may also consider the problems involved in juggling careers and childrearing simultaneously and decide they cannot cope with both stressors (Feldman, 1981; Martin & Martin, 1984; Myers-Walls, 1984; Veevers, 1979).

A woman who is college educated is not only more likely to be working but also probably has a higher paying job than a less educated woman. Wives who are employed have substantially higher rates of childlessness than housewives (Barnett & MacDonald, 1976; Bram, 1984; Macklin, 1980; Pohlman, 1970; Veevers, 1979). Wives with professional careers have the highest rates of voluntary childlessness (Bram, 1984; Gustavus & Henley, 1971; Poston, 1976; Rao, 1974; Veevers, 1979). For these high-achieving women committed to a full-time career, voluntary childlessness is a career-facilitating decision (Movius, 1976). Seeking an education and a career may be either a cause or an effect of voluntary childlessness, but the exposure to different lifestyles

and values gained through an education and career may expose one to the voluntarily childless lifestyle, and therefore, influence a woman to choose childlessness.

Feldman (1981) found no differences between the education and occupation levels of childless husbands and fathers. This lack of a difference for husbands may be partially due to husbands' traditional belief that children are "women's work" and "she has the children". Hence, they may be more willing to let her make the decision about childbearing (Guttentag & Secord, 1983).

Age at marriage and length of marriage. A factor related to higher education, career attainment and childlessness is age at first marriage. The older a person is at first marriage, the more likely he/she is to be highly educated, career-oriented, and voluntarily childless (Macklin, 1980; Veevers, 1979). Age at marriage influences the childlessness decision in that the older a woman is when she marries, the more likely it is that she has established a childless lifestyle and the fewer the number of fertile years she has left before menopause.

Length of marriage is also associated with childlessness (Rao, 1974). Couples who are childless after five years of marriage are likely to remain childless. A woman who has not had children by age 30 or after ten years of marriage is most likely to remain childless for life (Gustavus & Henley, 1971; Poston, 1976; Rao, 1974; Veevers, 1979). For example, among childless wives age 30-34, there is a 93.3% chance that they will never have a child (Poston, 1976).

While age at first marriage and length of marriage are associated with voluntary childlessness, whether they precede or are a result of voluntary childlessness is not known. It seems obvious that a woman who marries late has fewer fertile years of marriage; it is not obvious whether she is childless because she married late, or married late because she did not want children.

Personal Characteristics of the Voluntarily Childless

Family background. Family background affects voluntary childlessness through birth order, childhood memories and childhood experiences. Barnett and MacDonald (1976) conducted a survey of the membership of the National Organization for Non-Parents (now defunct), to examine the personal characteristics of voluntarily childless couples. They found that 53% of the members were only children or first-born children. Ory's (1978) study of 27 voluntarily childless couples and 54 couples who were parents, found that 37% of the voluntarily childless individuals were only-children, and 25% were first-born children.

First-born individuals are likely to have experienced the duties of childcare as a child while only-born individuals are likely to have had little childcare experience. Ory (1978) reported that 37% of the individuals with children in her sample had childcare experience in childhood, whereas 76% of the voluntarily childless couples reported childhood childcare responsibilities. It may be that the voluntarily childless individuals who had childcare experience as children know what to expect from children and are aware of the responsibility and

work involved. This knowledge and experience may inhibit them from assuming childcare responsibilities as adults (Ory, 1978; Veevers, 1979). In contrast, the majority of the parenting couples reported no childhood childcare experience. This lack of knowledge or experience with children does not seem to inhibit them from parenting.

Kaltreider and Margolis (1977) found that voluntarily childless women have an early sense of identity as an "achieving daughter" rather than as a "little mother" in their family of origin. The 33 voluntarily childless women in their sample perceived childcare experiences as unpleasant and involving a loss of freedom. They also expressed a fear of becoming a bad mother. Potts' (1980) childless respondents feared they would recreate an unsatisfactory family life like their family of origin. The childless women also reported not wanting to subordinate their own needs to meet the needs of their children. This attitude was related to their perception that their mothers had given up their own needs to meet the needs of their children and then later resented the children.

Negative family of origin experiences and memories precede an awareness of childlessness as a life choice. However, many people will have experiences similar to those of the voluntarily childless and still have children. Therefore, these family background factors most likely interact with other variables to influence childlessness.

