

VOLUNTARILY CHILDLESS MEN:  
AN EXPLORATION OF IDENTITY AND STIGMA

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife, Cynthia Kay Shinabarger Reed, Ph.D., in recognition of her encouragement, support, and endless faith in me.

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# ABSTRACT

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This study involved a qualitative exploration of voluntarily childless men. Eleven voluntarily childless men participated in in-depth interviews designed to investigate three research questions. The first one explored the reactions voluntarily childless men have encountered in response to their decisions to remain without children. All of the respondents with the exception of one gay respondent had received negative reactions from family, friends, coworkers, and others. This study also investigated whether voluntarily childless men incorporate negative societal evaluations into their concepts of self. All of the respondents stated that they did not let negative reactions bother them. The third research question this study explored was what strategies, if any; voluntarily childless men use to manage the stigma of their childless status. Most of the respondents in this sample did not report using any stigma management strategies however; one respondent used a strategy referred to as redefining the situation.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

In the United States approximately 90 percent of couples have children (Strong, DeVault, and Cohen, 2008). Of those who do not, some want to have children but have been unable to do so (involuntarily childless) while others choose a life without children (voluntarily childless). The voluntarily childless have also been referred to as “childfree” and “zero-child families.” There is a lack of consensus regarding which term should be used to identify those who choose not to have children. Some argue that the term voluntarily childless has negative connotations because it implies something that is valued or needed is missing. Thus, some prefer “childfree” because they perceive this term as having a more positive connotation. However, it has also been argued that childfree implies the person is free of something bad, as in fat-free and cholesterol-free. Recently, Brym and Lie (2007) proposed “zero-child families” as an alternative label. In this study the term voluntarily childless is used for the sake of consistency since it is the prevalent term in the currently available literature.

Couples who are involuntarily childless may be treated sympathetically however; those who are voluntarily childless often receive negative reactions to their decision. Family may express disappointment or react with denial, assuming the couple will eventually change their minds. Friends, coworkers, and others may

react with surprise or disdain. Couples who choose not to have children are sometimes perceived as selfish, immature or child-haters (Park, 2002). Thus, many stigmatize the choice not to have children. Voluntarily childless individuals must manage their social identity by finding a way to manage this stigma. Sociologists have only recently begun to explore how voluntarily childless individuals manage the stigma that accompanies their choice. The currently available studies provide more information on voluntarily childless women than voluntarily childless men. One purpose of the current study is to attempt to narrow this gap by investigating how voluntarily childless men manage the stigma associated with their decision not to have children. Research on the voluntarily childless has focused primarily on heterosexuals. A second purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of childlessness by gay men. A third purpose involves the label used to describe those who choose not to have children. While social scientists have debated the merits of terms such as voluntarily childless, childfree, and zero-child families, no one has explored what those who choose not to have children prefer to be called. The third purpose of the current study is to explore the label preferred by men who choose not to have children.

### Attitudes Regarding Childlessness

Prior to 1968, childlessness was listed only as a cross-reference to “sterility” in the literature (Bird and Sporkowski, 1994). Today, voluntarily childless couples continue to be perceived as deviant in spite of the fact that

increasing numbers of individuals are choosing to remain childless and in spite of predictions that voluntary childlessness will continue to increase in the U.S. (Lunneborg, 1999). In the last several decades, social scientists have found it necessary to state that voluntarily childless couples are normal. Campbell (1983) stated that voluntary childlessness is not a pathological condition and Hoffman and Levant (1985) proclaimed that the childless lifestyle is a valid, nondeviant alternative. Interest in the idea of remaining childless grew during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States as changing sexual norms, new contraceptive methods, and the women's movement began to present childlessness as a choice.

Research conducted during the past several decades has demonstrated negative attitudes toward individuals who are voluntarily childless. Calhoun and Selby (1980) conducted a study on perceptions of husbands and wives based on family size. Undergraduate students were asked to read information about couples who were applying for car loans. Couples were either described as having children or were described as childless. Students were asked to rate the husbands and wives on the following dimensions: how likeable they were, general psychological characteristics, perceived psychological disturbance, and the likelihood of the couples getting a divorce. The husbands were perceived as being more psychologically healthy regardless of parental status. When wives were described as childless, they were rated as less likable and were rated more negatively on general personality descriptors. The results of this study indicate a

double standard in which women are perceived negatively if they choose not to have children whereas men are not.

Childless couples have reported social pressure and negative responses to any indication they may remain childless for the rest of their lives (Shehan and Kammeyer, 1997). U.S. society is strongly pronatalist; therefore, family members, friends, and sometimes strangers feel justified in asking voluntarily childless couples why they are not having children. If the couple makes known their intention to remain childfree permanently, they may be told to think carefully about their decision and not wait until it is too late (Shehan and Kammeyer, 1997). Such reactions indicate that many people believe there must be something wrong with a person who does not want to have children.

Numerous studies have measured the attitudes of college students toward both involuntarily and voluntarily childless individuals. One study, conducted by Lampman and Dowling-Guyer (1995), conducted an experiment in which 215 university students read one of six scenarios describing a couple. Two independent variables were manipulated, parental status (involuntarily childless, voluntarily childless, or having children), and their employment status (professional or nonprofessional). After reading the scenario, participants were asked to rate the husband and the wife on 26 characteristics and to respond to 12 items regarding the strength and quality of the couple's relationship.

The purposes of the Lampman and Dowling-Guyer (1995) study were to explore attitudes toward voluntary versus involuntary childlessness and to

investigate whether professional childless couples (especially women) were viewed more negatively than nonprofessional couples. The second research question was generated in response to past studies in which infertile professional women have reported that people blame their infertility status on employment. They reported being advised to stop working so hard or to quit their jobs.

The results of the Lampman and Dowling-Guyer (1995) study indicated that voluntarily childless couples are perceived more negatively than involuntarily childless couples or couples with children. Voluntarily childless couples were viewed as lazy, insensitive, lonely, and unhappy. Involuntary childlessness was not uniformly stigmatizing. The professional status of the couple did not influence attitudes; thus, it was concluded that professional couples were not viewed as more susceptible to infertility.

In an extension of previous studies, LaMastro (2001) examined the beliefs of participants regarding the voluntary or involuntary nature of a couple's family size. In this study, 274 undergraduate students read one of 24 short paragraphs describing a married couple in their early 40s. The descriptions of the couple varied in number of children (zero, one, two or six) and in occupational status. Males were described as having either professional or non-professional positions while females were described as professional, non-professional, or not employed outside the home. To ensure the accessibility of salient details, students were asked to recall the information from the paragraph immediately after reading it. Each participant rated the male and female described in the paragraph

separately on 28 characteristics using a 7-point bipolar scale. Drawing from the work of Lampman and Dowling-Guyer (1995), students were next asked to rate the couple's relationship by responding to a series of seven statements using a 5-point scale from agree strongly (1) to disagree strongly (5). Participants were also asked to provide their attributions for the couple's family size, complete the Bem Sex Role Inventory, and to provide demographic information. The Bem Sex-Role Inventory is a scale that assesses masculinity and femininity by measuring self-reported possession of socially desirable characteristics that are stereotypically masculine and feminine. The scale is self-administered and contains 60 items to measure femininity, masculinity, and androgyny.

The results of LaMastro's (2001) study indicated that perceivers attributed family size to voluntary factors. Regardless of the attributions made for their childlessness, participants rated childless individuals less positively than individuals with children. Parents of all family sizes were perceived similarly. There was no relationship between a participant's Bem classification and their judgments.

Kopper and Smith (2001) have also investigated attitudes toward childlessness amongst college students. In their study, 456 female and 205 male undergraduate students were asked to rate male and female targets who were childless by choice, involuntarily childless, or childless with no explanation given. Targets who were childless by choice received the most negative evaluations. In addition, the male target character was rated more negatively than the female

target character, a result opposite of that found by Calhoun and Selby (1980) two decades earlier. Perhaps changes in gender roles have brought about changes in perceptions of men and women regarding their choices to have children.

