THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF OLDER VOLUNTARILY CHILDLESS COUPLES

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To the Dean of the Graduate School:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Cindy Nelson entitled "The Lived Experiences of Older Voluntarily Childless Couples." I have examined this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy with a major in Family Therapy.

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DEDICATION

To Parker Nelson, my precious husband, who has been so patient and so encouraging to me throughout this long process. Your love and your support have inspired and sustained me. I love you and thank you more than words can say.

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Where to begin to express my gratitude is not the problem. Where to end is the problem. I am most grateful to my Heavenly Father, on whom I have leaned time and again during this process. Thank you, Father, that when anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy (Psalm 94:19).

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ABSTRACT

CINDY NELSON

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF OLDER VOLUNTARILY CHILDLESS COUPLES

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This research explored the experiences of voluntary childlessness in couples 50 years of age and older. A qualitative phenomenological perspective guided the research in order to capture the individual meanings of the participants. Life course theory was used to offer a framework for explaining and understanding changing societal conditions and social forces over time. The researcher interviewed 15 voluntarily childless couples (30 individuals) who had been in a committed relationship for a minimum of 20 years and who volunteered to be a part of the study. Semi-structured interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim and analyzed to determine themes. Three themes emerged from the data: (a) Creating a Path to Childlessness; (b) Creating a Full and Satisfying Life Together; and (c) Creating a Different View of Family. Selected participant responses are included to illustrate the identified themes.

The results of this study were compared to existing literature on childlessness and conclusions were drawn. Implications and limitations were discussed, as well as recommendations for future research.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

COPYRIGHT iii

DEDICATION iv

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS v

ABSTRACT vii

LIST OF TABLES xi

Chapter

I. INTRODUCTION 1

Statement of the Problem 3
Purpose of the Study 4
Research Question 5
Theoretical Framework 5
Methodological Approach 6
Definition of Terms 7
Delimitations 8
Assumptions 8
The Researcher as Person 9
Summary 10

II. LITERATURE REVIEW 11

Early Studies of Childlessness 12
Voluntary Childlessness 14
Factors Contributing to Childlessness 16
Prevalence of Childlessness 16
Characteristics of Childless Women 18

Current Themes in Voluntary Childlessness Studies....20
Childless Men....21
Changing Gender Roles....24
Stigma Against Childless Couples....26
Childlessness in Later Life....29
Summary....34

III. METHODOLOGY....36

Theoretical Framework....36
Researcher as Person....39
Sampling Procedures....41
Protection of Participants....43
Interview Procedures....44
Data Analysis....45
Summary....47

IV. RESULTS....49

Description of the Sample....49
Findings....54
Creating a Pathway to Childlessness....55
Creating a Full, Satisfying Life Together....61
Creating a Different View of Family....68
Summary....71

V. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS....73

Discussion....74
Creating a Pathway to Childlessness....74
Creating a Full and Satisfying Life Together....76
Creating a Different View of Family....78
Conclusion....80
Implications....82
Limitations....85
Recommendations....88
Summary....89

REFERENCES 91

APPENDICES

A. Recruitment Flyer 96
B. Initial Telephone Script 98
C. Consent Form 100
D. Demographic Information 104
E. Interview Guide 107
F. Counseling Referral List 110

LIST OF TABLES

Table

1. Participant Number, Age, Race, and Years in Committed Relationship 52

2. Participant Number, Religion, Education Level, and Combined Income 53

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Decreasing birth rates have captured the attention of social researchers and policymakers in the past four decades. Explanations for the decline in birth rates are numerous. The women's movement of the1960s and 1970s resulted in larger numbers of women working outside the home and in professions formerly and predominately filled by men, thereby postponing pregnancy. The mean age of first births has climbed from 21.4 in 1970 to 24.9 in 2000. The availability of varied, inexpensive, and effective birth control techniques has also postponed births, and more people in general are marrying later and giving up childbirth altogether (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). This does not mean that the importance of family has decreased. The acknowledgment and acceptance of alternative family forms, however, have increased dramatically. Single parent families, blended families and same-sex families have modified and expanded the definition of family, which is no longer seen merely as an institution to reproduce and rear the next generation (Connidis & McMullin, 1999).

The U.S. Census Bureau (2008) used data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) in June 2006 to compare fertility patterns of 76 million women, aged 15-50. The level of childlessness among women 40 to 44 years of age in June 2006 (20%) was twice as high as it was in 1976 (10%). Women aged 40 to 44 will end their childbearing years

with an average of 1.9 children each, a below replacement-level fertility number. This is one child less than the average for women in the same age group in 1976. This figure reflects the overall trend of declining live births in women. For example, as recently as 1976 the average was 3.1 children per woman. In the span of less than two generations the size of the average family dropped by one child. In other words, in 1976 59% of all women had 3 or more children, yet in 2006 only 28% of all women had 3 or more children. Moreover, the overall proportion of married couples with children among all households has dropped from 40.3% in 1970 to 25% in 1996. This figure partly represents the increase in one-person households, which would have some impact on the overall increase in childless households (U. S. Census Bureau, 2008).

In spite of this new demographic reality, the U.S. continues to be a pronatalist society where fertility and biological reproduction remain central, particularly to women's lives (Gillespie, 2003). Men and women have always been encouraged to reproduce. In Genesis, God spoke of one's duty to be fruitful and to multiply. Indeed, procreation within marriage has been continuously prescribed by most religions (Pearce, 2002; Veevers, 1975). Religious groups often encourage reproduction in indirect ways as well. Many churches elevate the value of families in their sponsorship of family retreats, parenthood classes, and pastoral counseling for marriage and family issues. In addition, financial support and childcare are accessible through religious social networks. Religious participation also leads to social interaction with others who value parenthood, producing a net effect of reinforcing pronatalist values (Pearce, 2002).

Indeed, the majority of women of childbearing age today will become mothers, even with reproductive choice a viable option for a vast majority of women who live in industrialized societies (Gillespie, 2003; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2010). The U. S. media, politics, and educational systems strongly promote traditional family values and emphasize the importance of the parenting role. Children hold emotional value (Tyler-May, 1995), are expected to fulfill social-psychological needs (DeOllos & Kapinus, 2002) and are a provision of support and well being in old age (Koropeckyj-Cox & Pendell, 2007). Moreover, stage-based and developmental theories address the normative views of adulthood as including marriage and family as an achievement of psychosocial development, an expansion of self, and a validation of adult status and identity, achievement and creativity (Erikson 1950; Levinson 1968). Carter and McGoldrick's (1999) family systems perspective includes having and rearing children as an integral part of their six-stage life cycle model. According to them, children move into and out of the family as the larger family system expands, contracts, and realigns itself. Finally, there is an expectation to reproduce for the survival of the nation and as a contribution to society and its economy (Tyler-May, 1995).

Statement of the Problem

As the term clearly suggests, childlessness is constructed around the idea of "less" and may be associated with a sense of lacking and absence. It is defined in opposition to the cultural constructions which perpetuate and promote parenthood as normative (Gillespie, 2003; Hird & Abshoff, 2000). Perhaps having children confers on parents a

sense of immortality and helps them to satisfy a fundamental human need for meaning and purpose that transcends death. In any event, early studies on voluntarily childless women have mostly focused on the correlates and motives for being intentionally childless (Veevers, 1975; Houseknecht, 1979), the ways in which these women manage stigma (Peterson, 1983; Reissman, 2000), the characteristics of voluntarily childless women (Gillespie, 2000), and the deviance (Veevers, 1975) of this reproductive choice. Few have explored this alternative experience or nontraditional family form (Gold & Wilson, 2002; Ireland, 1993; Thornton & Young-Demarco, 2001) . Fewer still have looked at the male perspective of voluntary childlessness or the partnered couple who has chosen to remain childless (Lunneborg, 1999; Magarick & Brown, 1981).

While the academic literature on voluntary childlessness has slowly grown in the last 40 years (Houseknecht 1979; Koropeckyj-Cox & Pendell, 2007; Tyler-May; 1995; Veevers, 1975), no studies to date have examined the personal experiences of Baby Boomers (individuals born between 1946 and 1964), married or partnered couples aged 50 and older, who make up a portion of this cohort who is childless by choice. These are couples who purposely made the decision to limit their family size to two. They not only made the deliberate, permanent and biologically irreversible choice but they are now living with the consequences of moving into their retirement years without children.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to explore the lived experiences of 15 heterosexual married or partnered couples, aged 50 and older, who have been together for

a minimum of 20 years, and in which neither the husbands nor the wives sought pregnancy, adoption, or fostering and were able to remain childless because of reliable birth control methods. Marriage and family therapists will likely see more couples and individuals who are contemplating whether or not to become parents, and it will be important for therapists to recognize all aspects of reproductive choice. Learning about the experience and the later-life meanings of this decision will ideally provide family practitioners with tools necessary to help couples navigate this choice.

