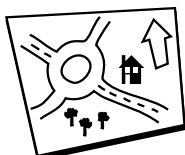


CHOOSING CHILDLESSNESS

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CONTEXT



It is only in the later part of this century that women have been able to control their fertility with any degree of reliability. Although the condom was used in previous centuries, its main purpose was to protect men from disease rather than to protect women from unwanted pregnancy. The burden of infertility in couples was often placed on women who could experience social stigma if they proved unable to conceive or to carry a pregnancy to full term. In modern society, not only can women prevent pregnancy, but those who once would have been deemed 'barren' or 'infertile' can be helped to have children through medical technologies such as fertility drugs, IVF or sperm donation. While contraception and fertility treatments are still not completely predictable technologies, they enable modern women to make choices that their grandmothers would not have imagined were possible.

A married woman at the turn of the century, if she did not die of complications from pregnancy or other health hazards, might well have expected to bear a very large number of children. Now women have more options. All over Europe women are delaying childbirth and having fewer children when they do choose to start families. More significantly for this study, one in five women in Britain is remaining childless.

The norms surrounding childbirth have changed dramatically, giving women considerable choice in their family arrangements and access to a life of paid employment unprecedented in previous societies. What is more, there is little stigma now attached to either accidental or deliberate pregnancy outside marriage, except perhaps for the very young or the very poor.

There is a further element to this debate in that fertility and childbirth are often seen as being related to femininity. However, males too, while dependent on a woman to choose to have sex with them and then to proceed with a pregnancy and carry a child to full term, may also have views on whether or not to become parents.

METHODS



The aims of this study were to:

- discover more about the deliberate choice to remain childless
- look at the extent to which people identify themselves as childless
- establish the extent to which childlessness is a meaningful concept to those who have remained without children.

Previous studies of childlessness have not been representative. Sampling methods were based on convenience or self-recruitment through magazine and newspaper articles. The inevitable result was that the samples tended to be middle class, married and female. Childlessness, however is also an option for the unmarried woman and even for those who are not in a couple relationship.

The sample for this study was based on people in the 35–49 age group. This was advantageous for two reasons:

These are people who are reaching the end of the age at which they are likely to have children. This means they will already have passed points in their lives at which the opportunity to have a child has presented itself and they have chosen not to go ahead with reproduction.

Their lives will have varied over time so that they can reflect on their choices and motivations at various ages. As the author points out 'The decision not to have children made at 18 may be qualitatively different from one made at 35; not having children within

a stable partnership is likely to feel different from being single and without children. Many parents do not plan to have children at all – or at least, not at the particular time they arrive. A similar perspective is likely to apply to those who remain childless ...'

The sample was selected using a sampling frame of participants in the British Social Attitudes Surveys of 1994 and 1995. 176 women were identified as childless in these samples. A letter was sent to each, asking if they were still currently childless and, if they had no intentions of childbearing in the future, whether they would be willing to participate in the study. Through a complex screening process involving telephone calls and further discussions, the final sample consisted of 34 women and ten childless men who were partners to the childless women either through marriage or cohabitation. One of the principle aims of the sampling process was to gain access to a wide range of people from a variety of social backgrounds. The extent to which the study does in fact reflect the distribution of childlessness among the general population is open to question.

The study touches on a very private and sensitive aspect of social behaviour. This is reflected in the number of contacts who refused to participate in the study and may illustrate the extent to which non-response can be highly significant. 23 people refused permission, the majority gave reasons such as being too busy or not interested. These may either be true or a polite way of preventing further contact or questioning. Three said it was a painful subject and nine offered no reason.

Because the study focuses on the meanings of childlessness, qualitative methods based on interviewing were seen as appropriate. The authors' review of existing research revealed that a wide variety of variables may contribute to the choice to remain childless. In addition, the general assumption of much writing on the subject is that childlessness represents a movement by women away from traditional domestic values. This meant that the interviews had to range over a variety of issues and also to consider wider social and political issues such as the extent to which the childless contribute towards the social cost of childrearing through taxation systems.

One of the most significant problems for the research team was to operationalise the question of childlessness. Because childbirth is being delayed by many women to a point where their chances of conception are lower, it may be that childlessness is not a deliberate choice, but an unfortunate accident.

Analysis of the interviews focused on three areas:

- the personal stories of the respondents
- the meanings they attach to events and processes
- their accounts and how they support or contradict what has already been written about childlessness.