### Decision-Making Process

Shehan and Kammeyer developed a 4-step process in which the decision not to have children is not consciously made until years after entering the relationship. In Shehan and Kammeyer's (1997) 4-step process the couple enters the relationship with the intention of eventually having children. In the first stage, having children is postponed for a definite time. The couple wants to wait until specific goals are met, such as completing school or getting established in their careers. The second stage involves a postponement for an indefinite time. At this point the couple is vague about the reasons for not having children at that time and vague about when they will have children. Some couples will state that they cannot yet afford children or the time just is not right. According to Shehan and Kammeyer (1997), the third stage involves considering the advantages and disadvantages of parenthood. The couple may openly consider for the first time the possibility of remaining childless. During the fourth and final stage the couple accepts childlessness as permanent. They recognize that the decision has already been made. It is possible that reactions from others could potentially impact this process. Exploring the decision-making process could shed light on whether societal reactions at all impacted the process.

## Defense Mechanisms

According to Park (2005), people who choose to remain childless in the United States today do so in a social context that is strongly, although subtly, pronatalist. Pronatalism is an ideology that having children is conducive to the well-being of individuals, families, and society. Pronatalism is generally endorsed by religious groups and is also associated with achieving full adult status (Park, 2005).

Social pressures to have children can be very strong leading some couples to hide their intention to remain childless from others (Shehan and Kammeyer, 1997). Couples devise different strategies to conceal their intentions from family, friends, co-workers and strangers. According to Veevers (1975), voluntarily childless couples also adhere to an alternate worldview in order to remain untroubled by social pressures to have children. Veevers (1975) found four defense mechanisms involved in this worldview. The first is the “selective perception of the consequences of parenthood” in which the individual focuses on the data that support the belief system and denies any contradictory data. The person pays careful attention to the negative comments made by parents about childrearing and ignores the positive ones. The second defense mechanism (Veevers, 1975) is differential association resulting in physical and psychological isolation from conflicting worldviews. Veevers (1975) found that most women in a sample of 81 voluntarily childless wives were uninformed that there were other women in society who also discarded the “motherhood mystique.” Most of these

women obtained social support from their husbands and over time lost touch with their friends who had children. The women in Veevers (1975) study also spent time with people who were single and with people who had children but shared similar attitudes toward children (some parents acknowledge they would have chosen childlessness but they became pregnant accidentally). The third defense mechanism identified involved structuring trial parenthood in a way that reconfirmed existing biases (Veevers, 1975). This involved “borrowing” the children of others for an evening or weekend. Such experiments were seldom found to have positive results and therefore, further convinced the individual that parenthood would not be a rewarding experience. The final defense mechanism involved capitalizing upon social ambivalence towards parenthood. This involved reinterpreting the disapproval of those with children as envy of the freedom and lifestyle associated with childlessness (Veevers, 1975).

### Managing Stigma

People who choose to remain childless possess a stigmatized identity. Thus they must find ways to manage this stigma when interacting with others. Park (2002) conducted a study on stigma management among voluntarily childless individuals. Fourteen voluntarily childless women and eight voluntarily childless men participated in focus groups and in-depth interviews to discuss how they manage this stigma. Park (2002) found that numerous strategies were used

including: passing, identity substitution, condemning the condemners, asserting a right to self-fulfillment, claiming biological deficiency, and redefining the situation.

In the strategy of passing, people give the impression that they will have children someday. This strategy is rewarded by having others perceive the person as “normal.” When using the strategy of identity substitution, the individual directly states, or indirectly implies, that he or she cannot have children, thus adopting a less stigmatized identity as involuntarily childless. In the strategy of condemning the condemners, the person admits their deviance but asserts that other individuals have committed worse acts. For example, when labeled selfish for not having children, the person may claim that many people have children for selfish reasons such as having someone to take care of them when they are older. Voluntarily childless individuals who assert their right to self-fulfillment state that they have a right to do whatever makes them happy. They see having children as a choice and not something they are obligated to do. The strategy of claiming biological deficiency involves excuses that minimize or absolve the person’s choice. For example, a voluntarily childless woman might state that she has no maternal instinct. Lastly, in redefining the situation, the childless person takes a proactive approach, sometimes by asserting the social contribution of alternative choices. If a person is asked, “why don’t you have children?” they may respond by asking, “Why did you decide to have children?” This response asks for an account for normative behavior (Park, 2002).

In Park's (2002) study men were most likely to use passing and redefining the situation to manage the stigma of voluntary childlessness. However, according to Lunneborg (1999) and Baker (2002), overall there is more available research on childless women. Park (2002) stated that more research is needed on men who choose not to have children. This study will expand on the work of Park (2002) on stigma management among the voluntarily childless by interviewing voluntarily childless men regarding their experiences.

The primary purpose of the current study was to investigate how voluntarily childless men manage the stigma associated with their choice not to have children. The research questions included

1. What reactions have voluntarily childless men encountered in response to their decisions to remain childless?
2. Do voluntarily childless men incorporate negative societal evaluations into their concepts of self?
3. What strategies, if any, do voluntarily childless men use to manage the stigma of their childless status?

In light of the conflicting results on how childless men are perceived described above and more recent research, it is possible that voluntarily childless men do not perceive themselves as stigmatized or find it necessary to employ strategies to manage stigma. In a recent study, Koropeckyj-Cox and Pendell (2007) concluded that attitudes are changing toward voluntarily childlessness and reflect an acceptance, if not an endorsement, of this lifestyle.

A second purpose is to explore the experience of childlessness among gay men. The answers of gay men to questions regarding the reactions they have encountered, whether such reactions have been incorporated into concepts of self, and strategies for managing stigma will be compared to the answers provided by heterosexual males. The tertiary purpose is to explore the label men who choose not to have children prefer. In the social science literature, people who choose not to have children have traditionally been referred to as voluntarily childless. However, some argue that this label has a negative connotation because “-less” implies that something is missing in the lives of these individuals. Therefore, some prefer the term childfree, perceiving it as having a more positive connotation. This term has also been criticized however, since it may imply that the individual is free from something undesirable as is the case in terms such as fat-free and cholesterol-free. In response to these criticisms, Brym and Lie (2008) recently proposed the term zero-child families. The literature has not yet revealed the responses of social scientists to this term. No studies have reported the preferences of the individuals themselves thus this study will add something new to the available literature.

### Theoretical Perspective

This study will utilize the symbolic interactionist perspective as a frame of reference for understanding the experiences of voluntarily childless men. The symbolic interactionist perspective views social meaning as arising out of social interactions. This view holds that human beings act toward things on the basis of

the meanings they attach to them and that these meanings are derived from social interactions with others. It also holds that meanings can be changed or modified through the processes of interaction and interpretation (Blumer, 1969).

Voluntarily childless men are likely to experience negative reactions from family, friends, co-workers, and others regarding their decision to remain childless. The United States is a pronatalist society. Couples who choose not to have children violate a prescriptive social norm. Since the choice to remain childless is a decision disapproved of and unexpected by others, voluntarily childless men may be expected to explain their decision. According to Scott and Lyman (1968), individuals in such situations are likely to give "accounts." Scott and Lyman (1968) defined an account as "a linguistic device employed whenever an action is subjected to valuative inquiry" (p. 46). An account is "a statement made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior..." (Scott and Lyman, 1968, p. 46). Accounts may come in the form of excuses and justifications. Scott and Lyman (1968) defined excuses as "socially approved vocabularies for mitigating or relieving responsibility when conduct is questioned" (p. 47). People may try to provide excuses for their behaviors by saying that they were accidental, against their own wills, unavoidable, or someone else's fault. According to Scott and Lyman, (1968) justifications "are accounts in which one accepts responsibility for the act in question, but denies the pejorative quality associated with it" (p. 47). The person using a justification is admitting the behavior is wrong but claiming that the situation permitted or required the act.

This study will seek to explore whether voluntarily childless men use excuses and/or justifications to respond to negative reactions of others regarding the decision to remain childless.