Research Question

To fulfill the purpose of this study, the following question was explored:

What is the lived experience and meaning for married or partnered couples, aged 50 and older, who have chosen to remain childless?

Theoretical Framework

The life course perspective (Elder, 1994) was used in this study. It offers a framework for explaining and understanding how changing societal conditions and social forces influence developmental trajectories and transitions over time. A trajectory refers to a sequence of linked age-related experiences such as one's education or occupation. It occurs over a long period of time. Transitions, on the other hand, are defined life events that occur within a trajectory. Common transitions are moving out of the parental home, getting married, or moving to a new location, all typical life events, but signifying individual concrete change that is marked in time. This perspective allows for thinking about lives as embedded in historical time as well as emphasizing cohorts,

about lives as embedded in historical time as well as emphasizing cohorts, multigenerational links, culture and tradition.

Life course theory (Elder, 1998) is based on a set of principles. First is that development and aging are lifelong processes. The second principle is agency, which refers to the fact that individuals are active forces in constructing their life course through the choices and actions taken. Third is the concept of time and place, in which the life of the individual is embedded in and shaped by the place and the socio-historical times in which they live. For example, the life course of a person born in 1900 will be vastly different from one born in 2000. The fourth principle of this theory is that lives are linked and lived interdependently. Individuals are continually influencing and being influenced by others. The final principle in Elder's conceptualization of life course theory is timing in life, which refers to the developmental impact of a succession of life's transitions and trajectories. This social, historical, psychological, and biological theory provides a unified lens through which to examine the life events of older married couples who have chosen to remain childless.

Methodological Approach

Phenomenology is a form of qualitative research that examines the lives of a particular group in an effort to discover the meanings of their unique experience. It was used in this study on voluntary childlessness. This particular form of inquiry seeks a different way of understanding and knowing. It attempts to capture the essence of the

world of the participants. It emphasizes discovery, description, subjectivity, and meaning of human experience, accessed in personal communication through in-depth interviews (Creswell, 2003).

Definition of Terms

The following terms were used in this study.

1. Child-bearing age - Period of woman's life between puberty and menopause, broadly categorized between 14 and 44 years of age (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).
2. Child-free - Designation of a person who does not have children and does not desire to have children because of the pull or attraction to the freedom it allows (Gillespie, 2003). This term will be used interchangeably with childless.
3. Childless - Designation of a person who does not have children and does not desire to have children because of a rejection or push away from the role and responsibilities it creates (Gillespie, 2003) This term will be used interchangeably with child-free.
4. Fecundity - The measure of being fertile; capable of producing offspring (Alba & Martinez, 2006; Rowland, 2007).
5. Infertility - Not being able to get pregnant despite having frequent, unprotected intercourse for at least a year.
6. Intentionally childless/voluntarily childless/childless by choice - These

terms will be used interchangeably throughout this dissertation in reference to the subset of women who have never had children and who desire to remain in that category, without any underlying implication that they are advantaged or disadvantaged in relation to mothers.

7. Pronatalism - An attitude or policy that encourages childbearing and childrearing (Veevers, 1975).

Delimitations

The following delimitations applied to this study:

1. Participants were heterosexual married or partnered couples aged 50 and older, who have been partnered for a minimum of 20 years..
2. Participants were couples who made the decision to remain voluntarily childless.
3. Participants may or may not be biologically able to have children, but have made a deliberate decision to not reproduce or rear children.

Assumptions

The following assumptions were made:

1. Participants volunteered to be a part of the study.
2. Participants responded openly and honestly about their experience as an intentionally childless couple.
3. The researcher was aware that as a participant-observer, she both impacted the study and was impacted by it.

4. The researcher consistently monitored her own preconceived ideas and interpretations about the subject.

The Researcher as Person

Qualitative research produces results not likely to be found through statistical analysis or any other means of quantification. Where quantitative research seeks causal determination, prediction, and generalization, qualitative research seeks illumination and further understanding of selected individuals or groups. Moreover, in qualitative phenomenological research, the participant-observer is part of the study. In this particular style of scientific inquiry, it is known that the researcher's understanding of a participant's lived experience is an interpreted understanding only, seen through his or her biases, gender, age, culture, experience, and socio-historic time, all of which can guide and constrict the research findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The researcher, as part of the study instrument, has an obligation and a responsibility to acknowledge this interpretation.

The researcher in this study is a Christian, Caucasian, female graduate student at Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas, and a marriage and family therapist in private practice. The researcher has been married for 34 years and intentionally chose not to have children. A curiosity on the part of the researcher to understand the reasons others have chosen this lifestyle and its impact in later life led to an interest in this topic. Moreover, it is hoped that sharing the experiences of others who are intentionally childless may broaden the understanding of this small but growing phenomenon.

Summary

The incidence of voluntary childlessness is increasing throughout the industrialized world. Reasons for this societal change are numerous and include influential social changes that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Effective birth control options gave women much more reproductive choice and more opportunity to engage in careers. Increasing divorce rates and the rise in cohabitation have led to a postponement of childbearing. Too, alternative family forms have increased the overall acceptance of the childless family.

The purpose of this study was to explore the meanings of voluntary childlessness among couples 50 years of age and older who have chosen to remain childless. Currently, there is an increasing body of research on the topic of childlessness, but the researcher found no studies that looked at the lives of older couples who have made the deliberate and irreversible choice to not reproduce. Recognizing that individual lives are influenced by their ever changing social and historical context, life course theory was used as the theoretical framework for this qualitative phenomenological study. Ideally this research will shed light on this phenomenon and its meaning and impact for those who are experiencing it today and will provide insight for marriage and family therapists who may work with couples considering this reproductive choice.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

It seems likely that there have always been couples who did not want to have children and who were successful in avoiding them, but childlessness as a lifestyle alternative or nontraditional family form did not emerge as a research topic until the 1970s. It was during that time that the women's movement re-emerged, birth control became available and effective, and sexual norms changed (Rowland, 2007; Veevers, 1975). Childless couples, like co-habiting couples, single parent families, gay and lesbian families, and non-marital childbearing have destabilized traditional views of family (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001).

The ability to measure the overall current number of childless couples is difficult for two primary reasons. First, whether the number represents those who are currently childless or permanently childless cannot be known. Further, childless studies do not always distinguish between those who are fecund and those who have fecundity problems (Alba & Martinez, 2006). Yet, the number of families choosing to remain childless in the U. S. has steadily grown and childlessness among women of childbearing age (14 – 44 years of age) has also risen in the last 40 years, with children among all households dropping from 40.3% in 1970 to 22% in 2006. This is due in some part to the overall increases in one-person households during the same time period. In fact the average

number of people per household has dropped from 3.1% in 1970 go to 2.6% in 2006 (U. S. Census Bureau, 2009). However, the U. S. is a strongly pronatalist country, with most women today still electing to give birth, and for those who do not, there is a stigma associated with that decision (Agrillo & Negrin, 2008; Letherby, 2002; Park, 2002; Pearce, 2002).

While the research to date has discussed the prevalence, correlates, motives, consequences and characteristics of voluntary childlessness, no studies to date have examined the personal experiences of Baby Boomers (individuals born between 1946 and 1964), over the age of 50, who have made this irrevocable decision. This chapter reviews early childlessness studies and more recent studies describing those who are voluntarily childless. The pathways resulting in this choice, the characteristics of this population, and some of the consequences associated with the decision to remain childless are also discussed..

Early Studies of Childlessness

Tyler-May (1995) examined the historical roots of pronatalism and childlessness in American culture. She explained that for early American settlers, having children was necessary for survival, since children were reared not for pleasure but for economic benefit and expansion of the community. Infant mortality was high, so couples needed to have many children to ensure that a number of them would make it to adulthood. The average colonial woman had eight children. Pronatalist forces exerted themselves through Puritan religious and community imperatives mandating women to bear many children

and tying a woman's role completely to motherhood. Intentional childlessness was not an option at all, and a woman making such a choice would be cast out of the community. A woman who was infertile was perceived as having received punishment from God for transgressions she committed.

Adding to the view that parenthood is the normal outcome of adulthood and marriage are the psychoanalytic theories of Freud (Gillespie, 2000) and Erikson (1950). These theories describe motherhood as essential to the healthy feminine psyche, reinforcing the notion that female identity is synonymous with motherhood. More recent views come from Erikson (1950) who wrote of the eight stages of man. Generativity, in stage seven, establishes and supports the next generation, primarily through the rearing of children. Failure to achieve this important task foils generativity and results in stagnation or a sense of purposelessness, according to Erikson. As Gillespie (2000) pointed out, "the nurturance of children has historically been seen to be what women do, and mothers have been seen to be what women are" (p. 225).

Most scholarly attention given to childless women before 1970 was confined to its low incidence and to its demographic correlates. Early studies treated the subject as if it were involuntary, implying that it was an unfortunate consequence rather than a conscious choice. Marriages purposefully without children were thought to be practically nonexistent. If women who chose nonparenthood were discussed at all, they were described as deviant, immature, unhappy, lonely or selfish (Housenecht, 1987; Pohlman, 1970; Rowland, 2007; Veevers, 1975).