Values and Attitudes. Voluntarily childless couples appear to have different values and attitudes than childbearing couples. Several studies show that compared to childbearing couples, voluntarily childless couples more frequently report no religious

affiliation (Barnett & MacDonald, 1976; Benson, 1979; Feldman, 1981; Gustavus & Henley, 1971; Macklin, 1980; Rao, 1974; Renne, 1976). This lack of religious affiliation may help shield these couples from the pronatalist pressures which are inherent in most religions.

Compared to childbearing individuals, the voluntarily childless seem more likely to value individuality, autonomy, freedom from responsibilities, travel, personal goal attainment, intimacy, personal growth, egalitarian sex roles, a flexible nonconforming lifestyle, career attainment and companionship (Bram, 1984; Callan, 1983; Hoffman & Manis, 1979; Houseknecht, 1977, 1982; Macklin, 1980; Movius, 1976).

Many voluntarily childless women have negative attitudes toward pregnancy, childbirth and childrearing (Gustavus & Henley, 1971). Kaltreider and Margolis (1977) found that voluntarily childless women view childrearing as very unpleasant. Some voluntarily childless couples are motivated not to have children because of perceived disadvantages of parenthood such as little spare time, little spare money, little time for extra activities and interference by children in the marital relationship (Blake, 1979; Goodbody, 1977; Hoffman & Manis, 1979; Pohlman, 1970).

Blake (1979) found that men are more likely than women to think of the disadvantages of childlessness. Men are more likely than women to agree with these statements: "A women is likely to feel unfulfilled unless she becomes a mother", and "Childless couples are more likely to lead empty lives than couples with children".

For the woman who values a full-time career more than having children, or simply does not want children, the decision to remain

childless may be a liberating and growth-promoting choice (Goodbody, 1977). For non-college educated women, the value of children is to give life more meaning and more status (Hoffman & Manis, 1979). Bearing children is very important to their self-esteem. The value of having children may also be heightened by a lack of perceived alternatives to the motherhood role (e.g., college).

Sex-role attitudes and voluntary childlessness have been extensively studied. Compared to parents, the childless are more likely to be egalitarian in decision making processes and in doing housework (Bram, 1984), less conventional, more androgynous, and to place a higher value on masculine traits such as independence (Macklin, 1980). Compared to fathers, childless men report that they do more housework than fathers (Feldman, 1981; Holahan, 1983; Houseknecht, 1982). These differences may be partially due to the tendency for parenthood to foster more traditional sex-role attitudes in husbands and wives because of the division of labor inherent in the raising of children or due to the differences in education between the groups (Feldman, 1981).

Many values and attitudes are learned in the family of origin. These values and attitudes are modified through life experiences, such as obtaining an education or working. The values associated with voluntary childlessness are the result of childhood and adult experiences and can affect whether one chooses to work, seek an advanced education, or be less traditional in one's marital roles. The relationship between these values and attitudes and the decision to remain childless is still not fully understood.

Marital satisfaction. The marital satisfaction of parents and nonparents has been the focus of several studies. Research consistently shows that marriages without children are more satisfactory than those marriages with children (Campbell, 1975; Houseknecht, 1979; Renne, 1976; Veevers, 1973b). It is not known how many childless couples view childlessness as one way of maintaining marital satisfaction, or if their marriage becomes more satisfactory after the decision to remain childless is made. As with many of the above mentioned factors, voluntary childlessness may precede or be the result of a satisfactory marriage. Marital satisfaction may also be influenced by career satisfaction and may interact with the decision to be voluntarily childless.

Social Pressures Affecting Voluntary Childlessness

Factors that discourage voluntary childlessness. There are social norms in American society which influence couples to have children, and therefore discourage voluntary childlessness. One states that married people should have children because they have a moral responsibility to procreate. Another expectation is that normal people should want children because of biological instincts (Campbell, 1975; Goodbody, 1977; Houseknecht, 1977; Kaltreider & Margolis, 1977; Ory, 1978; Poston, 1976; Ross & Kahan, 1983; Veevers, 1973b, 1975, 1979). Thus, the desire to have children is assumed to be universal, especially for women, and parenthood roles are assumed to be intrinsically rewarding. The fact that the percentage of couples who are childless remains low despite the availability of better

contraception and more choices for women reflects in part the strength and endurance of these pronatalist norms (Bram, 1984; Cook, West & Hamner, 1982; Elman & Gilbert, 1984; Hoffman & Manis, 1979; Holahan, 1983; Houseknecht, 1982; Movius, 1976; Rossi, 1968; Veevers, 1973a, 1973b, 1975, 1979).