## CHAPTER II

### METHODS

#### Purpose of Study

The intent of this study was on discovery rather than the testing of hypotheses. Three main research questions guided this study. The first research question is what reactions have voluntarily childless men encountered in response to their decisions to remain without children. The second research question is do voluntarily childless men incorporate negative societal evaluations into their concepts of self. The third research question this study explored is the strategies, if any, voluntarily childless men use to manage the stigma of their childless status. The goal was to gain a better understanding of identity issues and stigma management of voluntarily childless men.

#### Design

I used in-depth interviews to acquire data from voluntarily childless men. I developed an interview guide based on the empirical literature, which also included questions concerning the research problems that I have investigated in this study (See Appendix). The questions were used as a guide. In every interview answers were sought to all the questions on the interview guide. These included questions regarding relationships with family and experiences with children. In addition, respondents were also asked what the word “family” meant

to them. They were also asked whether they had pets and, if so, whether they considered their pet to be part of their family. They were also asked to describe how they made the decision to remain childless. Respondents were asked how family, friends, and co-workers have reacted to their decision to remain childless. They were also asked about their preference regarding which term should be used to label people who choose not to have children.

### Procedures

I obtained permission to conduct this study from the Institutional Review Board at Texas Woman's University. After obtaining permission from the Institutional Review Board to conduct the study, 20 individuals who were identified through their personal acquaintances with myself and through snowball sampling were sent a recruitment letter and asked to take part in the study. Participants were informed in the letter that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If the individual chose to participate, he contacted the investigator by phone or electronic mail to schedule an interview. Those contacted who did not want to participate did not have to take any action. Eleven voluntarily childless men were interviewed.

The interviews were conducted in a relaxed, non-intimidating manner. Interviews took place in the homes or offices of the respondents and at each respondent's convenience. The participant was asked to read the consent form and then asked if he had any questions. Next, the participant was asked to sign the consent form if he was willing to participate. The participant was given a copy

of the consent form for his records. The participant was also told that he could ask questions at any point during the interview. Each respondent permitted me to audio record the interviews. I proceeded to follow the interview guide to obtain answers to every question. All eleven participants completed the interviews in their entirety. After completion of the interview each respondent was once again asked if he had any questions. Typically, each interview lasted approximately one hour. The interviews took place during March of 2008.

### Participants

The respondents ranged in age from 30 to 60 years old with a mean for the 11 respondents of 43.5 years old. Total time in their current committed relationship ranged from 5 to 37 years with a mean of 15.6 years. Two of the men are gay and the remaining nine are heterosexual. Two respondents are Black and the remaining respondents are White. The two respondents who are gay include a 33 year old Black man and a 53 year old White man. All live in the Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan area. Three respondents have a high school diploma and one of these respondents also has three years of college but did not complete a degree. Six respondents have Bachelor's degrees, and two have doctoral degrees. Most of the respondents have professional occupations including positions as a banker, operations manager, structural engineer, physician, chiropractor, and an auditor. One respondent is currently unemployed. The interviewer is an insider with this group as he shares with these men the

characteristic of being voluntarily childless. This was known to the participants and facilitated establishing rapport.

### Analysis

The information provided by each respondent was kept confidential. The interviewer was the only one to collect the data, organize them, analyze them and write the results. Respondents were not identified with their data in the written report, even when direct quotes were used. The key identifying the respondents was discarded immediately after writing the results.

After obtaining interview data from the eleven respondents, open coding was performed in order to locate themes in the data and code them (Patton, 2002 and Neuman, 2006). Secondly, axial coding was performed. During this second pass through the data, the focus was on the initial categories. Categories and concepts that clustered together were identified. During this stage, some categories were renamed (for example “closeness” was renamed “intimacy” when categorizing meaning of family) and others were combined (for example, concerns about world resources, concerns about overpopulation, and concerns about the environment were combined). Thirdly, selective coding was used and all previous codes and data were scanned (Patton, 2002 and Neuman, 2006). Cases were identified that illustrated each theme.

The coding process enabled the investigator to identify themes and explore how voluntarily childless men conceptualize family and make the decision to remain without children. It also revealed the reactions voluntarily

childless men have received in response to their decision as well as how they have reacted to these decisions. Information was also uncovered about identity issues including whether voluntarily childless men incorporate negative societal evaluations into their concepts of self and what term they believe should be used to label individuals who choose to remain childless. The data were also placed into a theoretical framework to reveal whether voluntarily childless men use accounts to explain their behavior as described by Scott and Lyman (1968).

### Conclusion

In summary, this qualitative study of voluntarily childless men explored issues related to identity and stigma. Eleven voluntarily childless men participated in in-depth interviews regarding their experiences and perceptions. Open, axial, and selective coding were used to identify major and minor themes. Scott and Lyman's theory regarding the use of accounts served as the theoretical framework for analyzing the ways voluntarily childless men manage stigma.

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

To provide a foundation and framework for the research questions, participants were asked background questions. They were asked to describe the kind of leisure activities they engage in. The responses helped to shed light on the lifestyles of voluntarily childless men. To learn about their experiences and conceptualizations of family, respondents were asked to describe their relationships with family and experiences with children. Participants were also asked to explain what family means to them and whether they have pets and if so, if they considered their pets to be members of the family. In order to answer the research questions, participants were asked to describe the reactions they have encountered to their decisions to remain childless, whether these reactions influenced how they thought or felt about themselves as men, and how they have responded to negative reactions. This chapter will relay their responses in the men's own voices and draw conclusions about their experiences. When half or more of the respondents' answers were in the same category, the responses were identified as a predominant, primary, or major theme. If less than half of the respondents' answers were in the same category, it was identified as a minor or secondary theme.

## Background Information

In order to more fully understand ways in which their choice to remain childless affected their lives, the respondents were asked what they did for recreation. Perhaps voluntarily childless men have difficulty finding other men to engage in leisure activities with since many of their peers may be parents and have less time for leisure activities. When asked what they did for recreation, the men reported engaging in a variety of leisure activities. Many of the activities they reported engaging in are activities that can be engaged in alone. Their responses included:

“Work in the yard, work on cars, stuff like that, and fix stuff.”

“Play golf, read, walk the dogs, and work out at a gym.”

“Spending time with friends, motorcycling, and hanging out with my wife.”

“Going to movies, going out to dinner with friends, gardening.”

Other activities include mountain biking, shopping, traveling, back-packing, trying new foods and wines, hiking, racquetball, and taking walks. These men seem to have ample time for participating in leisure activities. None of the respondents reported that they simply did not have time to engage in leisurely pursuits. It appears that their voluntarily childless state does provide them with more free time than parents may have but this could be due to their social class. Most of the men have professional occupations that permit more autonomy and control over their time.

Although these respondents have chosen not to have children themselves, their responses indicate they value the institution of family. The main theme emerging from most of the respondents was that their relationship with family was close or good. When asked to describe their relationship with their families responses included:

“I am pretty close with family from both sides, including the children.”

“We are a close family. We speak to each other at least once a week and visit each other at least every other month. We actually enjoy spending time with each other.”

“Great, they’re very open-minded.”

“My relationship with my parents is very good.”

One 30-year-old White respondent stated:

I see my father’s parents, parents, sister and sister’s children on a weekly to biweekly basis. We all live in the same small town. I would not say that I am not emotionally close to any of them. I am in a different socioeconomic class, which makes deep relationships difficult.

Only one respondent commented that he neither saw his family often nor had a close relationship with them. A secondary theme was of emotional closeness in spite of physical distance. Some of the respondent’s family members are geographically spread out, so much of their communication is by telephone but they continue to feel close. As one respondent stated:

“Most of my family lives in other states but we talk with each other over the phone every week. We are still a very close family.”

### Meaning of Family

In order to explore how voluntarily childless men define and construct the meaning of family, each respondent was first asked about his prior experiences with children such as nieces and nephews, cousins, children in their neighborhood and children of friends. The predominant theme was that of enjoying children. While these participants have chosen not to have children, most of them reported positive experiences with children and stated they enjoyed children. This indicates that it is not necessarily a dislike of children that influences their choice to remain without children but rather, other factors. In the words of a few respondents:

“At work I am around small children all the time and I enjoy that.”