Voluntary Childlessness

Sociologist Judith Veevers was an early researcher in the field of voluntary childlessness. She interviewed 52 Caucasian, Canadian women, ranging in age from 23 to 71, all of whom clearly stated they were childless by choice. They were overwhelmingly educated, married, and employed. Interviews, which lasted approximately 4 hours, included discussion of the women's personal histories, attitudes about childlessness, and evaluations of what they perceived to be the maternal role. Veevers (1973) found that one-third of these women entered into their marriages with childlessness as a firm condition. Most had recognized their "negative decisions regarding the value of children" (p. 358) in their adolescence. The other two-thirds simply postponed parenthood until some future time, a time that never came. This group, like most conventional wives, assumed they would have children eventually. Veevers believed that this group remained childless as a result of a gradual, distinctive four-stage process. The first stage is a clear commitment to have children later when the time is right. In the second stage the couple remains committed to parenthood, but because of life's distractions of education, career, friends, and travel, they become vague about when it will occur. During the third phase, they consciously acknowledge to themselves that they may not have children. This phase represents a qualitative change in thinking, according to Veevers. Finally, in the fourth stage, the couple comes to the realization that they will never have children. Often there is no overt decision made, only a recognition that the event has occurred.

Rolf Peterson (1983) analyzed 203 first-year psychology student responses, using

a story-telling procedure to measure motivation for and effects of intentional childlessness. The students, 143 females and 60 males, were given extra credit in a college course if they volunteered to be part of the study. Each person was given a starter-sentence to complete about 2 hypothetical individuals, one of whom wanted children, and another who did not want children. The participants were to write a brief story about each hypothetical individual including the following information: what they thought about their situation, how others reacted to their decision, what happens at the end of the story, and how the person feels about the outcome. Results were classified as either positive effects, negative effects, or do not know, based on participant story-completion responses. The results showed that voluntarily childless married individuals were often rejected by friends, and if they decided to remain childless after their "misguided intentions" (p. 328) have been pointed out, they are likely to be ostracized. Peterson believed the study to be important because it pointed out the negative bias with which some in our society at that time viewed voluntary childlessness.

Of the early researchers on voluntary childlessness, Pohlman (1970) stands in contrast to others who described the misfortune and emptiness of this lifestyle choice. His work gives equal consideration to the negative aspects of having children. Among them are financial costs, noise, mess, confusion, interference with marital satisfaction, health costs, the psychological costs of guilt, and responsibility for childrens' actions and behaviors. Motives for remaining childless are reducing threats of overpopulation, having greater financial freedoms and opportunities, and affording more leisure time.

Factors Contributing to Childlessness

The multidisciplinary research on voluntary childlessness, which began to proliferate in the 1970s, tended to integrate psychological, sociological and economic data. The social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s, the birth control pill, and the 1973 Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion are among the factors that led to the increase in voluntary childlessness and the subsequent increase in research on the subject (Caldwell, 2008). Finances also played a role. As the dollar buys less, individuals become frightened of the burgeoning costs of raising even one child. With greater numbers of women working either out of choice or necessity, motherhood seems to be an onerous added responsibility. Ideas and ideals about the American family have given way to new realities such as high divorce rates, postponed marriages and births for career opportunities, and sex for pleasure rather than for procreation (Tyler-May, 1995). Also cited in early literature on this subject is growing concern about the environment, world population increases, and overconsumption, all adding social legitimacy to the childless life (Pohlman, 1970; Veevers, 1975). With so many changing mores associated with the 1960s and 1970s, motherhood had become a matter of choice.

Prevalence of Childlessness

And choice has meant change. The U.S. Bureau of Census (2002) figures first published in May, 1980 reported that childlessness had risen sharply among women less than 35 years of age. The proportions of childlessness increased from 24% in 1960 to 40% in 1979 for ever-married women 20-24 years of age. Furthermore, the census report

predicted that these proportions of young married women who were childless resulted from a decision not to delay motherhood but to remain childless permanently. Indeed, U. S. Census (2008) data show that to be the case. In June 2006, 20% of women 40 to 44 years of age were childless, a proportion that has doubled since 1976. Overall, females aged 15 to 44 years of age had an average of 68.4 births per 1000 women in 2006, compared to 122.7 births per 1000 women in 1957, the highest ever recorded number of annual births.

U.S. figures are similar to those of other industrialized countries. In 2005, differences in the mean age of women at birth of first child were significantly higher than in 1975 across the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2010) countries. In the U.S. women's age at first birth averaged 25.2 years of age and in the United Kingdom the age was 29.8 years of age. Along with increases in the mean age of first births, there were significant increases in late-age births (first birth at age 40 and older) from 1970 to 2005 in industrialized countries. The OECD (2010) article highlighted that fertility at later ages increased in the mid-1990s in many other parts of the world. The convergence of these two trends, a reduction in fertility rates at younger ages and an increase of fertility rates at later ages, has contributed to overall fertility rates staying close to 2 children per woman in the U. S., a minimum replacement-level fertility rate.

Characteristics of Childless Women

Early research on voluntarily childless women sought to identify the correlates of childlessness that may predict future trends. At that time, it was learned that they were more likely to live in large urban areas and marry at relatively later ages. They tended to have above average education, often with university degrees, and to have a greater occupational status and accompanying income (Veevers, 1973).

Ireland (1993) found childless women to hold nontraditional views of the female role. She investigated 100 women living in Northern California between 38 and 50 years of age who had varying marital statuses, sexual orientations, and ethnic backgrounds. Focused, in-depth interviews were conducted after each woman completed the Bem Sex Inventory, the results of which determined one of three childless group classifications. The first group was traditional, or childless because of infertility or other health reasons. The second group was transitional, or childless by postponement, and the third group was transformative, or childless by choice.

Traditional women intended to become mothers, but biologically could not be. These 31 women talked of mourning the loss of their imagined identities and accepting and integrating a positive sense of self. This process was described as variable, depending on the extent to which their personal identities were tied to mothering (Ireland, 1993).

Transitional women demonstrate the tension and conflict of multiple goals. The social changes of the previous decades have opened possibilities for them that were not typical for earlier generations. Maternal ambivalence and difficulty in finding the right

time for childbearing contribute to delays in motherhood, delays that may lead to permanent childlessness (Ireland, 1993).

The transformative woman is one who is childless by choice. Ireland (1993) describes these women as achievement-oriented, independent, and egalitarian in their relationships with others. Of the 100 women in her study, 39 fit into this category and of those, most viewed having a career and children as mutually exclusive. Finally, Ireland (1993) reported that these women are able to deflect negative social judgments about their childless choice, breaking social and gender norms to embrace the energy and excitement of new forms of creativity and nurturance.

Houseknecht (1979) examined the relationship between voluntary childlessness and marital satisfaction. Her findings showed that married women who were childless by choice scored higher in overall marital satisfaction when compared to mothers. Fifty voluntarily childless married women, between 25 and 40 years of age, were compared to 50 same-aged married mothers who were matched on education, religious affiliation, and participation in the work-force. Each participant completed the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, which measures overall marital quality in four areas: marital satisfaction, dyadic consensus, dyadic cohesion, and affective expression. Findings revealed that childless women scored higher than mothers in overall adjustment, most significantly in the area of cohesiveness, in which differences were significant on all 4 subscales. Moreover, they were shown to be disproportionately unassociated with formal religious affiliation.

Finally, these women were more egalitarian in their attitudes toward themselves and others.

In sum, early researchers have studied the prevalence, characteristics, and stigma of voluntary childlessness. A broad profile of this increasingly visible group has emerged. Later research is marked by an increasing recognition of the right to not have children and by a gradual retreat from the centrality of motherhood (Ireland, 1993). This paper will now turn to more current themes noted in the literature on childless adults.

Current Themes in Voluntary Childlessness Studies

Current literature on voluntary childlessness tends to place it within the trend of overall change in family behavior associated with the second demographic transition (SDT) (Lesthaeghe, 1998; Van de Kaa, 1987). They described the unprecedented shifts in family formation that have occurred since the 1970s. These include increased cohabitation and divorce, childbearing outside marriage, a rising age at first marriage and at childbearing, and declining fertility and marriage rates. Also included in SDT changes are non-conformism, a decline of traditional religious beliefs, higher permissiveness in personal matters such as homosexuality and abortion, more openness about sexuality, and higher value placed on personal fulfillment. While not mentioning life course theory, Lesthaeghe (1998) suggested that these developments are caused by shifts in cultural norms, values and attitudes that coincide with political, economic and societal changes regarding family life.

The following sections highlight three particular areas that are important to the discussion of voluntary childlessness: childless men, changing gender roles, and the specific advantages and disadvantages of choosing a childless lifestyle. Disadvantages include stigma, regret, old age consequences, and legacy.