The continued low rate of childlessness in America is also a result of negative stereotypes and social sanctions against those who choose not to have children. The stereotype of the childless couple held by the public depicts these people in negative terms (Blake, 1979; Calhoun & Selby, 1980; Callan, 1985; Houseknecht, 1977; Veevers, 1979). The two most prevalent negative stereotypes of childless couples are that; 1) a childless couple is physically impaired, e.g. sterile, or 2) they are psychologically impaired if they choose not to fulfill their innate biological drives and moral obligation to society to reproduce (Veevers, 1975). Perhaps some people have children simply to avoid these negative stereotypes.

Barnett and MacDonald (1976) investigated the sources of pronatalist pressure on 420 members of the National Organization for Non-Parents. These individuals were under age 35 and 78% of them were married and intended to remain childless. Sixty-three percent of the total sample reported social pressure to have children with more females reporting feeling pressure than males. No single source of pronatalist pressure was found to be more influential than the others. However, the media, friends, and coworkers were consistently selected by a substantial portion of the respondents as major sources of pressure to have children (Barnett & MacDonald, 1976).

Fifty-two percent of Barnett and MacDonald's (1976) sample reported that the pronatalist argument most often heard was, "It is selfish not to have children". Forty-seven percent of the sample reported receiving advice that, "You will be unhappy when you get older, especially after you retire, if you do not have children". This attitude is still pervasive even though Turnstall (1966) and Veevers (1973a) found that the childless elderly are no lonelier than the elderly with children. Two other prevalent pronatalist arguments are: "You are intelligent and responsible and can raise the kind of person your country needs" and, "You will never be a complete man or woman until you become a parent".

Voluntarily childless couples expect negative sanctions for their choice. Ory (1978) found that 83% of the voluntarily childless couples she sampled expected an unfavorable reaction to their choice. Ninety-four percent of the voluntarily childless felt the dominant attitude toward voluntary childlessness is negative. Such overt social disapproval can cause distress for a couple and may even lead to a marital breakup; or, the pressure may lead the couple to have children just to regain social approval (Veevers, 1973b).

Hoffman and Manis (1979) found that parents and nonparents report similar reasons for having children. However, male nonparents do not relate adult status and social identity to having children. Fathers attribute adult status to parenting to a lesser degree than mothers and childless women. It seems that a "stamp of approval" is given to those couples who choose to follow the social norm to have children and that women are more strongly influenced by these social norms than

men. This is largely a result of the fact that only women can bear children and the strong cultural pressure on them to assume the motherhood role (Rossi, 1968).

The expectation that all married people have children and that something is wrong with those who do not may also be found in one's extended family. This expectation is manifested in the attitudes of parents and in-laws when they anxiously ask when grandchildren will be born (Barnett & MacDonald, 1976).

In summary, the social meanings of parenthood and childlessness seem to center on six themes: morality, responsibility, naturalness, the purpose of sex, marriage, and mental health (Veevers, 1973a). Procreation is often seen as a religious, moral and social obligation. Parenthood is viewed as the natural, intended and accepted result of sexual behavior and a major purpose of marriage. Parenthood is assumed to contribute to one's personality development. The decision to remain voluntarily childless, then, invokes anxiety in others and results in negative social sanctions.

Government policies and statistics also encourage childbearing. One encouragement is the income tax deduction for children. Another is the present welfare system which pays the rent, medical bills, energy bills, and food bills for women with children but does not provide similar benefits to individuals or couples with no children. Another subtle force for having children is statistics about births and family size. An example is: "Since the 1970's the birth rate has remained static at 1.7 births per woman" (Why do baby-boom women stay childless?, 1985) or "the average American family has 2.3 children."

An awareness of what these statistics mean may help women realize that the term "average" does not mean that every woman has children nor is a woman abnormal if she does not give birth to at least 2.3 children.

In summary, there seem to be several social factors that discourage voluntary childlessness. These factors are pervasive in all aspects of American society and function to keep voluntary childlessness rates low. Though these norms are pervasive, voluntarily childless couples are able to maintain their nontraditional lifestyle. Due to the pervasive nature of the pronatalist norms and pressure to have children in American society, these social factors most likely affect all other variables in the decision to remain voluntarily childless.

Factors that encourage voluntary childlessness. There are factors that operate counter to the pronatalist attitudes found in American society and serve to promote less traditional lifestyles. A major social factor which encourages voluntary childlessness is the Women's Movement. The Women's Movement promotes education and occupational attainment for women, egalitarian sex roles, individualism, awareness of issues and the right to choose among alternatives. In general, the Women's Movement promotes a combination of mother, wife, and professional roles. The emphasis on choice and awareness of alternatives makes the Women's Movement an important positive factor in a woman's choice to remain childless (Barnett & MacDonald, 1976; Houseknecht, 1977). Concurrent with the Women's Movement has been the improvement of birth control methods which allow

a woman more choice in childbearing without a loss of freedom to fulfill her sexual needs.