KEY FINDINGS



Childlessness is rarely a decision entered into early in life and then decisively stuck to. It is more likely to be the result of sequence of decision-making processes. This means that childlessness does not appear to represent a firm rejection of family life or a total commitment to paid work.

The authors identify six broad categories of childlessness.

- **The 'certain' category**

People who are certain that they do not want children accounted for between one quarter and one third of respondents. These were those who had made a firm decision, often as teenagers, and then they stuck to that decision. For women this was often associated with a lack of interest in feminine roles or their own sense of a lack of 'maternal instinct'.

Rejection of childbearing was often linked to an awareness of the more negative elements of family life: responsibility, permanence, sacrifice and dislike of the 'parenting lifestyle'. One of the respondents had repeatedly, over a ten year period, rejected parenthood, but kept the discussion open with her partner so that her decision was repeatedly reaffirmed rather than made and then never re-examined. Many of these, in the event of contraceptive failure, would have opted for a termination of pregnancy.

- **The 'certain now' category**

These were people who had wavered in their decision not to have children, but who had

finally decided late in life, often as a result of relationship difficulties. Some of those in second relationships would have considered children had they been with their present partners at an earlier point in life.

- **Those who 'accept' childlessness**

Accepters consisted of women who were old in terms of reproductive age and who might have had children had their lives been different. These women were often content with their situation and accepted the advantages of childlessness.

- **The 'ambivalent' childless**

These were people who never really took a decision about children and did not really rule out late parenthood. Some had postponed childbearing and others had experienced fertility problems. They were weighing up possibilities and had not really made a firm choice of any kind. Childlessness was experienced as a process involving complex life issues or the postponement of a decision until biology imposed its own solution.

- **Those who had the 'decision taken for them'**

There were those who were not really in control of the decision making process, for instance one respondent had experienced fertility problems but not gone very far down the route of seeking a medical solution or choosing the adoption route to parenthood. Others had experienced medical problems which caused them great emotional pain and had sought comfort in their careers.

- **Those 'not voluntarily childless'**

These were a mixed group of people but all would have liked children had not circumstances made the situation difficult. One couple had fertility problems, another woman had experienced a broken relationship but had not fully ruled out the possibility of late conception.

Many of the 'certain' childless women had chosen partners who were considerably older than themselves, sometimes up to ten years. Others had chosen partners with children from previous relationships, two of whom had had vasectomies. Another interesting pattern was that some of the older women in the study were religious and therefore would not have children outside marriage. Some of the younger women felt that it was preferable to be a single parent than to be in a partnership and many saw the traditional gendered domestic division of labour as a definite reason for not following the traditional route of partnership and children.

Childless partnerships often viewed parenting as disruptive and linked to financial and emotional risk. People looked at the risks and made coolly logical decisions against parenting and the sacrifices required by good parenting. Childless couples often felt that their relationships were very strong and supportive. Terms such as 'companionate' and 'deep friendship' were used. They felt children would create an opposite style of marriage to the one that they had chosen. There was a danger of the relationship becoming unequal, less opportunity for paid employment, economic dependence and lack of power. Often couples invested heavily in their houses, and gained security through sharing a mortgage. Parenting was not considered until security was achieved and so the time for making a positive decision to have children had passed. Single women often felt emotionally attached to their homes and viewed their domestic situation as a source of satisfaction.

One of the most significant areas of concern in the choice to be childless debate is that of 'career versus children'. These positions used to be presented as opposites. It was felt that women could not combine paid work and childbearing. At regular intervals, women would point out that men are not expected to allow parenting to disrupt their careers in the same way that females are often expected to. However, it remains an issue as there are still so few support structures such as equality of paternity and maternity leave.

Almost all of the childless women were employed. Some had taken early retirement and a fourth was having a break between contracts. Three quarters of the women worked full time, and many were freelance, self-employed or working to contracts. The lowest earners were in caring jobs. McAllister found little evidence of career ambition with only half of the sample reporting any particular special interest in their work. Those in the older group were generally working towards retirement. The significant career decades for both men and women occurred when they were in their twenties and thirties. Very few women had planned a career in the sense of making an early choice. The women in some of the higher

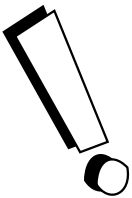
status jobs talked in terms of 'falling into opportunities'. Work therefore had a role as a means of support and an opportunity for independence. It was not seen as something so important that it was replacing the role of caring for the modern woman.