Childless Men

Research on childlessness has focused predominately on Caucasian, middle class women. Research on childless men is a small percentage of the literature on childlessness. Possibly the shortage of interest in men reflects the assumption that men's adult identity formation is not derived purely from the role of father. Fertility and the ability to reproduce have traditionally been women's issues (Gillespie, 2003). Men have largely acquired and maintained role identities as competent adults through the clearly delineated developmental tasks of career, financial success, and marriage and family life (Levinson, 1968). Moreover, men have not generally perceived their careers or other non-family demands to be in competition with family life, nor have they generally received criticism for choosing to remain childless. It has been suggested (Cain, 2001; Gillespie, 2003; Lunneborg, 1999) that manhood and fatherhood have not been socially linked as strongly as female identity and motherhood.

Magarick and Brown (1981) compared 44 childless men and 51 fathers, 29 to 31 years of age, using the California Psychological Inventory and the Bowerman Scale of Marital Satisfaction. The purpose of their research was to compare childless men and fathers on childhood background, marital satisfaction, social/emotional adjustment,

physical and emotional health, and attitudes toward vasectomy as a means of birth control between these two groups. Research participants had all received vasectomies at a Planned Parenthood clinic between 1971 and 1976. The childless men believed that others viewed them negatively for their reproductive choice when compared to fathers. There were also differences in modes of adjustment, with the childless fathers less tied to tradition, more inclined to experiment, and showing more capacity for independent thought than parents. Additional findings, however, showed no differences in marital satisfaction, childhood happiness, or levels of social/emotional adjustment.

This study was one of the earliest found to focus exclusively on intentional childlessness in men. Yet it is dated and is limited in its application today. The authors pointed out correlates and personality factors of this cohort but did not explore the lived experience of voluntary childlessness. It is significant, however, in that it concludes that childlessness is a viable lifestyle choice, mirroring many of the social changes and family formations occurring in the 1970s (Magrick & Brown, 1981).

Lunneborg (1999) addressed the limited research on childless men in her book *The Chosen Lives of Childfree Men.* Based on in-depth interviews with 30 middle-class, college-educated American and British childless men, this is the first book to explore the motives and consequences of voluntary childlessness from a man's perspective. Her convenience sample included 22 married or co-habiting men and 8 single men, ranging in age from 27 to 55. One participant was from Japan; another was originally from Iran. The

remaining 28 were Caucasian, living either in the U.S. or in England. In semi-structured interviews she identified nine groups of men into which her sample could be divided.

There were those who emphasized personal development, which included a means of deepening one's understanding of self and others. These men appeared to see the idea of generativity through public roles of advocacy or philanthropy, as opposed to the traditional role of reproduction. Another group stated that their personal relationships or finding happy, fulfilling lives in their own private worlds with a partner was much more important than having children (Lunneborg 1999).

Career was identified by over half the group as being extremely important, but they noted both the freedom to work and the freedom from work that comes with choosing childlessness. Another theme that was important was the idea of home. In other words, these men saw home as a refuge, a place to indulge their creative and leisure interests (Lunneborg, 1999).

Many of the men in Lunneborg's (1999) study wanted to avoid mistakes in parenting. They stated that they would feel responsible for raising their children into adulthood and did not want to feel the pain of their own child growing into a troubled adult. Many, too, simply did not like children or were ambivalent about them. Another theme was not wanting the financial responsibility, seeing themselves trapped into a career long after they were ready to retire if they had children.

Finally, the last two themes identified in Lunneborg's (1999) book were a desire to avoid stress and a wish to keep things as they are with their life partners. One group

indicated that they wished to keep stress at a minimum in their lives and they viewed parenting as a likely source of strain they could choose to avoid. Also, they seemed to settle comfortably into their adult identities, relieved of the necessity to change their lifestyles or personalities to be more patient and child-centered.

The reported studies on voluntary childless men (Lunneborg, 1999; Magarick & Brown, 1981) reveal only fragments of insight into the lived experiences of this group of men. They suggest that men who choose not to father may have less traditional belief systems, value egalitarian relationships with their partners, and prefer the flexibility childlessness gives their daily lives of work and other meaningful pursuits. One key difference in the findings from Lunneborg's (1999) more recent research is that her male respondents did not believe they were subjected to negative social perceptions. These differing results between studies, spanning almost 20 years, may reflect an increasing tolerance for the childless lifestyle. The dramatic social changes that recast traditional gender role expectations and marital and reproductive options during that time may have shaped the meanings of childlessness. Still, more studies reflecting decision making, the lived experience and shared meaning of the childfree choice are needed to adequately inform our clinical understanding of this small but growing population.

Changing Gender Roles

Attitudes toward gender equality and freedom in family form have changed considerably in the last 40 to 50 years. In the 1950s the normative American family consisted of a White, middle class breadwinner father, homemaker mother, and several

children, all living in homes in the suburbs. It was a narrow view of a model family, yet it pervaded the media and was widely accepted as the ideal and most normal. One influential book on social changes in our country in the 1960s was written by Betty Friedan (1963). She exposed how, at the time, White, middle-class mothers in the U. S. were regulated by a cultural construct of femininity that was both isolating and limiting. Women who wanted something other than marriage and motherhood were castigated. Friedan called for a reshaping of femininity that included fulfillment of maturity, potential, contentment, identity and self that may not embrace motherhood.

Giles, Shaw, and Morgan (2009) described four different ways the childless choice could be seen as a social phenomenon representing the shared views of the contemporary, gender-equal Western couple. They analyzed 116 newspaper articles in the U. K. press on voluntary childlessness from 1990-2008 to identify the ways in which print media frames this phenomenon. Frames were described as interpretive categories or themes used to present a particular social reality.

First, voluntary childlessness could be seen as an individual rights issue, seen within the larger discourse of human rights. Second, it was described as resistance to a normative, positivist view of the inevitable model of husband and wife with one or more children. The third frame explains the humanitarian reasoning behind the childless decision, one that takes into account overpopulation and an undersupply of resources. The final frame described voluntary childlessness as a personal decision. In these articles, couples eschew political or socioeconomic reasons for remaining childless. Instead this

group simply saw the personal benefits of this lifestyle, namely freedom and opportunity (Giles et al., 2009).

Strict gender roles have broken down considerably in the last 30 years. Young women assume that they will be working outside the home, and their choices are far greater than choices of traditional female occupations of nurse, teacher, or secretary. Too, men are participating more and more in childrearing, as indicated by diaper changing stations in men's public restrooms, and more men attending parent-teacher conferences. According to Ireland (1993), the meaning of gender and personal identity may carry more ambiguity and yet more mutuality today, as well. Reproductive choice is just one domain that has become both a cause and a consequence of social reconstruction and practice, occurring again within the cultural/historical milieu of our time.

Stigma Against Childless Couples

The general influence of Western pronatalist beliefs can be seen in many studies describing the non-mother as "other" (Ireland, 1993), incomplete and stigmatized (Hird & Abshoff, 2000), deviant (Veevers, 1975), self -absorbed (Gillespie, 2000), psychologically disturbed (Houseknect, 1987), and hedonistic (Magarick & Brown, 1981). These negative views of the childless choice have been explained to be the result of childhood trauma, poor parental role models, oppressive child rearing practices, too much sibling responsibility or negative identification with their mothers (Reading & Amatea, 1986).

Studies of college-aged young adults have consistently documented negative views toward childless persons, suggesting that those who perceive childless couples view them as having lesser quality relationships and possessing less interpersonal warmth (Letherby, 2002). Park (2002) interviewed 14 voluntarily childless women and 8 voluntarily childless men, all of whom recognized negative bias attributed to their choice, to learn how they managed their stigmatized identity. All participants were Caucasian, ranging from 21 to 56 years of age and living in nine separate communities in the U.S. Level of income and educational status across the sample varied, from some college, to one woman with a Ph.D. and one man with a J.D. Interviews and focus group data were transcribed and coded for themes. Park found numerous strategies used to manage or minimize the stigma of childlessness. Among them were passing, identity substitution, condemning the condemners, asserting a right to self fulfillment, claiming biological deficiency and redefining the situation.

In the passing strategy, individuals could be thought of as normal when they made the impression that they would one day have children. Identity substitution was seen as less stigmatizing and was used to limit conversation about childlessness. Examples of identity substitution included implying infertility and giving vague, short answers. Justification for the childless decision came in two forms, according to Park (2002), condemning the condemners and asserting a right to self-fulfillment. When condemning the condemners, the individual acknowledged the deviant nature of their choice, but compared it to worse actions that could be made by others, actions that are not "noticed,

caught, punished or condemned" (p. 34). Another type of justification was simply elaborating on the freedom to live life as they choose. In claiming biological deficiency, individuals excused their decision as disinterest in children or not having a maternal instinct. Finally, in redefining the situation, one's nonconformity was deemed valuable and reframed as normal for them (Park, 2002).