Decision Dynamics of the Voluntarily Childless

In the face of pervasive pressure to conform to pronatalist ideals, it seems likely that there would be almost no voluntarily childless couples in American society. However, voluntarily childless couples do exist in our society and manage to maintain their alternative lifestyle with satisfaction (Campbell, 1975; Feldman, 1981; Houseknecht, 1979; Renne, 1976; Veevers, 1973b). Unfortunately, the process involved in the decision to remain childless has received little attention in the research literature (Veevers, 1973b, 1974, 1979).

Awareness of choice. Perhaps most basic in the decision to remain childless is an awareness that childbearing is a choice, not an inevitability (Movius, 1976; Potts, 1980; Ross & Kahan, 1983; Veevers, 1975). Today children are no longer biologically inevitable or economically necessary and so perceived choice may now have a greater influence on whether or not a couple has children.

Although the choice to remain childless affects both spouses, the impact on the woman is more significant. Since the birth of a child does not affect the husband's life as much as his wife's life, the decision to remain childless may be less important to him (Hoffman & Manis, 1979), or he may prefer that his wife choose whether or not to have children (Van Meter & Agronow, 1982). Thus, for most couples, the wife's preference usually takes precedence over her husband's

desires (Houseknecht, 1982). Nevertheless, most wives do not make the decision alone. Women usually consider the impact of their childbearing decision on others as well as on themselves (Holahan, 1983; Myers-Walls, 1984; Potts, 1980). Unfortunately, there is no way to try-out being a parent and no way to reverse the decision once a child is born (Feldman, 1981; Potts, 1980; Rossi, 1968; Veevers, 1974, 1979).

A couple cannot make the choice to remain childless if they are not aware that this choice exists. In a pronatalist society, the awareness of choice in childbearing is limited. Urban residence, advanced education and pursuit of a career interact to make a person more aware of alternative lifestyles, including voluntary childlessness. Of course, a couple may also seek an advanced education and a career after they have chosen to remain childless as a result of personal values and attitudes and past family of origin experiences. Again, all these factors seem to interact together in the decision to remain voluntarily childless.

Timing of the decision. Once an individual recognizes that childbearing is a choice, the timing of the decision becomes important (Benson, 1979; Callan, 1983; Holahan, 1983; Veevers, 1979). Those individuals who make the decision about childbearing at a young age, independent of a spouse and prior to marriage are called "early articulators", while those couples and individuals who decide through postponements are called "postponers" (Macklin, 1980; Veevers, 1979). Barnett and MacDonald (1976) found that men and women usually make the

decision to remain childless between the ages of 10 and 32. The average age for the decision is 22.5 years.

Benson (1979), Macklin (1980), and Veevers (1979) found that as many as one-third of childless couples make the decision not to have children prior to marriage. Not having children is an integral part of these couples' mate selection process.

Callan (1983) studied 45 never-married women who wanted to remain childless and 45 never-married women who wanted to have children. All women were under 35 years of age and expected to marry in the future. In this sample, 53% of the voluntarily childless single women decided not to have children in high school, 31% decided in childhood and 16% decided recently. In Ory's (1978) study, 9% of the voluntarily childless couples made the decision prior to engagement, 33% decided at engagement, 50% decided through postponements, 6% made no active decision, and 2% became pregnant accidentally. Ninety-two percent of the voluntarily childless couples reported they made an active childbearing choice while only 62.9% of the 54 couples with children said they made an active choice.

Childless couples who do not decide early in their relationship not to have children are usually pursuing activities such as continued education or career pursuits that promote the postponement of childbearing (Goodbody, 1977; Holahan, 1983; Houseknecht, 1982; Veevers, 1979). In some instances, young wives do not decide to be childless but rather postpone childbearing until it becomes permanent (Goodbody, 1977; Veevers, 1979).

Cost of raising children. The cost of raising children is an important factor for some couples who choose not to have children (Cook et al., 1982; Kimball & McCabe, 1981; Movius, 1976; Pohlman, 1970). Cook et al. (1982) found that 50% of a sample of single college women chose family economic factors as a major reason not to have children.