“I love children and associate very well with them.”

“I have great relationships with kids.”

“I love children and have always had many children around for holidays, school breaks, etc.”

A minor theme was lack of experience with children. Several individuals stated they had not had much prior experience with children and only two reported that someone else’s children (besides their nieces or nephews) referred to them as “Uncle” or with some other familial term. Thus, it does not appear that most of these men are substituting relationships with other children for having children of

their own. Comments regarding their experiences with children included:

“I have not had a lot of interaction with children.”

“I do not have consistent contact with children.”

“About four children of friends refer to me as their uncle.”

“Several children from our church family call me ‘Uncle.’”

When the respondents were asked what the word family meant to them the major theme was intimacy. The most common responses included closeness, love, and intimacy. The idea that family does not have to have a biological relationship was a secondary theme. Several of the respondents stated that family did not have to be related by blood. This indicates their conceptualizations of family have evolved beyond the traditional nuclear family that includes only biological relations and must include children. Not only are these voluntarily childless men including affiliated kin in their conceptions of family but they also do not appear to believe that to be a family, a couple must have children. None of the respondents stated that a family must have children. When asked what family meant to them their responses included:

“Close relationships and blood relatives but also other members at church are just as close due to similar values and beliefs and therefore, they’re just like family too.”

“I think of it as a close-knit group of people mostly genetically related, but some not.”

“A support group of both related and not related people who you choose to spend intimate time with.”

“The group of people you live with and/or spend a lot of time with and love dearly. Not necessarily blood related.”

“There is a closeness, a togetherness, an intimacy, that’s what it really means. It goes beyond biological boundaries.”

Only three respondents mentioned the specific family members that came to mind, as illustrated by the following:

“Mom and dad and sisters.”

“I guess the first thing that comes to mind is my brothers nowadays.”

“Immediate family is my mom, dad, sister, and half siblings.”

Several others described qualities they associate with family such as:

“To me family means security.”

“To me family simply means home.”

“Devotion and familiarity are involved.”

While many participants implied that a family did not have to include children, one was more direct. He declared:

“My spouse and I consider ourselves a family.”

Respondents were asked if they had any pets and if so, whether they considered their pets to be part of their family. Eight of the respondents have pets. Their responses to whether they considered their pets to be members of the family included:

“Yes, absolutely. Pets have always been a member of the family. Even growing up we had dogs that were members of the family.”

“We treat them just like regular family members.”

Others did not consider their pets to be family as illustrated by the following:

“I do have pets and enjoy them very much but I would not consider them as children.”

“The pets are loved but treated as pets.”

Thinking of pets as family and thinking of pets as merely pets were equally strong themes with approximately half of the respondents falling into each of these two categories. The six respondents who considered their pets to be family were asked if they thought of themselves as fathers to their pets. Three answered this question in the affirmative. Since slightly more than half of the respondents consider their pets to be family it could be concluded that some voluntarily childless men are substituting pets for children. However, considering pets to be family or children is not unique to voluntarily childless people. There are couples who have children who think of their pets as family or as children. This was illustrated by one of the respondents who stated that his family had always had dogs when he was growing up and that they were considered part of the family. Perhaps thinking of pets as family is a conception one is socialized into.

## Decision-Making Process

The process the respondents used to make the decision to be childless was explored. The decision-making process was explored in order to discover if societal reactions had any impact on the process. The first question the respondents were asked was how they felt about children prior to getting married or starting their current relationship. A predominant theme was a belief in early adulthood that eventually the individual would have children. About half of the respondents thought they would eventually become parents. The currently available literature indicates that voluntarily childless people are sometimes perceived as child-haters (Park, 2002). This does not hold true with this sample given the fact that many of the respondents reported enjoying being with children and the fact that when they were younger many of them thought they would have children one day. In their words:

“I was fine with children and never thought that I wouldn’t have any.”

“I always thought I would have children of my own however, I dated a woman while in college that had two children and I really started to reconsider at that point. Her children were out of control and rude.”

Others commented:

“I still planned on having them before I met my spouse. I was still fully intending to get married and raise children.”

“Initially at the beginning we wanted to have children.”

“At that time, I felt that the lifetime goal of a couple was to raise children.”

A minor theme that emerged was ambivalence. A few respondents commented that they were ambivalent about having children when they were single. They stated:

“I wasn’t interested in having children but I also did not rule it out.”

“I was fairly ambivalent about them.”

Consistent with the literature (Shehan and Kammeyer, 1997) which indicates that only a minority of voluntarily childless individuals know they do not want children prior to marriage or entering committed relationships, only two respondents stated they knew they did not want children before their current relationships.

They replied:

“I never really wanted to have kids.”

“I just knew I did not want any children.”

One of the gay respondents, a 53-year-old, did not even consider parenthood a possibility for him. It is likely that when this man was at an age that many adults would start having children, societal prejudice and discrimination against gays was so prevalent that he believed becoming a parent was not even possible. He stated:

“I did not believe children were an option being gay and coming out when I did so I never considered them.”

Respondents were also asked if they had had interactions with other childless couples and if so, to describe the relationships and interactions. Having

relationships with other voluntarily childless couples and the lack of such relationships were both major themes. About half of the respondents stated they had relationships with other couples that did not have children. It seems that such relationships provide the respondents and their partners with the opportunity to socialize with like-minded couples and to receive social support for their decision. The main activity shared with other childless couples was going out to dinner. They reported:

“Actually my best friend and his wife do not have children. We do a lot of things together like helping each other work on projects, or we have gone out to dinner and that kind of thing.”

“We have mutual friends who do not have kids and we just go and hang out, or go out to dinner, or just come over for get-togethers.”

One respondent shared that he and his wife have a relationship with an involuntarily childless couple. He stated:

“We get together with my nephew and his wife. They have not been able to conceive and they are heart-broken.”

The other half of the respondents reported no relationships with other childless couples. A main theme of their responses was simply not knowing any other childless couples. A 44-year-old White respondent commented:

We spend more time with each other and enjoy that time and are at peace with having just us. We do not interact with other couples that do not have children because we do not know any others. We do spend time with other

couples. All have children and some are older and some have been divorced so the children are not always there when we get together.

Another respondent stated:

“We have not met any other couples who haven’t had kids. It is quite unusual.”

A minor theme emerging was difficulty in sustaining relationships with other couples due to the transition of these couples into parenthood. A number of men who reported no relationships with other couples without children explained that many of their previous relationships with other couples have ended when those couples became parents. One explained:

“Many couples that we associate with have conceived children over the last several years and are no longer childfree. At this time, I can’t recall a childfree couple that we regularly associate with.”

A White, 43-year-old respondent commented:

A lot of our friends that didn’t have kids now have kids so that has changed. We used to hang out with a couple and have cocktail parties and go to the park and have barbecues and also get together with some of their relatives who were close friends of ours. We would go to parties, movies, and out to dinner a lot. After they had a child the opportunities for that slimmed down a lot. Opportunities for more spontaneous get-togethers greatly reduced. A lot more revolves around the child’s schedule.

One White, 34-year-old respondent contrasted his and his wife's relationships with voluntarily childless couples with those couples who plan to have children at some later point in time. He also indicated relationships change after a couple has children. In his words:

We have had childfree friends over for a late night get-together and we've had couples over who do not have children but intend to and the dynamic is different between us. Also, after a couple has a child the dynamic changes between us.

The respondents were asked if they were ever excluded from social activities when it is customary for children to be present. The predominant theme was one of inclusion. Only two respondents stated that they had been excluded from such activities. They replied:

"We often don't get invited to our friends' children's birthday parties. Because we don't have children they assume we wouldn't enjoy the celebration. "

Yes, there have been several times. We just accepted the fact that there would always be those kinds of situations, like children's ballgames, that we are not included in. After we were first married it was awkward but now we're at an age where it doesn't matter.