While representations of voluntarily childless people are predominantly negative, focusing on childless people as having misplaced priorities and unwarranted anxieties about parenting, the perception of childlessness has changed in the past 40 years. A more positive picture was drawn in a study by Koropeckyj-Cox, Romano, and Moras (2007). They used hypothetical vignettes to question the attitudes of 478 undergraduate sociology students, 357 women and 121 men, who volunteered to participate in the study. Participants' ages ranged from 18-37. Of the students, 15% were African-American, 62% were White, and the remainder were either Hispanic, Asian or other. Only 3 of the 478 students were married or co-habiting.

The authors used hypothetical vignettes to assess participants' attitudes of childless couples. The vignettes were similar in that all couples had been married and were childless. However, the couple's race, husband's occupation and wife's occupation were randomly varied to measure how these factors would influence perceptions. After reading the vignettes, students were asked to write several sentences about the couple, describing the interpersonal warmth, drive, and negative emotionality of both husband and wife and the overall relationship quality of the couple. Further, they were to make

inferences about why the couple was childless, choosing permanently childless by choice, permanently childless by infertility, or temporarily childless (Koropeckyj-Cox et al., 2007).

The impact of gender occurred in three areas of participant characteristics. First, female students' ratings of interpersonal warmth for the husband was higher than male student ratings, and female ratings of drive for both the husband and wives in the vignettes were greater than male participants. And finally, females rated couple relationship quality as significantly higher than males. While ratings of warmth of childless wives who were in traditionally male occupations were generally lower than childless wives who had more pink collar occupations, these authors found few differences in student attitudes on childlessness related to race. Further, the childless couples were rated high on relationship quality, with the students believing that the couples in these vignettes may have not needed children for marital satisfaction. However, those couples who were viewed as likely to become parents in the future were viewed more positively. The authors speculated that there is an overall belief that delayed childbearing has economic advantages and is therefore positive or normative. According to the authors, these student attitudes may reflect their understanding of the difficulties of combining marriage, work and children over the life course and may signal increased childlessness for future generations (Koropeckyj-Cox et al., 2007).

Childlessness in Later Life

Compared to earlier cohorts, adults aging over the next several decades will have

experienced many new socially constructed family arrangements, of which intentional childlessness is just one. Research on aging has compared childless women with parents to identify and predict vulnerabilities, psychological well being, and social support (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Letherby, 2002). A common theme missing in current literature, however, is the older intentionally childless woman and the later life consequences of her earlier decision. Since parenthood has traditionally been a normal, traditional and expected marker in the life course and a major factor in social integration (Levinson, 1968), it is important to look at the later life advantages and disadvantages of those who chose nonparenthood.

Connidis and McCullin (1999) challenged some of the commonly held perceptions about childlessness, asking childless individuals themselves to discuss their experiences. They reported on 287 voluntarily childless respondents, 146 women and 141 men, who participated in a larger study of social support and aging in a large Canadian city. Participants were aged from 55 to over 75. Eighty-eight participants were married and 88 were widowed. Ninety-eight were single and 23 were divorced or separated. Those who were childless by choice represented 28% of the sample and those who were childless by circumstance represented 72%. The purpose of the study was to examine the views of older childless adults in terms of the advantages and disadvantages of being older and without children. Quantitative and qualitative data were used. Advantages were reported by 67% and disadvantages were reported by 64%. Almost half of the respondents (47%) reported both advantages and disadvantages to being childless.

Among the advantages of childlessness were fewer worries associated with childrearing, financial benefits, greater freedoms and ease for travel, and career flexibility. Three key disadvantages were observed. Most commonly reported were loneliness and lack of companionship, followed by the "missed experience" or "missed opportunities", and finally, a lack of support in old age. The authors pointed out, however, that those without children in this study were able to maintain social ties throughout their lives which may mitigate against some of the disadvantages. Moreover, the respondents noted that it was a life partner rather than children who had the biggest impact on psychological well being in later life. The authors focused on those who had lived as childless adults for a long time, thus attempting to differentiate between the myth of childlessness and the actual experience of it.

Bures, Koropeckyj-Cox and Loree (2009) examined the relationship between parental status and depressive symptoms in adults aged 51 and older. Using samples developed from the RAND Center for the Study of Aging along with the 1998 Health Retirement Study and the Asset and Health Dynamics of the Elderly Survey (HRS/AHEAD), they reported on 17,469 adults every other year for eight years. They measured depression using the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D). Independent variables were parental status, marital status, psychological well-being, and gender.

Results suggested that having biological children did not protect against depression. Depression scores were correlated less to parental status and more to

psychological well-being and marital status. The authors pointed out that future research should include proximity and contact with children along with the overall quality of the parent-adult child relationship when measuring psychological well-being. Childless older adults, married or unmarried, had similar levels of depression. Gender differences did exist, however. Widowed men, with and without children, had the highest depression scores and never married biological mothers also had above average depressive symptoms. Finally, married women who had outlived their children also had high levels of depression (Bures et al., 2009).

Few scientific studies address voluntary childlessness and regret among older women. Ostensibly, since these women have chosen to remain childless, they would not likely experience regret. Change, however, guided in part by human agency, is also influenced by personal, historical and contextual variables that can alter developmental trajectories (Elder, 1998). In other words, evaluation of earlier decisions, in retrospect, may change because circumstances are always changing. In this light, older adults who may need social, emotional or financial support will not have children on whom they can depend. Two studies, contradictory in nature, addressed the idea of regret among older childless adults.

Baine, Alexander, Rubinstein, Goodman and Luborsky (1992) analyzed the experience of regret among 90 women, aged 60 and over, using qualitative methods. The childless women in their study formed 3 groups: never-married (n = 30), currently married (n = 29), and widowed (n = 31). The sample was 91% White and 9% African-

American. Each woman was interviewed 3 times over a 30-day period. The first interview captured demographic data. The second and third interviews discussed life achievements, ways to achieve generativity, and feelings about their childless states. The authors used life course theory to review the trajectories of their lives within a sociocultural perspective.

Three major areas of regret were discussed: dependency and caring, social marginalization, and generational continuity. Generational continuity was referred to as the desire to pass on personal achievements and values as legacy. Many stories of these women included regret about not being able to continue on, leave an imprint, create an emblem of self, pass on a family tradition, etc. Issues of dependency and caring were prevalent, as participants saw themselves as vulnerable in old age, recognizing the current impact of a decision made long ago. Many of these women stated that they had support from others, but that the "emotional return" (p. 623) of rearing children on whom they could count for support in older age was not equivalent to support from friends. In other words, as these authors noted, dependency needs are not solely concrete needs, but needs of emotional support and connection (Baine et al., 1992).

Concern about personal and familial continuity is a driving principle in Erikson's (1963) generativity stage. Many of the women in this study expressed regret about not being able to live on through their children and grandchildren. Children, as a central part of legacy, would not be a part of their lives now or ever (Baine et al., 1992).

Many, too, felt marginalized, judged by a cultural standard that made them

different. Society often views the female identity as synonymous with motherhood (Gillespie, 2003), leading some of these women to feel incomplete, unfulfilled, or outside the norm because of their childlessness (Baine et al., 1992).

In another study, the association between regret and self-evaluation among 72 middle-aged and older adult women who were either voluntarily childless or involuntarily childless was examined by Jefferies and Konnert (2002). They used both qualitative and quantitative measures. There were no significant differences between groups on the Center of Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D). On the Scales of Psychological Well-Being, which measures autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance, there were differences. The voluntarily childless women scored significantly higher on overall psychological well-being, autonomy, environmental mastery, and self acceptance when compared to involuntarily childless women. Interview data suggested that women who are voluntarily childless describe their feelings of regret as "minor and transitory" (p. 103). As expected, involuntarily childless women expressed more sustained regret.

Summary

The childless population is growing, not just in the United States, but in many industrialized countries throughout the world. A broad profile of this increasingly visible group has emerged, but the literature on voluntary childlessness is limited by two major shortcomings. One is the static nature with which this group is viewed. As with adult development in general, childlessness is multidirectional, changing in meaning and

impact, guided by human agency, and yet bound by personal, historical and cultural constraints. Another shortcoming is that married or partnered couples who have chosen childlessness are practically nonexistent in the literature. It is hoped that through this dissertation, new light will be shed on this non-traditional family form.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research was to explore the lived experiences of 15 heterosexual married or partnered couples, aged 50 and older, who have been together for a minimum of 20 years, and in which neither the husbands nor the wives sought pregnancy, adoption, or fostering and were able to remain childless because of reliable birth control methods. Marriage and family therapists will likely see more couples and individuals who are contemplating whether or not to become parents. Learning about the experience and the later-life meanings of this decision will ideally provide family therapists and other family sciences professionals with tools necessary to help couples navigate this choice. Data were collected using semi-structured, in-person interviews with couples who are voluntarily childless. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed for emerging themes. Chapter III presents the methodology of the study, including the theoretical framework, description of the researcher, sampling procedures, interview procedures, protection of the participants, and an explanation of the data collection, treatment and analysis procedures.