The above average income of voluntarily childless couples seems to undermine their concern with the cost of raising children. Childless couples may greatly exaggerate the cost of raising children in their attempt to have a more socially acceptable reason for not having children (Anonymous, 1979; Houseknecht, 1982; Macklin, 1980). The cost of raising children may also include emotional costs, such as interference in the marital relationship by children or the postponement or neglect of one's own needs to provide for a child's need (Potts, 1980).

The cost factor is interrelated with social factors, value and attitude factors and lifestyle factors. The cost of raising children may be directly causal in the decision to remain childless or may simply be a socially acceptable explanation childless couples use for not having children.

Decision-making strategies. The few studies on decision-making postulate several strategies for making the childless decision. Goodbody (1977) found that the decision to remain childless seemed to follow one of two patterns. The first pattern involved simply studying parenthood and nonparenthood and then deciding nonparenthood would be more comfortable. The second pattern consisted of a process

that evolved gradually as a result of a series of postponements of childbearing.

Veevers (1979) suggests four stages of postponement in the decision to be childless beginning with putting-off childbearing until some objective was achieved, like finishing school. In the second stage the couple becomes increasingly vague about when they want to have a child. In the third stage the couple begins to debate the pros and cons of parenthood. The final stage is the decision to never become parents.

Potts (1980) found that childless couples in the process of deciding whether or not to have children are aware of the irrevocable nature of the decision and express fear at making a wrong choice. These couples talked to other couples with children about the changes made in the family to accommodate children and attempted to find out if these changes were viewed as worth it. Childless couples considered their immediate and longterm life goals and how these would be affected by the addition of a child.

Holahan (1983) studied the relationship between women's perceptions of the manner in which the decision concerning childbearing was made and present life satisfaction. Life satisfaction was hypothesized to be related to a childbearing decision process involving an exhaustive information search about the effects of children on marriage and the individual. However, this relationship was not found. Nonmothers who expressed high life satisfaction utilized an active information search the least. High satisfaction mothers utilized the active information search more than

low satisfaction mothers. Childless women who were happiest with their decision not to have children experienced little conflict about the decision or resolved the conflict without doing an information search.

Many voluntarily childless women reach the decision not to have children through a process of successive postponements until she finds she has established a childfree lifestyle. Such women may avoid the psychological conflict in making the decision by delaying consideration of the issues related to childbearing until children are no longer desired or possible to have. This avoidance of psychological conflict may explain the lack of information search by such women (Holahan, 1983).

Ory (1978) offered two explanations for the childbearing decision. The normative model states that childbearing decisions are the product of social norms and sanctions. According to this model couples have children because of social norms and sanctions which promote childbearing. The structural model states that childbearing decisions are the result of traditional sociodemographic factors or psychosocial attitudes from one's family of origin which may operate counter to prevailing norms and may produce deviance. For instance, an individual who grows up in a family in which the children are neglected may adopt an attitude that people should not have children unless they can care for them in a healthy way. This attitude may be so conservative so as to discourage the person from having children even though such a decision goes against prevailing social norms.

Decision-making strategies are not directly related to the decision to remain childless itself, but are a reflection of the values, attitudes and personalities of the couple making the childbearing decision and may affect the satisfaction a couple feels about their decision not to have children. No one pattern seems more prevalent or well-studied than any other, so decision-making strategies are not a factor affecting the decision to remain childless.

Coping strategies. Once the decision to remain childless is made, it becomes necessary for a couple to defend their position in order to maintain their lifestyle comfortably in a pronatalist society (Veevers, 1975). Childless couples often reason that parenthood is a privilege and only the best qualified people should do it (Veevers, 1975). Wanting time alone or with one's spouse, or wanting the freedom to travel may not be perceived as mature or responsible reasons not to have children and may be described as selfish by those with pronatalist attitudes. If the couple or individual does not actively defend his/her position, he/she may develop a method of ignoring or undermining criticism (Veevers, 1975).

Other methods of coping with pronatalist attitudes include the alteration of one's philosophy of life and perceptions of others, or the focusing of attention on other activities and interests to the extent that children are seen as an impediment (Barnett & MacDonald, 1976; Macklin, 1980). For example, Veevers (1975) found that voluntarily childless wives are able to adequately resolve the real or perceived differences between their own world views and those of other

women so as not to feel rejected. These childless women minimize the differences between themselves and other women and deny the stereotypes of childless couples. Alternatively, they may accept the differences and emphasize them. In this case, they interpret the differences as desirable, and view motherhood as negative, pregnancy as dangerous, children as burdensome, and parenthood as a trap. Voluntarily childless women often interpret rejection by mothers as an expression of envy, and so are able to maintain their self-esteem and continue their chosen lifestyle. In addition, childless women may give selective attention to perceptions which are congruent with their own beliefs and tend to interact more with those who share their beliefs (Veevers, 1975).