The other nine respondents stated that they were not excluded by others but a secondary theme was self-exclusion. In other words, sometimes they chose not

to participate. They noted:

“I have skipped a couple of baby showers.”

“Sometimes we get invited to things we don’t want to go to because there will be a lot of kids there, so we just find excuses not to go.”

“I kind of exclude myself.”

The fact that these men and their partners are not excluded from such activities may contribute to the positive feelings they maintain about family.

Respondents were asked about their first memories pertaining to their decision not to have children. The major theme was one of not considering a childless lifestyle until their current relationship. For most of the respondents, the decision was made with their current partners after entering their relationships. Both of the gay respondents reported thinking about it prior to their current relationships. As stated earlier, one respondent, a 53-year-old, did not consider children to even be an option for him. The younger gay respondent, a 33-year-old, stated:

“I began to think about it as I was nearing college graduation. I would see other people’s children acting up in public and I just did not want any.”

Next respondents were asked to describe how they had made the decision to be childless and what the reasons for the decision were. The predominant theme was that of a gradual decision. The available literature indicates that most voluntarily childless couples make the decision to remain without children gradually and through a series of four stages. In Shehan and

Kammeyer's (1997) 4-step process the couple begins by postponing children for a definite time, followed by an indefinite postponement. During the third stage the couple considers the advantages and disadvantages of childlessness and in the fourth stage they realize they definitely do not want children. Consistent with the process identified by Shehan and Kammeyer (1997), nine respondents stated their decision had evolved over time with their current partners. A 53-year-old, White respondent recalled:

The more we thought about it over time the more we realized that we just didn't want children. It was the right thing with me not being home because of my career it wouldn't have worked well being a parent. I wouldn't have been there.

Others commented:

"We never felt a void not having children. We always felt at peace not having them so it just seemed natural to stay childfree."

It was not a formal process but a gradual process over time. We like our life the way it is and our lives would be a lot different if we had children.

The ways our lives would change aren't palatable to us.

Two of the men answered that they initially put off having children in order to pursue other goals. This is consistent with the first stage identified by Shehan and Kammeyer (1997). A 60-year-old, White respondent stated:

My wife comes from a family of nine and she actually reared most of her siblings. After we met we decided that we wanted to get our priorities

straight as far as our education and travel and do some things and then we would have kids but by the time we finally got where we wanted to be we really didn't want to have kids.

A 56-year-old, Black respondent explained:

Initially we wanted to accomplish other goals before having children, such as finishing college and establishing a career. Once I established my career and we became financially stable, we began to enjoy life even more and didn't want such significant responsibilities such as having a child.

Some of the men explained their decision was influenced by concerns about world resources, overpopulation, and the environment. They displayed a sociological mindfulness; in other words, an awareness that everything we do affects someone else in a positive or negative way. A 36-year-old, White respondent explained:

It gives us a better impact on the environment. We don't have a carbon footprint like some families driving large SUVs using a lot of gas. Also, by not having children we produce less garbage and we use less electricity. As I became environmentally conscious I recognized that there was absolutely no need to introduce more children into the world. I'm concerned about the environment and there are already too many people on this planet. Consumption of the resources is making a huge, negative impact on our world. Why would anyone bring more children into this

overcrowded world when many children are available for adoption that have a real need? Having a baby creates a need instead of meeting a need.

Respondents were asked to describe the advantages and disadvantages they perceived they had in various areas of their lives (relationships, work, leisure, other) by not having children. This is a task that most of the men in the sample would have accomplished during the third stage of Shehan and Kammeyer's (1997) model. A major theme was the financial advantage of not having children, as illustrated by the following:

"It is definitely an advantage financially."

"It saves a lot of money not having kids. You don't have to be buying toys or food or clothes for them all the time."

"You have more disposable income."

"Financially you can save a lot more money than those who have kids."

Secondary themes involved advantages related to the quality of their marriages and the greater freedom they have. Comments included:

"You have free time and time available to do what you want."

"Not having children gave us the freedom to do what we wanted to do when we wanted to, including travel."

"We have a more intimate marriage."

"I believe having children strains the relationship between a husband and a wife."

“We have plenty of time to enjoy life in general.”

“The biggest advantage I can think of is freedom of movement.”

Calmness emerged as a minor theme. According to the participants:

“We have a more calm life.”

“We have a calm household.”

Another predominant theme was related to the advantage of not having to worry about children or deal with the demands of a child. Such as:

“I never had to worry about taking children with me on vacations or worry about having someone else watch them while I went out to dinner. I never had to deal with them.”

“I think having children takes a toll on your mental health.”

“We don’t have to worry about children. There is no dealing with the anger or rejection of a child. There is no dealing with the demands of a child.”

One man commented about his perceived societal advantages and advantages for the environment. He stated:

“We are not adding to overpopulation and consumption. Disposable diapers take up a great amount of space in landfills.”

When considering these themes as a group, the overarching theme is that of lifestyle. Greater disposable income and more free time are both lifestyle issues. Freedom from the mental labor (worrying about children) and calmness are also lifestyle issues.

When asked about the perceived disadvantages of not having children, a perceived lack of disadvantages was a major theme. Over half of the respondents stated that they could not think of any disadvantages or that there were none. For the other participants a major theme was a disadvantage related to lost companionship. Some commented about the loss of companionship that children can bring and/or not having someone to visit or care for them in late adulthood. They replied:

The only disadvantage I think about is when I get really old I may not have any family come to visit me. Also, not having a boy I can teach to throw, catch, climb trees, do carpentry, and teach about science and engineering.

“You miss out on taking children to different activities. You don’t have that thrill of them opening gifts at Christmas and putting things together with them.”

“Not having someone to take care of you when you get older, although having children does not guarantee that they will but it is something I have done for my parents and my wife’s parents.”

“One disadvantage would be the companionship you are missing. I really liked the relationship I had with my parents.”

Each respondent was asked if there had been times when they had reconsidered the decision to remain childless and if so, to describe the circumstances and why they had decided to remain childless. Eight of the

respondents replied that they had never reconsidered the decision. Their remarks included:

“No, we have never regretted the decision.”

“No, we never second guessed our decision. We knew it was final and we were happy with that.”

Although they had not reconsidered their decision, a minor theme among these respondents was trepidation about the future. Some reported wondering about the future and who would take care of them. One confessed:

No, however my wife and I have joked about getting old and having no one to take care of us. However, the reality is that most of our friends’ children do not care about their parents’ well-being, only about what they can get from their parents.

A 33-year-old, Black respondent stated similar concern:

We have not really reconsidered but we have speculated about the future and who is going to take care of us when we are old and cannot take care of ourselves. That is the biggest question mark we have in our lives because of our decision.

For the three respondents who had reconsidered, the major theme was an effect of being around children. Several reported that when around children they sometimes rethink their decision. They remarked:

“Yes, I have reconsidered at times when I have been around young children and enjoyed being with them.”

“Around holidays is when I think about it the most. Holidays when people and family are getting together and celebrating you start thinking about how you don’t have a personal connection like that.”

“Yes, sometimes after being around kids we have talked about the advantages of parenthood. But then we always go back to the disadvantages and there seem to be a lot more disadvantages.”

Overall, these voluntarily childless men are confident about their decisions. Although they may entertain fleeting thoughts about what they may be missing for the most part they are satisfied with their decisions and their lifestyles.

The final question respondents were asked while exploring their decision was who, if anyone, had influenced their decision not to have children. The principal theme was that of partner influence. Nine respondents commented that the decision was made jointly with their partners and that no one else had influenced their decisions. Two of the respondents reported that their decision had been directly influenced by their wives. As they described:

“My wife influenced my decision. I was not sure if I wanted to have children or not but she did not want any and she convinced me of the advantages of not having them.”

“My wife strongly influenced my decision. She was very opposed to having children.”

Again, this is consistent with the literature. Since the decision to remain childless is typically made after entering a committed relationship, it is logical to assume

that one's partner would be very influential in the decision. Unlike the other respondents who did not mention influence from other family members, one respondent stated that his parents had indirectly influenced his decision not to have children. He recalled:

“My most painful memories from childhood were witnessing my young parents verbally argue over lack of financial resources. I was convinced at a young age that I did not want the financial burden of children.”