The authors of the study wanted to see whether decisions about work would impact with the decision to remain childless. Of the women who had accepted that they would remain childless, career choices had been significant at the time when they might have considered starting a family. Respondents who had remained single were driven by a sense of vocation and took on traditional female work rather than higher paid jobs. Their commitment to paid work was such that they had not sought a permanent life partner. They had not chosen work over family life so much as enjoyed their work and accepted childlessness.

The final section deals with the self-perceptions of the childless. The use of the term 'childless' is in itself emotionally loaded and it is difficult to imagine what term could be used to express 'being an adult who has not had children and is unlikely to do so' without its carrying some form of message. 'Childfree' would not quite work. Many of the respondents felt this point keenly. 'Childless' meant that people actually wanted to have children and could not, this was not a term they felt described their own situation. Childless people chose alternative identities to describe their status as not having reproduced: 'I'm an individual' or 'I'm free' were popular. Some of the mature women preferred 'I'm single' while others chose to identify themselves as being 'a couple rather than a family'. The childless felt pressure to conform to the childbearing and pair-bonding norms of society.

Their perceptions of parenting were not always positive. They used terms such as 'self-sacrificing', 'challenging' and 'responsibility'. Many of the respondents considered the term 'selfish' but saw it in terms of lack of obligation to others, a situation which they chose and enjoyed. Many had shown considerable commitment to the off-spring of relatives and/or had supported elderly relatives. They were however, critical of those people they deemed to be irresponsible enough to have children without visible support and were unhappy about benefits for those they deemed to be thoughtless.

IMPORTANCE



As family forms are changing and child-bearing becomes a lifestyle choice rather than a dangerous necessity for women, any study which offers an insight into the processes which people go through to make their choices is an addition to our understanding of family and parenting dynamics. The view offered is generally one of childlessness as a positive choice. There is no evidence of uncaring women desperate to take over male roles in the workplace. Instead there are single people and couples contributing to society in a variety of ways and enjoying a positive and fruitful lifestyle.

Given the obvious burdens of parenting, it would seem that a childless lifestyle will be an increasingly popular choice for women and their partners, particularly those women who are able to gain satisfaction from workplace or adult relationships rather than through a mothering role.

EVALUATION



Childlessness is a very sensitive area of study. While it certainly requires research, it is difficult to see how it can be done ethically without making very detailed enquiries to ensure that the respondents are actually happy and positive about their choice to remain without children. Clearly, however, such a study would also be totally unrepresentative of childlessness.

High claims are made for the representativeness of the study. However, the sample remained very small, and was heavily weighted in favour of women. There may well be childless men who choose not to reproduce or who have partners who are mothers from a previous relationship. These are surely worthy of study. There is also a bias in favour of the heterosexual couple. Modern birth technologies and legislative changes have meant that homosexual couples can also acquire children if they so choose.

It is also clear from the study that the sample is drawn predominantly from the more educated sector of the population: over half of the sample were educated to A level or above. It might be interesting to look at the extent to which deliberate or involuntary childlessness is a middle class phenomenon.

It would also have been useful to learn more of the interview process itself. Were couples

interviewed separately or together? If they were interviewed together, then they may have been evasive and careful in their answers for fear of upsetting their partners. This throws some degree of doubt on the validity of the research.

The conclusions refer to the issue of over-population and the debates about the wisdom of an ever increasing human population in competition for scarce resources. The interviews themselves seem to focus on the very personal and while this reveals a great deal about the actual process of remaining childless, we do not understand the role of the wider political and social understandings of the respondents. Some people who choose to remain childless may have had ideological grounds for their choices. These are unexplored.



QUESTIONS

KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

- 1 What social and technological changes have allowed women to control their own fertility and reproduction?
- 2 Describe the aims of this research in your own words.
- 3 What proportion of women in British society remains childless?
- 4 Why are studies of voluntary and involuntary childlessness likely to be unrepresentative?
- 5 How was the sample acquired and how was it different from previous studies of childlessness?
- 6 Describe the categories of childlessness identified by the study.
- 7 What does the study add to our understanding of the 'career' versus 'children' debate?

ANALYSIS

- 1 What ethical problems are faced by studies which look at childlessness in adults?
- 2 Identify and describe ways in which the roles of parents have become less attractive to many young people in recent years.
- 3 Evaluate the suggestion that society places a low value on parenting.