As with decision-making strategies, coping strategies are not directly related to the decision to remain childless. However, the effectiveness of a coping strategy may affect a couple's life and marital satisfaction by virtue of relieving tension or conflict once a couple has made a childbearing decision. However, this relationship has not been fully investigated.

Social support for voluntary childlessness. It is important for childless women to have a reference group and/or support group to help them cope with negative social sanctions that are a result of choosing to be voluntarily childless (Houseknecht, 1982). For the voluntarily childless, a reference group may be difficult to find in a pronatalist society. Houseknecht (1977) found 60% of 27 single, undergraduate women wishing to remain childless had some degree of reference group support for their childless decision. Although the voluntarily

childless may be sufficiently autonomous to remain relatively unaffected by external pressures, social support still appears to be a key factor in being able to maintain the decision to remain childless (Houseknecht, 1977).

An important source of support for a voluntarily childless woman is her husband. A childless wife's self-esteem, coping effectiveness and resistance to social pressure are all related to having a husband who concurs with his wife's decision to remain childless (Callan, 1983; Elman & Gilbert, 1984; Veevers, 1975, 1979).

Social support for the childless lifestyle may function to make one aware of voluntary childlessness as a lifestyle choice. Or support may be influential in helping a couple maintain their decision to be childless. Once a couple has chosen not to have children their support group may shrink to include more people who support voluntary childlessness, thereby reducing negative input regarding childlessness. The exact relationship between social support and voluntary childlessness is not well understood.

Birth control. For a couple to maintain childlessness over a lifetime requires competent and consistent use of contraception. However, there is a lack of research on the types of contraception used by voluntarily childless couples. For a woman who wishes to remain childless, an unexpected pregnancy is a big problem. While adoption of the child would be acceptable for her if she were unmarried, it is less acceptable for her as a married woman. Hence, adoption is not usually a viable choice for the pregnant woman who wants to remain childless. Her only choice may be abortion, a choice

that receives even more negative social sanctions than voluntary childlessness and is often harder to explain to others (Spake, 1985).

The voluntarily childless couple may choose permanent sterilization to prevent unwanted pregnancies. However, many doctors will not perform sterilization surgery on a husband or wife who has no children (Gustavus & Henley, 1971). This is mainly due to the assumption on the part of the medical profession that the individual may change his/her mind later (Potts, 1980).

Summary

An examination of the current research literature on voluntary childlessness reveals a variety of factors which influence couples to remain childless. These include lifestyle and demographic characteristics such as place of residence, education level, occupation, income, age at marriage, and length of marriage. Personal characteristics include birth order, family background, values and attitudes, and marital satisfaction. Social pressures that discourage voluntary childlessness include pronatalist norms, negative stereotypes and social sanctions. Factors that encourage voluntary childlessness, include the Women's Movement and the improvement in birth control methods. Finally, there are decision-making factors that influence the decision to be voluntarily childless. These include an awareness of a childbearing choice, the timing of the childbearing decision, coping strategies, presence of social support and the use of birth control methods to maintain the childlessness decision.

CHAPTER III

THE DECISION-MAKING MODEL

The purpose of this chapter is to present a model of the decision-making process for voluntary childlessness. Figure 1 shows the decision-making model. This is a deductive model based on variables identified in the review of the literature.

The Model

The model presented in Figure 1 focuses on the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of the decision to remain voluntarily childless. Awareness of choice in the childbearing decision is the most important element in the model. Without the awareness that childbearing is a choice, no couple would choose not to have children.

Awareness of choice is directly affected by three variables: advanced education, urban residence, and career pursuit (see Figure 1). Advanced education directly and positively influences awareness of choice by exposing a person to different lifestyles and values thereby enhancing one's awareness of alternatives to childbearing. One who highly values educational attainment may postpone childbearing and then through learning about other lifestyles, may choose to remain childless (Gustavus & Henley, 1971; Houseknecht, 1982; Rao, 1974; Veevers, 1973b).