Theoretical Framework

This research was conducted using a life course perspective with a phenomenological approach. The life course perspective is particularly relevant with this

subject because it offers a framework for understanding and explaining how changing societal conditions and social forces influence individual patterns of stability and change over time. It allows for thinking about lives as grafted into historical time as well as emphasizing cohorts, multigenerational links, culture, tradition and social embeddedness (Elder, 1994).

Human lives are intricately influenced by social and historical context, making the construct of time and place foundational to life course research (Bianchi & Casper, 2005). Use of the birth control pill, common only since the 1960s, marked the beginning of a shift toward a culture of reproductive choice never known before. Even if a married woman had doubts about having and rearing children, the odds of postponement or remaining permanently childless were extremely limited. Concurrent with the increased use of contraceptives was the emergence of feminism. Women were better able to choose how they would allocate their time, promoting a sense of autonomy and a chance to explore roles other than wife and mother (Friedan, 1963). For this particular birth cohort, individuals born between 1946 and 1964, medical and technological advances as well as the burgeoning feminist movement are two powerful socio-historical influences, without which this demographic shift in increased childlessness would not likely have taken place.

Particularly important in life course theory are the concepts of trajectories and transitions. Elder (1998) used the term trajectories to describe patterns of stability and change. They are long term pathways of participation in social institutions such as family,

education, and career. Within them are transitions, or discrete life events that result in changes in status, social identity, and role involvement. Transitions can include, for example, graduations, moving to full-time work, or marriage, but they always occur within the larger trajectory (Bianchi & Casper, 2005). Within the interlocking trajectories of career and marriage for the Baby Boomers who were participants in this study, the transition to a parenthood role did not occur.

Consistent with studies of the life course and family systems theory is the principle of interdependent or "linked" lives. Individuals cannot be known and understood outside the systems in which they live. The individual life course and its personal developmental trajectory are embedded and interconnected with the lives and development of others. New situations encountered in adulthood are shaped by earlier experiences, suggesting that a woman's decision to have a child is shaped partly by her previous relationships and the meanings attached to those relationships. In other words, earlier life events likely increase or decrease the likelihood of having children (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; Elder, 1994).

Another life course principle depicts the role of individuals as an active force in constructing their life course through the "decisions made and actions taken within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstance" (Elder, 1998, p. 4). This principle of agency refers to individual choice and a sense of personal control over one's life. It is based on the assumption that humans are not passive recipients of a predetermined life course but rather, they are purposeful and intentional decision-makers.

Agency has particular salience in the context of motherhood. As the Supreme Court ruled in 1973 in *Roe v. Wade,* a woman's right to privacy includes the right to end the life of her unborn child.

Life course theory creates a conceptual bridge between human development and ongoing social change based on the premise that people are placed within a particular historical time and culture. As recorded tendencies toward increased childlessness have emerged in the last 40 years, this social, historical and psychological theory provides a unified lens through which to examine the trajectories and transitions of older married couples who have chosen to remain childless.

Finally, using a phenomenological form of inquiry allows for a different way of knowing and understanding, one that captures the essence of the world of the participants through their own rich descriptions of their experiences. It is a uniquely collaborative endeavor between researcher and participant, emphasizing discovery, subjectivity and meaning through personal communication (Creswell, 2003).

Researcher as Person

Qualitative research and quantitative research are two very different forms of scientific inquiry. In quantitative research the researcher's goal is to test, predict and confirm data, using numerical values to report findings. The researcher controls as much of the research design as possible, testing hypotheses using deductive analysis, reductionist methods, and predetermined design characteristics (Creswell, 2003).

The goal of understanding a phenomenon from the point of view of the

participants and its particular social and institutional context, however, is largely lost when textual data are quantified in this way. Qualitative research does a much better job of capturing the nuance of lived experience. In qualitative research, the researcher relies on observation and feedback, allowing the design to remain flexible, evolving, emergent and expansive. Data are obtained from audiotapes, videotapes and field notes, ideally leading to a comprehensive, expansive exploration of a unique experience (Creswell, 2003).

One of the distinguishing characteristics of qualitative research is the method used to collect and analyze data. In qualitative studies the human investigator, as participant/observer, is the primary instrument for gathering and analyzing data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified the characteristics that make humans the instrument of choice for naturalistic inquiry. Humans are responsive to environmental cues, and able to interact with the situation; they have the ability to collect information at multiple levels simultaneously; they are able to perceive situations holistically; they are able to process data as soon as they become available; they can provide immediate feedback and request verification of data; and they can explore atypical or unexpected responses. Researchers' direct contact with the researched is critical to understanding, clarifying and summarizing data. However, the human instrument in qualitative research has possible shortcomings and potential bias, as well. Rather than attempting to eliminate bias, it is important that it be identified and monitored so that it will not shape the collection and interpretation of the data. The qualitative researcher must be aware of any risk that may influence

participants or their responses, maintaining a balance between the insider and outsider roles (Creswell, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

As mentioned in the introductory portion of this dissertation, I am a Caucasian, Christian, female marriage and family therapist who is childless by choice. I began in the mental health field as a second career over 20 years ago, knowing almost immediately that I was exactly where I was meant to be. I have a passion and a hope for the hurting individual that is satisfied in my work with clients. I have been married for 34 years to my precious husband. He has always stated that he did not want children and I have never felt a strong urge to become a parent. We fit well into Veevers (1973) model of the women in her study, two-thirds of whom were voluntarily childless. Not having a strong desire to parent, we simply postponed pregnancy until that time when we realized that we would be permanently childless. Neither of us has experienced regret, per se, although we do wonder from time to time what our adult child or children would be like. My interest in this topic has grown over the years as I have talked with other intentionally and unintentionally childless women and their spouses. There is no research on the lived experience of older partnered couples who are childless by choice. It is my hope and my intent, as a researcher/participant, to shed additional light on this small but growing population.

Sampling Procedures

Participants of this study were 15 heterosexual married or partnered couples, 50 years of age and older, in which neither the husbands nor the wives sought pregnancy,

adoption, or fostering and were able to remain childless because of reliable birth control methods. Participants have been partnered for a minimum of 20 years. An attempt was made to include those from educationally, socioeconomically, and culturally diverse backgrounds. This was done as flyers were distributed in churches and places of business where socioeconomic levels have traditionally been low and ethnic diversity has been high.

Participants were recruited from the Dallas-Ft. Worth-Denton areas. A recruitment flyer (Appendix A) was created and posted in her place of business, in the Family Sciences building at Texas Woman's University, and with permission from Student Life, throughout the TWU campus.. Additionally, recruitment flyers were placed in other churches and public areas where permission was given to do so. Also, since this study relied on snowball sampling, acquaintances of the researcher were asked to use their social networks to access and recruit participants.

Snowball sampling is a form of nonprobability sampling based on the assumption that a link exists between the initial sample and others in the same target population, allowing a series of referrals to be made within a circle of acquaintance. Snowball sampling allows for an increased opportunity to access difficult to reach populations, such as those who are vulnerable or stigmatized, who may be reluctant to take part in more formalized studies using traditional research methods. Trust must be developed before participants can share candidly about their experiences. Snowball sampling has been

found to be economical, efficient, and effective in various studies (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997).

Protection of Participants

Qualitative researchers focus on exploring, analyzing, and describing people, their natural environments, and meanings that are personal to individuals in their study. Unique participation protection issues that arise in data collection require special attention by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which evaluates the human benefits and potential risks of research studies. To ensure the protection of the participants in this research, the study was conducted in accordance with the policies and procedures of the IRB of Texas Woman's University. Approval of the study was requested and obtained prior to initiation of data collection. Professional research ethics were followed through the provision of informed consent, acknowledgment of participants' rights to voluntarily participate and withdraw at any time without penalty, and assurance that questions could be asked and answered throughout involvement in the study.

Confidentiality of study participants was protected at all times using a numeric coding system in place of names. Numeric codes were assigned to each participant couple, beginning with number 001M for the male, and 001F for the female. Coding proceeded consecutively. Only the researcher and her advisor had access to identifying information. Participant names appeared only on the consent forms which were stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home office. Code numbers, audio CDs, interview transcripts, and field notes were placed in locked cabinet, accessible to the researcher

only. Confidentiality was protected at all times and no identifying information was included in the presentation of data. Finally, the consent forms, tapes, transcription copies, and CD text files are to be destroyed within two years of completion of the study.

Interview Procedures

Participants for this study were found through a recruitment flyer (Appendix A) and snowball sampling. A qualitative approach was used to explore the decision-making experiences and meanings of those ending their childbearing years without children. Unlike quantitative researchers who analyze their data at the end of the study, qualitative researchers analyze their data throughout their study until they reach a point of data saturation. Data saturation occurs when the researcher is no longer hearing or seeing new information (Wray, Markovic & Manderson, 2007). It was anticipated that 15 couples would yield a point of data saturation. The semi-structured interview was the central focus of the study, using a phenomenological approach to capture the richness and fullness of personal meaning regarding couples' decisions to remain childless. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) described the qualitative researcher as an observer who takes on many roles to construct an interconnected interpretation of a world that, previously, has not been visible in quite the same way.