#### Reactions from Others

The next set of interview items addressed the research question regarding the reactions voluntarily childless men have encountered in response to their decisions to remain without children. These questions involved exploring reactions voluntarily childless men had encountered from family, friends, co-workers, and others regarding their decision to remain childless. Only the older gay respondent reported he had not received any negative reactions to the decision to remain childless. He explained:

“Being gay it was assumed that you would not have children. Having children would have caused conversation.”

The major theme regarding reactions was one of inquisitiveness and surprise. Seven of the respondents, including the younger gay respondent, had received inquisitive reactions to their decision or the decision was met with disbelief.

Reactions have included:

“When they hear you don’t have children they ask why not, with a very surprised look.”

“Sometimes they react with surprise and sometimes support. More often than not it is confusing to people and they don’t know how to handle it.”

“Why would you not want kids?”

“I think my parents believe that someday we will change our minds.”

Others added:

“People often ask when we are going to have children. People rarely ask if we are going to have them, but rather when we are going to have them.”

“Some people are shocked and appalled that we don’t have children after eight years of marriage.”

“It is like there is a disconnect. Most people just don’t get it.”

A White, 36-year-old respondent explained:

Female coworkers often do not understand. You have kids to have a fulfilled life. Male coworkers seem to have an understanding of why I would not want children. I have noticed that the less educated a person is the more utter disbelief they have about my decision not to have children. They think that if they talk to me for a moment, I will see the light and be convinced that I should have children.

It is obvious from these responses that pronatalist views are still held by many in society today. It is as if these men and their partners have broken a rule by not

having children. Parenthood continues to be the norm and these men have violated it.

A secondary theme was an expressed urgency regarding starting a family. Upon hearing that they do not have children, some respondents were told that they needed to “get busy.” In their words:

“A friend of mine who has a kid will tell me that we should get busy.”

“After hearing that I was not a father, an older man looked at me and said, ‘Son, you better get busy!’”

My dad said “Okay, you guys need to get busy and have a grandson for me.” It is expected. The thought of not having children does not even enter into the consciousness of some people. It doesn’t make sense because the idea is actually foreign to them.

Other respondents were told they would be a good father. They stated:

“I am very often told by women that I would be a great father.”

“We have been told over and over that we have so much love to give and that we would make great parents.”

Some respondents reported receiving negative reactions from members of their religious communities. They remarked:

“Someone gave me a CD recording of a Bible study he gave regarding the blessings of children and why every married couple should have as many as possible.”

“A woman at our church who had five children scolded us for not taking our responsibility to God seriously by having children.”

However, another respondent was quite surprised by the reaction he received from a clergyman. He recalled:

“I had an interesting conversation on an airplane about two months ago with a pastor of a conservative church. He surprisingly was very respectful of my decision not to have children. I was surprised.”

One respondent remembered how his mother reacted when she learned of his decision. He recalled:

“My mother was terribly disappointed. She became very upset.”

Other respondents stated that the pressure has decreased over time as they've grown older and as siblings have had children. Some people just gave up asking when they were going to have children. Comments included:

“Family members used to ask when we were going to have children and we told them we were not ready. After so many years they quit asking.”

“My mom bugs me about having a kid, but less since my brother and sister each have a kid.”

Some respondents reported receiving positive reactions as illustrated by the following:

“My parents have always been behind us 100%.”

“I know my boss is going through a divorce right now and he has two kids and he has some regrets of having children and he is very supportive.”

“Most people have said they admire us and wish they had been as smart.”

Another respondent remarked that the decision really wasn't discussed:

“People usually don't ask why we don't have children and we do not go into details.”

A secondary theme involved judgment and regret. Many received reactions indicating that they would regret the decision later or they received judgmental comments. For example:

“Some people have commented that we better have children before it's too late because we will change our minds later.”

“People have told us that we will be miserable without children.”

“We have been told that it was selfish of us not to have children.”

Some people have responded with reproach. I have been told that I am a bad person for not having children. Some people try to reprimand me. One woman told me that my wife and I should have children because capable, intelligent, successful couples are morally obligated to have children.

The experiences of these respondents bears witness to the literature that states the voluntarily childless are perceived negatively and stigmatized by society.

In order to address the research question regarding whether voluntarily childless men incorporate negative societal evaluations into their concepts of self, the respondent's were asked how the reactions they received made them feel and think about themselves as men. The main theme revolved around not letting negative reactions influence their self-concepts. All of the respondents

said the reactions they had received did not influence how they felt or thought about themselves as men. All but one respondent stated they did not let the negative reactions bother them. The fact that the men did not let negative reactions bother them could be due the privilege men have in society and to how males are socialized to be independent (Brym and Lie, 2007). Such privilege and independence may make it easier to violate social norms. Based on their occupations and education levels, it is concluded that most of these men were of middle or upper-middle class status. It is possible that their occupational and financial successes have made it easier for them to not let negative reactions bother them or influence the way they feel about themselves as men. When responding to the question of how negative reactions made them feel, their comments included:

“It did not affect me at all.”

“It did not make me feel any different.”

“Well, it never did bother me.”

Some respondents indicated they did not associate having children with masculinity. A 41-year-old, White respondent remarked:

I have never really assigned having a child with masculinity which sounds bizarre because I know so many cultures do. I can't say that it affects the way I think of myself as a man either positively or negatively. I guess it doesn't really enter into the picture.

Others stated:

“Having children does not make you a man.”

“I never felt that my masculinity was challenged.”

“I don’t think having children is connected to my gender.’

One respondent reported feelings of sadness at having disappointed his father while another felt indignant. He stated:

“When my father made that comment to my wife about having a grandson for him, I was a little sad and disappointed that I was not going to be able to do that for him.”

“It made me feel defensive and indignant that someone else was really sticking their nose way too far into my business.”

The men in this sample all seemed to have high self-esteem. They seemed to feel good about themselves, their relationships, and their choices. Based on this sample it appears that voluntarily childless men feel good about themselves, are confident in their decisions, and do not incorporate negative societal evaluations into their self-concepts.

Another way in which this study explored identity was to ask the men what term they thought should be used to refer to people who choose not to have children. The main theme was the perception that the term “childfree” has the most positive connotations. Six of the men chose the term “childfree” and one chose “voluntarily childfree.” Their thoughts included:

“Childless just sounds bad. I prefer childfree. It has positive connotations.”

“I don’t see the same negative with childfree as I do with childless.”

“I prefer the term childfree. It has a more positive connotation to it.”

“Childfree sounds more positive where childless sounds like you may have had a child and lost it.”

Another respondent replied:

“I don’t know; I guess voluntarily childless.”

A few others expressed a desire not to be labeled as illustrated by these comments:

“It is too bad there needs to be a term.”

“I would choose not to have a title. I do not think we should be labeled.”

“I don’t have a term. It is a personal choice.”

It can be concluded that voluntarily childless men prefer that society perceive their choice in the same way they do, positively. They prefer to be thought of as childfree or to not have any label at all. Voluntarily childless men do not perceive their decision to remain without children as deviant even though it may not be typical.

One research question had to do with identifying what strategies, if any; voluntarily childless men use to manage the stigma of their childless status. The respondents were asked how they have responded to the reactions they have received from family, friends, coworkers, and others. The predominant theme was lack of concern about negative reactions. The majority of the respondents replied that they did not let negative reactions bother them and none reported

feeling compelled to explain their decision. This is not surprising given that these men do not incorporate negative societal reactions into their self-concepts. Their responses included:

“I just don’t worry about it.”

“I do not get irritated that others feel they have the duty to direct the structure of my life.”

“I do not feel the need to explain myself.”

Others commented:

“I’ve tried to be empathetic and put myself in their shoes and try to figure out why they are sad for me.”

“I am not going to let others push me around.”

“I let it pass. Early on it was a little uncomfortable for me but I have never felt a desire to explain myself. Quite frankly, it is not their concern.”