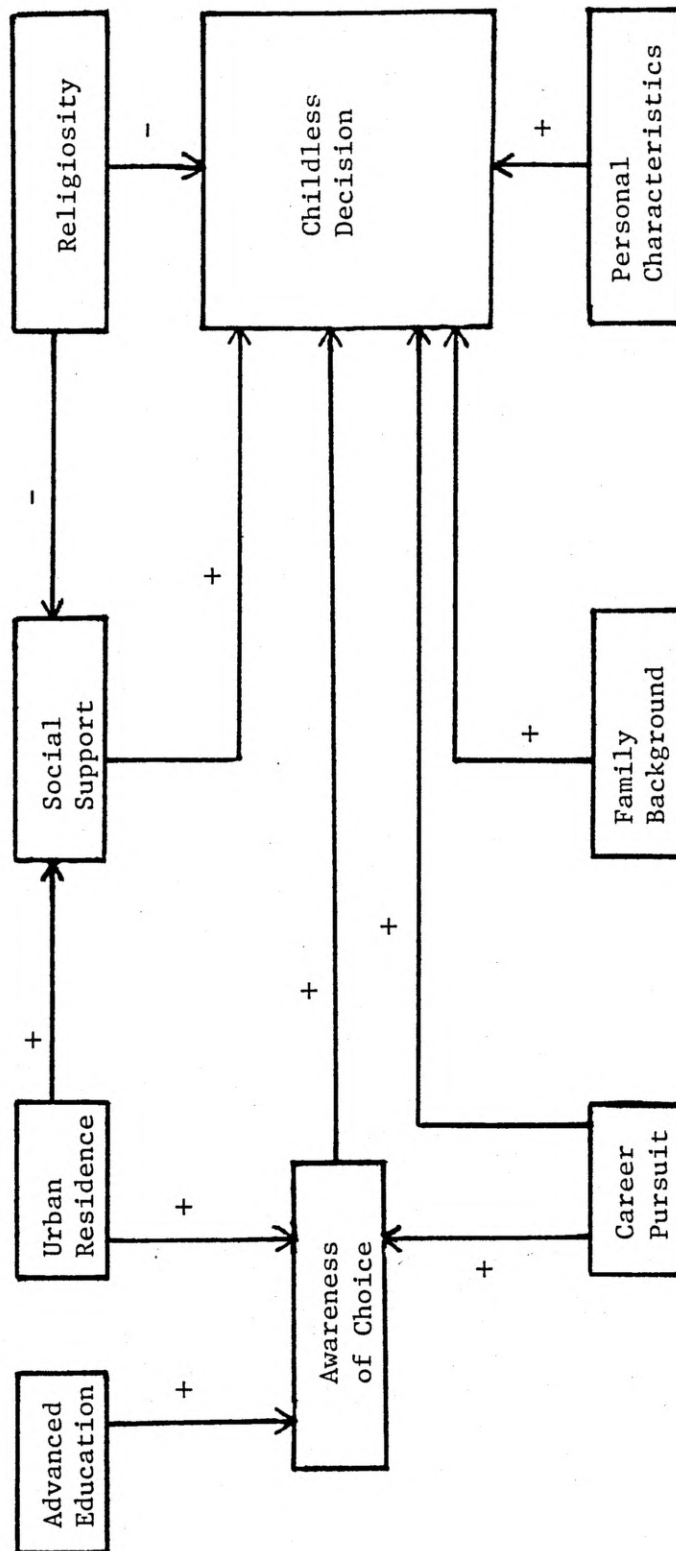


Figure 1. A model of the voluntarily childless decision.

Career pursuit is positively related to awareness of choice in the childbearing decision. In voluntarily childless couples, both spouses tend to work. A woman who is working is more likely to come into contact with other working women who have made the choice to be voluntarily childless, thereby heightening a woman's awareness of the childless lifestyle.

Career pursuit is also positively related to the decision to remain childless. Most individuals who decide to remain childless have a spouse who also works full-time. Deciding to remain childless is a career-facilitating decision for these individuals (Houseknecht, 1982), since it allows each spouse to focus more on his/her career.

The relationship between urban residence and awareness of choice in the childbearing decision is positive in that those who are voluntarily childless tend to live in urban areas. Urban areas offer more opportunities for couples to be exposed to and become familiar with nontraditional lifestyles (Bram, 1984). There are also more alternative roles available to women in urban areas than in rural areas. For instance, a woman has more educational and career opportunities available in an urban area than in a rural area. The urban couple is more likely to come into contact with other voluntarily childless couples and gain firsthand knowledge of the voluntarily childless lifestyle (Gustavus & Henley, 1971; Poston, 1976; Veevers, 1979).