Participants who volunteered for the study initially contacted the researcher so that the purpose of the research could be fully explained and any questions could be answered (Appendix B). When the participants agreed to be part of the study, a meeting was scheduled for a time and place agreed to by the couple.

At the meeting between the researcher and the participants, the researcher dressed professionally, yet casually. In addition to the consent form (Appendix C) an audio recorder, tape, pen, and paper were brought to the interview. The informed consent forms (Appendix C) were signed and a copy was given each member of the participant couple. Demographic data (Appendix D) were taken to gain information about participants' education, ethnicity, spirituality, and income. A semi-structured interview guide (Appendix E) was then used to obtain information about the participants' lived experiences. They were specifically asked the following questions:1) Can you tell me the story of how the two of you decided to remain childless? 2) What has the experience of being childless been like for you? Participants were encouraged to speak freely and to ask questions for clarification.

Participants were asked to respond to the questions listed above. The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed and analyzed for themes and the results were reported using a narrative format. Additional paperwork consisted of a referral list for counseling (Appendix F), should any participant want to speak with a mental health professional after the interview.

Data Analysis

At the root of phenomenological research is the intent to understand the phenomenon as it is experienced by the individual. Data analysis begins immediately and constantly informs and reshapes the research questions, the group being studied, and the data collection, all in order to capture participants' unique experiences. This approach

encourages the kind of flexibility so important to the qualitative researcher who can move in new directions as more information and a better understanding of the data are acquired (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Creswell (1998) outlined essential strategies in analyzing phenomenological data. First the transcripts are read several times in order to organize and sort the data. Significant statements are then highlighted to provide a thorough understanding of how the participants experience what is being studied. These statements lead to the development of meaning clusters which are used to describe the experience and context of the phenomenon. The data then reveal an "invariant structure or essence" (p. 61), which focuses on the most common experiences shared by the participants.

Following interviews, the researcher listened to the audiotapes at least one time completely before transcribing them verbatim. The researcher then followed the steps outlined by Creswell (1998). Once these steps were completed, themes began to emerge. Ultimately, the researcher attempted to translate the conceptual model into a story that will be read by others so that the report will be a rich, tightly woven account that closely approximates the reality it represents.

A single method of verification cannot adequately shed light on interwoven and aggregated phenomena. Therefore, in order to ensure maximum rigor of method and presentation of interpretations, triangulation was used. Triangulation refers to the different methods researchers use to ensure credibility of the data. It involves using multiple data sources in the investigation to produce comprehensive, well-developed

themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For the purpose of this study, the researcher's advisor and a research assistant were utilized throughout the research process to ensure corroboration and dependability of the researcher's findings.

A research assistant participated in the transcription analysis to help identify emerging themes, but only the researcher and the researcher's advisor had access to the audiotapes. The research assistant had knowledge in conducting qualitative research, and has completed training in protecting research participants. The assistant was randomly assigned 7 coded interview transcripts. She read the transcripts several times to highlight significant statements and to identify patterns or themes. The researcher then met with her advisor and the assistant independently to discuss the data, choosing and confirming themes and then comparing them to other themes identified by the researcher. The final data analysis is presented in a narrative format.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative research was to examine phenomenologically the lived experiences of 15 heterosexual married or partnered couples, aged 50 and older, in which neither the husbands nor the wives sought pregnancy, adoption, or fostering and were able to remain childless because of reliable birth control methods. Data were collected from 15 partnered couples, together for a minimum of 20 years, who met this criteria. The interviews included two open-ended questions with follow-up prompting. The audiotaped interviews were transcribed and then analyzed for emerging themes. The

themes were then reported using a narrative format, which included excerpts from the participants' responses.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the question, "What is the lived experience and meaning for married or partnered couples, aged 50 and older, who have chosen to remain childless?" This chapter reports the results from an analysis of data that were collected from the interviews. The researcher interviewed 15 voluntarily childless couples (30 individuals) who had been in a committed relationship for a minimum of 20 years and who volunteered to be a part of the study. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim and the data were analyzed for themes. In this chapter, a description of the sample and a description of three emergent themes will be discussed.

Description of the Sample

The research sample consisted of 15 older voluntarily childless couples who ranged in age from 49-71, with a mean age of 59.6 years. One female was 49 at the time of the interview, but her 50th birthday occurred 3 months after the interview. The researcher conducted 12 interviews with couples who were living in the Dallas/Ft. Worth/Denton areas. Three couples lived outside the Dallas/Ft.Worth/Denton areas. The number of years in a committed relationship ranged from 21-37 years, with a mean of

27.1 years. Only one couple was unmarried, having been partnered for 37 years. All 15 couples identified themselves as Caucasian. (In text refer to table 1)

Religious affiliations varied. Of the male participants, 7 identified themselves as Protestant, 1 as Catholic, 1 as Anglican Catholic, 3 designating no religious affiliation, 1 as atheist, 1 as Buddhist, and 1 as pagan. One male identified himself as Protestant and Jewish. Female participants included 6 Protestants, 1 Catholic, 1 Anglican, 1 agnostic, and 6 designating no religious affiliation. (In text refer to table 2)

Four males disclosed that they were retired. Nine worked 40 hours-plus weekly and 2 reported working 30-39 hours weekly. Three females were retired, 8 worked 40 hours-plus weekly, 2 worked 20-29 hours weekly, 1 worked 10-19 hours weekly and 1 reported being a housewife. Annual combined household incomes included 2 couples who did not report an annual income, 1 couple reporting $40,000-$59,999, 2 couples reporting $60, 000-$89,999, 1 couple reporting $90,000-$119,999, 4 reporting $120,000-$149,999, 3 reporting $150-$199,999, 1 reporting $200,000-$299,999, and 1 couple reporting $300,000-$499,000 annually.

Various forms of birth control were used by the couples. Four females stated that they had had a tubal ligation, all by the age of 30. One additional female had a tubal ligation at the age of 34, after her first and only marriage. Three men reported having vasectomies. Nine women used birth control pills predominately. One female reported using no birth control in her current relationship, but had used birth control pills in previous years.

The education level of male participants included 1 with a doctorate degree, 2 with a master's degree, and 12 with a bachelor's degree. Of the women, 1 reported having a doctorate degree, 5 with a master's degrees, 6 with a bachelor's degree, 2 with some college, and 1 with a high school diploma.

Of the 30 individuals interviewed, 8 men were the oldest in their family of origin, with 1 being an only child. Two of the women reported being the oldest in their family of origin. Additionally, 9 individuals, 3 males and 6 females, revealed that they had siblings who also chose to be childless.

Table 1

Participant Number, Age, Race, and Years in Committed Relationship

Participant	Age Male/Female	Race Male/Female	Years in Committed Relationship
1M/1F	57/59	Caucasian/Caucasian	31
2M/2F	61/58	Caucasian/Caucasian	37
3M/3F	51/51	Caucasian/Caucasian	24
4M/4F	67/60	Caucasian/Caucasian	21
5M5F	63/55	Caucasian/Caucasian	29
6M/6F	50/49	Caucasian/Caucasian	27
7M/7F	71/59	Caucasian/Caucasian	34
8M/8F	58/56	Caucasian/Caucasian	27
9M/9F	61/61	Caucasian/Caucasian	37
10M/10F	51/53	Caucasian/Caucasian	30
11M/11F	60/57	Caucasian/Caucasian	30
12M/12F	53/51	Caucasian/Caucasian	24
13M/13F	59/59	Caucasian/Caucasian	37
14M/14F	60/64	Caucasian/Caucasian	31
15M/15F	55/58	Caucasian/Caucasian	28

Table 2

Participant Number, Religion, Education Level, and Combined Income

Participant	Religion Male/Female	Educational Level Male/Female	Combined Income
1M/1F	None/Pagan	Master/Master	$120,000 +
2M/2F	Protestant/Protestant	Bachelor/Bachelor	$150,000 +
3M/3F	None/None	Bachelor/Bachelor	$90,000 +
4M/4F	Protestant/Protestant	Bachelor/Master	Not reported
5M5F	Protestant/Protestant	Bachelor/Some College	$150,000 +
6M/6F	Protestant-Jewish/Protestant	Bachelor/Master	$60,000 +
7M/7F	Catholic/Catholic	Bachelor/High School	$120,000 +
8M/8F	None/Agnostic	Doctorate/Master	$200,000 +
9M/9F	Buddhist/None	Bachelor/Master	$40,000 +
10M/10F	Protestant/Protestant	Some College/Bachelor	Not reported
11M/11F	Anglican-Catholic/Anglican	Bachelor/Bachelor	$500,000 +
12M/12F	Protestant/Protestant	Bachelor/Master	$120,000 +
13M/13F	Atheist/None	Bachelor/Doctorate	$150,000 +
14M/14F	Catholic/None	Bachelor/Some College	$60,000 +
15M/15F	Other/Other	Bachelor/Bachelor	$120,000 +

Findings

The purpose of this qualitative research was to examine phenomenologically the lived experiences of 15 heterosexual married or partnered couples, aged 50 and older, in which neither the husbands nor the wives sought pregnancy, adoption, or fostering and were able to remain childless because of reliable birth control methods. To guide this study, the researcher focused on the following question: What is the lived experience and meaning for married or partnered couples, aged 50 and older, who have chosen to remain childless? Each participant was asked the following two questions: 1) Can you tell me the story of how the two of you decided to remain childless? 2) What has the experience of being childless been like for you? Participants were not restricted to the interview questions and were encouraged to speak openly and to elaborate as much as they were comfortable. On occasion, prompts and follow up questions were asked to gain clarity on comments made.