One respondent, a White, 36-year-old, reported trying to convince others that remaining childless was the more logical choice and should be perceived as normative behavior. He stated:

You need an argument for a reason to have children. When I looked at the reasons to have children they did not hold water. The default was simply to proceed without children. When people challenge me on my decision I listen to their argument but then I explain my logical case against having children.

None of the respondents reported reactions that indicated the use of accounts as described by Scott and Lyman (1968). While the respondents did not try to excuse or justify their decisions to remain without children, one respondent tried to redefine his choice as normative by stating that people should have a reason to choose parenthood but not having children should be “the default” and require no explanation. This respondent used a strategy that most closely fits what Park (2002) referred to as redefining the situation. This respondent reported trying to convince others that his choice was actually normative and that the decision to have children is the one that needs to be explained.

### Conclusion

In summary, the voluntarily childless men in this sample value the institution of family in spite of their choice not to have children. In early adulthood most of them believed they would eventually have children; however, they gradually made the decision not to after entering a relationship with their current partners. These voluntarily childless men have received negative reactions to their decision to remain childless but they do not incorporate these negative reactions into their self-concepts. These men would like for society to perceive their choice not to have children as positively as they themselves perceive it and most prefer the label of childfree.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

In this study I have delineated major and minor patterns with regards to the ways voluntarily childless men define the meaning of family, make the decision to remain childless, the reactions they receive to this decision, and the impact of their childless status on their identities. These findings have been placed within a general theoretical perspective, put forth by Scott and Lyman (1968). The voices of the respondents are direct quotes and give credibility to the findings. I also sought in this exploratory study some answers to specific questions.

#### Constructing the Meaning of Family

This study explored how voluntarily childless men define and construct the meaning of family life. Most respondents reported having prior interaction with children. Many reported having positive experiences with children and stated they enjoyed children. While a few respondents thought of their parents and their siblings when asked what family meant to them, most gave definitions of family that were based on intimacy and included affiliated kin. This most closely fits the more modern constructions of family that do not require a child, such as the definitions provided by Thompson and Hickey (1999) and Davidson and Moore

(1996), rather than more traditional constructions of family that specify to be a family a household must have a dependent, such as the definition proposed by Popenoe (1993).

### Decision-Making Process

This study explored how men make the decision to remain childless. Men were asked how they felt about children prior to getting married or entering their current relationship. Approximately half of the respondents thought they would eventually have children. A few respondents reported feeling ambivalent about children while two stated they knew they did not want children before entering their current relationships. The older of two gay respondents stated that he never perceived children as an option for himself because he was gay.

Respondents were also asked if they had interactions with other childless couples. About half of the respondents reported having relationships with other couples who did not have children. Four respondents stated that they did not know any other childless couples. Three other respondents stated that couples they used to be friends with now have children and their relationship has changed. Many of the voluntarily childless women interviewed by Veevers (1975) reported difficulty in maintaining friendships with people who have children. Two of the individuals in this sample also stated that they had friends with children as well, however it was difficult to have the type of relationship they would like with these couples since childcare responsibilities limited opportunities to spend time

together and also limited the spontaneity that the respondents value. The respondents were also asked if they were ever excluded from activities in which children were present. Only three or four implied or stated they had been; two others indicated they excluded themselves voluntarily.

Respondents were asked how they had made the decision to remain childless, what the reasons were for their decision, and who, if anyone, had influenced their decision. Two respondents had made the decision individually prior to their current relationships and then sought out partners with similar desires and attitudes. The two respondents were both in their 30s, reflecting the possibility that younger people are more likely to view the childless lifestyle as an acceptable option.

The majority of respondents reported the decision had been made as a couple after entering their current relationship. The decision was usually made gradually, over a period of years. In Shehan and Kammeyer's study (1997) the majority of couples made the decision after marriage in a 4-step process. Three of the men in this sample, who had made the decision after marriage, reported a decision process consistent with Shehan and Kammeyer's 4-step process. In this process the decision is not consciously made until years after entering the relationship. Such couples become childless by evading the issue. In Shehan and Kammeyer's (1997) 4-step process the couple enters the relationship with the intention of eventually having children. In the first stage, having children is

postponed for a definite time. The couple wants to wait until specific goals are met, such as completing school or getting established in their careers. The second stage involves a postponement for an indefinite time. At this point the couple is vague about the reasons for not having children at that time and vague about when they will have children. Some couples will state that they cannot yet afford children or the time just is not right. According to Shehan and Kammeyer (1997), the third stage involves considering the advantages and disadvantages of parenthood. The couple may openly consider for the first time the possibility of remaining childless. During the fourth and final stage the couple accepts childlessness as permanent. They recognize that the decision has already been made. In this sample, this gradual process was more often reported by respondents in their 40s, 50s, and 60s. I conclude from this that the respondents born in earlier generations about 50 years ago did not consider voluntary childlessness as an acceptable option until the opportunity for having children was almost gone.

Concerning who had influenced their decision to remain childless, four of the men reported that their wives had influenced their decision. Three others reported that their own observations of children had influenced them, while one respondent stated the decision had been influenced by his parents' financial struggles when he was a child.

During the third stage of Shehan and Kammeyer's 4-step process (1997) the couple considers the advantages and disadvantages of not having children. The respondents were asked the reasons they did not want children. Many of the respondents considered the disadvantages of parenthood during the third stage of Shehan and Kammeyer's 4-step process (1997). Three themes emerged regarding the reasons respondents wanted to remain childless. The first was a lifestyle theme. Five respondents reported wanting to remain childless because they realized after a time, that they enjoyed their lives as they were. Three men wanted to remain childless in order to have more time and resources for travel and other leisure activities. A second theme that emerged regarding why respondents wanted to remain childless was to focus on other goals such as pursuing education and careers. For two respondents their careers took up a major portion of their time. These respondents talked about the freedom of not having children and how they chose to use the time for their careers. A third theme that emerged was a concern about resources, world population, and the environment. At least three respondents believed that choosing not to have children helped them to have less of a negative impact on the environment and saved valuable resources.

The perceived advantages and disadvantages of choosing not to have children were also explored in this study. The advantage most frequently reported was financial. By not having children the respondents stated they could

save more money and have more disposable income. Another theme was freedom to pursue other activities, and a third was a closer relationship with their partners. Burgwyn (1981) found that many couples wanted to remain childless to maintain the special nature of the one-to-one relationship and many men in this sample stated a similar desire. The respondents in this sample reported enjoying spending time with their partners and expressed concern that children would change the nature and quality of these relationships. Four men commented on the investment of time and effort children would require. As far as disadvantages were concerned, six respondents did not identify any disadvantages of the decision to remain childless. Three men expressed the loss of companionship as a disadvantage while three others were concerned about who would care for them when they grew old.

Respondents were asked whether they had ever reconsidered the decision to remain childless. Eight reported they had never reconsidered the decision while three reported they had reconsidered when they had spent time with children. As stated above, three expressed concern over who would care for them in late adulthood but ultimately concluded that even if they had children, there was no guarantee children would take care of them when they were older.

### Reactions to Decision

The above questions were explored to provide a foundation and context for the research questions. The first research question this study explored is what

reactions have voluntarily childless men encountered in response to their decisions to remain without children. All of the respondents but one reported receiving negative reactions from family, friends, coworkers, or others about their decision to remain childless. The respondent who received no negative reactions believed that his status as a gay male led others to expect that he would not have children. For those respondents who had received negative reactions, the major theme that emerged was inquisition. People questioned why the respondent was not going to have children, thus implying that having children is the expected behavior. A second theme that emerged was “get busy.” Numerous respondents stated that when others learned they did not have children they told them they needed to “get busy.” In my opinion, living in a pronatalist society puts pressure on the childless to reproduce during the prime childrearing years between the ages of 25 to 40. Family members in particular were likely to keep asking the person when they were going to have kids (ignoring their declared intention to remain childless) or told them they had to have them and they would make great parents. Some respondents said people looked at them like they just did not understand and some reported being told by others that their decision was wrong or that they were making a mistake.