Urban residence is also positively related to social support. Urban areas tend to be less traditional and hence, the opportunity to

find social support for nontraditional lifestyles is more likely in an urban area than in a rural area (Houseknecht, 1977, 1982).

Social support is positively related to the decision to be voluntarily childless. Couples who live and work in urban areas have probably come into contact with voluntarily childless couples and are aware of the limited support for this lifestyle in American society. The more social support a couple is able to obtain for their lifestyle, the more likely they are to be able to maintain the decision to remain childless (Barnett & MacDonald, 1976; Veevers, 1975).

Traditional, pronatalist religious beliefs have a negative influence on social support for voluntary childlessness. Voluntarily childless couples generally lack religious affiliation and therefore lose the support group that may be available in a religious group. While losing a built-in support group, the voluntarily childless also limit the amount of pronatalist pressure they are exposed to by not being affiliated with a religious group.

Traditional religious values are also negatively related to the voluntarily childless decision. Traditional religions are pronatalist and profamily. Therefore, the more closely one adheres to traditional religious beliefs the more likely one is to have children. However, the voluntarily childless generally report no religious affiliation and value a nontraditional lifestyle more than those with children (Barnett & MacDonald, 1976; Benson, 1979; Feldman, 1981; Macklin, 1980; Renne, 1976).

Certain family background characteristics such as bad childhood memories, birth order and fears of recreating a family like the family of origin are positively related to the decision to be voluntarily childless. The nature of the family of origin may discourage a person from becoming a parent if that environment was unhealthy and created negative memories of parent-child interactions (Ory, 1978). Birth order is related to the decision to be childless in that first-born and only-born children are more likely not to have children (Barnett & MacDonald, 1976; Ory, 1978). Some women express a fear of becoming a bad mother as one reason not to have children (Kaltreider & Margolis, 1977).

The following personal characteristics have a positive influence on the childless decision: autonomy, freedom from responsibility, need to achieve, need for adult companionship, concern for personal growth, career directedness, and nonconformity. Voluntarily childless women also tend to have negative attitudes towards pregnancy, childbirth and childrearing (Gustavus & Henley, 1971; Kaltreider & Margolis, 1977). High marital satisfaction and spousal consensus on the decision to remain childless are also positively related to the childless decision.

The final variable influencing the decision to remain childless is timing. All of the above variables may influence the timing of the decision; likewise, the timing of the decision may affect several of these variables. For example, a woman who decides not to have children early in life (e.g., high school) may move to an urban area, begin college, and eventually seek a career. These factors will

likely encourage her to develop egalitarian marital role expectations, and she may marry late. On the other hand, a woman may marry early, and postpone childbearing until after her education is completed and her career is begun. This wife may be married a long time and postpone having children, thereby establishing a childless lifestyle several years prior to the actual decision to remain permanently childless. Timing, then, is a factor that can affect or be affected by the above factors, and is part of the decision not to have children.

Conclusions

The decision to remain childless is difficult and irrevocable. Many factors influence an individual or couple in his/her decision not to have children. This decision has a significant impact on the future lifestyle of the couple involved.

The model of the childless decision described in this paper can be used by family planning professionals, family life educators and family therapists to aid couples in the decision-making process. An awareness of the factors influencing voluntary childlessness and the reasoning process couples use can help family counselors and educators discuss this issue in a more informed and objective manner, thereby promoting a decision by a couple that is in their best interest. The factors related to the decision to be voluntarily childless can be explored and evaluated as to the importance of each particular factor for each couple.

Following testing and revision of the model, it may be used in the classroom to explore the decision-making dynamics of one group of people who choose an alternative lifestyle. It may help students develop an awareness that parenthood is a choice. The model may also be used in couples counseling to promote discussion of an important decision in family life -- childbearing -- that is generally taken for granted by spouses. This model may also be used to promote awareness and sensitivity among medical professionals who often counsel with couples on the childbearing decision. Hopefully, it will help others realize that the decision not to have children is complicated and not simply a religious or moral decision.

Further research is needed to understand the characteristics, the motivations and the role of the husband in the couple's decision to be childless. Future research should be directed to longitudinal studies of childless couples to more adequately discover how they maintain the childless state. Finally, the continued exploration of voluntary childlessness has the potential to further an understanding of the decision to have children.

This model of the childless decision hypothesizes a linear and generally unidirectional relationship among the variables. Testing and further development of this model would involve path analysis and multivariate analysis to determine the strength of the relationships indicated. This model could be further studied for differences in the relative importance of factors for males and females in order to better understand the impact of husbands and wives on the decision to remain voluntarily childless.

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