### Identity and Stigma

The second research question was whether voluntarily childless men incorporate negative societal evaluations into their concepts of self. One

respondent reported feeling sad that he disappointed his father, who wanted grandchildren. All of the other respondents stated they did not let negative societal evaluations bother them. According to Shehan & Kammeyer (1997), social pressures to have children can be so strong that many couples hide their intention to remain childless from others. They stated that couples devise different strategies to conceal their intentions from family, friends, co-workers and strangers. Inconsistent with these findings, in this sample none of the respondents reported concealing their decision to remain without children. I believe this inconsistency was due to a change in societal attitudes and indicate more acceptance of the decision not to have children.

Since the choice to remain childless is a decision unexpected by others, voluntarily childless couples may be expected to explain their decision. According to Scott and Lyman (1968), individuals in such situations are likely to give “accounts” in the form of excuses and justifications. Respondents in this sample did not report trying to excuse their choice to remain without children. Instead, most reported they felt no need to explain their decision.

Scott and Lyman (1968) defined justifications as “accounts in which one accepts responsibility for the act in question, but denies the pejorative quality associated with it” (p. 47). They also explained that a person using a justification admits their behavior is wrong but then claims the situation they were in permitted or required the act. None of the respondents in this sample gave any

indication that they questioned whether remaining childless might be wrong, although some expressed concern about who would care for them in late adulthood. One respondent tried to redefine his choice as normative by stating that people should have a reason to choose parenthood but not having children should be “the default” and require no explanation.

The third research question was what strategies, if any, do voluntarily childless men use to manage the stigma of their childfree status. In Park’s (2002) study, respondents used six different strategies for managing the stigma associated with voluntary childlessness. The two strategies most commonly used by males were passing and redefining the situation. In response to negative reactions, most of the respondents in this sample did not report using any of the strategies identified by Park (2002). One respondent used a strategy that most closely fits what Park (2002) referred to as redefining the situation. This respondent reported trying to convince others that his choice was actually normative and that the decision to have children is the one that needs to be explained.

There are a few potential explanations for why the respondents in this sample did not let negative reactions from others bother them or why they felt no need to use stigma management strategies. One possibility has to do with the age of the participants in the sample. The mean age of this sample was 43.5. Many of the men while still capable of having children are well beyond the age

when society expects people to have children. Many reported that people no longer ask them when they are going to have children. It is possible that these men may have used strategies when they were younger but no longer recall using them. It would have been beneficial to ask the respondents if they recalled using any of the stigma management strategies. Another possibility relates to previous findings (Calhoun and Selby, 1980) that women are more subject to pronatalist attitudes than men because reproduction is more closely identified with the female role. It is also possible that these findings may be explained by the conclusion made by Koropecj-Cox and Pendell (2007) that attitudes toward those who chose to remain voluntarily childless are changing. Some respondents did report reactions from others who were supportive. With adequate social support, respondents may not feel the need to use stigma management strategies even when faced with negative reactions by others.

### Labeling

Since there has been a lack of agreement amongst social scientists on how to label individuals who choose not to have children, the respondents were asked what term they preferred. Over half chose the term “childfree”; however, three respondents thought there should not be a label for those who choose not to have children.

## Voluntarily Childless Gay Men

Unlike previous studies, this study included voluntarily childless gay men in the sample. Two of the participants in this sample of 11 were gay. Their responses were similar to those of heterosexual men on most of the questions. The main difference was that the older of the two gay men reported that he never even considered children as an option because he was gay and he believed that having children would have been a controversial choice. The younger of the two gay men, however, did consider having children. To me, this suggests how strong the pronatalist credence has permeated society such that most people seem compelled to consider children.

### Summary

In summary, the responses of this sample indicate that voluntarily childless men do not have traditional concepts of family. Consistent with the results of other studies, the majority of the men made the decision to remain childless after marriage or entering a committed relationship. As expected, almost all of these voluntarily childless men reported receiving negative reactions to their decision but they do not use accounts and only one used a stigma management strategy. These respondents felt good about their decisions and did not appear to incorporate negative societal reactions into their concepts of self. They all appeared to have high self-esteem. The majority of the respondents preferred to be identified as “childfree.” Although these respondents have chosen

not to have children themselves, their responses indicate that they value the institution of the family.

### Limitations

There is considerably more information available in the literature about voluntarily childless women compared to voluntarily childless men. While this study has narrowed this gap, it is not without limitations. First, although attempts were made to recruit a diverse sample, two respondents were Black and the remaining was White. In addition, only two of the respondents were gay; a 33 year old Black man and a 53 year old White man. The sample was also limited to residents of the Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan area. It is possible that voluntarily childless men living in other parts of the country might not report similar experiences and attitudes. However, the aim of this qualitative study is to describe and better understand this population rather than to generalize to a larger population.

Secondly, this study limited participation to men who voluntarily chose not to have children and excluded those who were childless due to other circumstances. Although this restriction was intentional, this study did not contribute to the literature on men who are childless due to infertility. Many couples who are involuntarily childless voluntarily choose not to adopt and to remain without children. These couples may face some of the same, as well as different, issues as those who are not childless due to infertility.

Third, participants were limited to men and their experiences and excluded their partners or any other individuals who might have influenced their decisions. Some of the men reported that their decisions were influenced by their partners. Including partners may add to the understanding of the decision making process. Providing the interview questions to the participants ahead of time might have allowed respondents deeper reflections and different results, To help strengthen the findings it would have been beneficial to discuss issues of veracity, triangulate the data and employ the use of an auditor.

#### Directions for Future Research

Studying voluntarily childless men and their partners would expand the range of experiences and add to the literature on the decision making process, societal reactions, stigma management, and other issues relevant to both voluntarily childless men and women. It would also add to the literature to include individuals who identify as childfree because they chose not to adopt, even though they wanted children, but are infertile. Studying these individuals could reveal whether their experiences are similar to, or different from, those who chose childlessness but did not have fertility issues.

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## APPENDIX

# INTERVIEW GUIDE

## Part 1: Demographic Characteristics

1. Do you have any children?
2. Are you voluntarily childfree?
3. What is your age?
4. In what year did you begin your relationship with your partner?
5. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
6. What is your occupation?
7. What do you do for recreation?

## Part 2

8. Describe your prior experiences with children such as nieces and nephews, cousins, children in your neighborhood, children of friends and others.
9. Do anyone else's children refer to you as Uncle \_\_\_\_\_?
10. Do you consider your family to be a "close" family? Do you have frequent interactions with your parents? Your siblings?
11. What does the word "family" mean to you?

12. How did you feel about children prior to getting married or starting your current relationship? What sorts of relationships and interactions did you have, if any, with children?
13. Have you had interactions with other childfree couples? If so, please describe what their relationship is to you and describe the type of interactions.
14. What are your earliest memories pertaining to your eventual decision not to have children? What was happening in your life around the time you first remember thinking about this decision?
15. Describe how you made the decision to remain childfree and what were or are the reasons for your decision? Was the decision made individually or as a couple? Was there a particular defining moment or experience that influenced your decision to not have children? Did you arrive at the decision with ease or difficulty?
16. Have there been times when you reconsidered the decision to remain childfree? If so, please describe the circumstances and why you decided to remain childfree.
17. Who, if anyone, influenced your childfree decision? Were they childless?
18. With whom do you discuss the issue to remain childfree? Who provides you with support for this decision?
19. What sorts of reactions have you had from others when you disclose (or

when they otherwise learn) your decision not to have children? How have you managed any negative reactions you have received?

#### Part 4

18. How have others reacted to this decision? Family (especially parents)? Friends? Co-workers? Others?
19. Describe any positive or negative reactions you have encountered. Who were they from? Describe the setting and circumstances.
20. How did these reactions make you feel?
21. How have you responded to the reactions from family? Friends? Co-workers? Others?
22. Have you been excluded from social activities when it's customary for children to be present?
23. Tell me about the advantages and disadvantages you perceive in the different areas of your life by remaining childfree.