The research analyzed the participants' narratives by listening to the audiotapes and re-reading transcripts from each interview. A research assistant analyzed 7 transcripts separately and identified significant statements and themes that were consistent with those identified by the researcher, when compared. As participants talked about their experiences of childlessness, three themes emerged. Verbatim quotes are used to support the identified themes. They are: (1) Creating a

Pathway to Childlessness; (2) Creating a Full, Satisfying Life Together; (3) Creating a Different View of Family.

Creating a Pathway to Childlessness

The usual issues of coming of age were challenged in the 1960s and 1970s. This generational cohort was faced with decisions unlike their parents, whose societal role expectations were anchored in history, tradition and biology. A combination of factors, not the least of which was the birth control pill, redefined their life course decisions. Whether to parent or not was clearly an individual choice for these couples. Their paths to childlessness were different. In this section, these varying paths are described..

In response to the first interview question, three couples knew from the beginning of their relationship that they would not parent. Two females had tubal ligations at the age of 25. Another had a tubal ligation at 27.

> I am a Vietnam veteran…and I grew into believing that I did not want to bring children into this god-forsaken world….When I was stationed at [army base] the army was doing tubal ligations…. I signed up for it and had my tubes tied at 25. …I am so grateful that at 59 years of age, when I leave this world, the only thing I have to worry about is my cats. (Participant 1F)
>
> She told me about it, how she felt about not wanting to bring children into the world and I didn't really have a problem with it. I was doing guy things,

hunting, camping. I didn't have time for kids anyway and didn't feel like I had the money or time to devote to raising a child. (Participant 1M)

Oh, I was probably in college when I came to that idea. I married the first time at 21 and told my husband before we married that I didn't want children. That was part of the deal.... and at 25 I was so completely convinced that I didn't want children, 'cause I'd been taking the pill since I was 18, I had a tubal ligation. (Participant 9F)

I think before the tubal we talked vasectomy, but [partner] was so convinced that she would fix the issue permanently for herself, there was no reason for me to do it [have the vasectomy]. (Participant 9M)

I watched my mother raise four children... She never felt empowered and I think having children was a part of that... so after my first divorce at 26, I told my gynecologist to tie my tubes. I think I'm missing a gene or something because I've never wanted to be a parent. (Participant 15F)

An additional six of the fifteen female participants reported that they had little desire to have children and were aware of their feelings from an early age. Of the fifteen male participants, five males said they never wanted children, seven males stated that they never had a strong desire to parent, and three males stated that

it was never a priority to bring children into the world. Thus, parenting was not something any of the male participants felt strongly about and they allowed their female partners to have the final say as to whether or not they had children, either biologically, through adoption or fostering.

> I guess I'd have to say it started for me when I was very young. I remember telling my mother when I was in high school that she should not look to me to make her a grandmother....I don't think I ever had a strong maternal instinct. (Participant 2F)

> Family is very important to me and I certainly love my family, but I also wanted the nicer things in life that money and a good job could provide. I met [spouse] while we were in college and the idea of kids just went by the wayside back then. But, you know, I never grew up with a strong desire to have kids either. (Participant 2M)

> It's not that we don't like children or something. We talked about it on and off and kept saying to each other over the years, "should we talk about having kids?", and then we'd change the subject. It was like neither one of us wanted to be the one to say, "I don't want kids." But, you know, neither of us really wanted them. (Participant 3F)

[Spouse] is really the driver in this and the ultimate decider because the responsibility was always on her until I had my vasectomy. [Participant 3M]

Well, you know, there was never a decision when we said, "We're not gonna have kids." I didn't marry until I was 30 and I for sure didn't want them early on. A year would come and go and then another one and I kept putting it off. I don't know, I just didn't see myself as a mother...can't remember seeing myself as a mother. (Participant 7F)

I knew it would be a 24/7 job for her. I traveled so much for work.... If one or the other of us really wanted kids, I guess it would have happened. One or the other has to have a real desire to have them and then to raise them for 18 years. Neither of us did. (Participant 7M)

Later, in my mid to late 30's my gynecologist told me I should think about it because of the risks and all, the longer I put it off. We discussed it, but you know, it was just something I didn't particularly want to do. He didn't either, so we said, "I don't think so." (Participant 8F)

Really what happened, it never reached a priority to have kids. We were both busy in our professions and neither of us felt strongly about having kids. We did know that. And then time passes and you realize "We don't have kids and we're OK about that." (Participant 8M)

> I could look down the road and see someone depending on me for 21 years and possibly more, financially, emotionally, in every way and I wasn't prepared for that. I just didn't see it. I was removed from and relieved by not having children. (Participant 9F)

Five of the female participants initially thought they would have children. For a variety of reasons they changed their positions and all expressed satisfaction with the ultimate decision to remain childless. Three females had been married previously and their marriages had ended in divorce. One female had tried to become pregnant in her first marriage even though the marriage was an unhappy one.

> What made us decide we weren't gonna have children was that we'd both been married before and I tried for nine years. It was nine long years and it felt like I went through all that by myself, I mean emotionally, in terms of emotional support. My ex-spouse was just so passive and so unavailable to me. After it was over I was tired emotionally and I didn't want to go through that again. [Spouse] had been married, too, and having kids was not a big deal to him. (Participant 12F)

The other two previously married females deliberately chose not to bring children into an unstable marriage and after the divorce they remained single into

their 30s. When one female married her current spouse, her husband did not place a high priority on parenting and neither did she. The other female married a man who stated during their courtship that he had not wanted children and wanted to be clear about relaying that message before the relationship became serious.

> It's very simple for me. I never wanted children and I never thought I would even marry. I was 46 when I met [spouse] and we dated for quite a few years before we even talked about marriage. I was very clear that I didn't want children then or ever. If she did or thought I would change my mind, it [the relationship] wasn't going anywhere. (Participant 4M)

The two remaining childless couples are still married to their original spouses, and initially believed they would be parents at some point in their adulthood. One couple, unable to conceive, went through testing, had laparoscopic surgery to take care of endometriosis and still did not conceive after several years.

> We talked about adoption and decided adoption was more than we wanted to do. Anyway, I wanted [spouse's] child. We were not excited about *in vitro* because of the drugs, they have side effects....and then we might possibly have multiples, that's always a risk. Then we both got busy with our careers and then it just didn't quite seem as important. (Participant 10F)

The remaining couple decided on childlessness because of the husband's mental health challenges.

> I became pretty sick when I was about 33....unable to work, to function, didn't want to live, you know, I was in bed most of the time initially. (Participant 6M)
>
> Yea, it was chaos in the first two years, just trying to get a grip of this diagnosis, bi-polar disorder....[spouse] was very much focused on staying stable....I was about 35 and dealing with my biological clock....when we brought it up to our psychiatrist she cautioned us about family history, the likelihood of our child suffering from this. It made sense logically not to have children, but it was devastating to me. (Participant 6F)

Creating a Full, Satisfying Life Together

Self determination and the confidence that adult life is rich in all forms was reflected in the themes of these participants. Elder's (1998) principle of agency is seen in these couples' narratives. A new generational era emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, influenced by postmodern thinking and a desire to live in ways that were consistent with individual choice. What is absent in the couples interviewed is the traditional concept of adulthood and family. Childlessness created a new path toward life satisfaction.

The one theme that was consistent with every couple interviewed is the idea that their lives are full and satisfying. They have or did have careers that are or were rewarding, financially and mentally. Every couple talked about the time associated with being intentionally childless, time for themselves and time for others. They enjoy the freedom to pursue passions, hobbies, travel, friendships and a deeper relationship with each other. Even the one couple who expressed feelings of loss upon learning of the husband's mental illness, lives a rewarding life, one they would not have expected or chosen had they been parents.

> And I will say, had it not been for [spouse's] mental illness and the path that we've been on since then, neither of us would be in ministry. We were both in sales, both very successful, but I had to quit my job to take care of him and had to reconsider everything that was important to me in my life.... except for [spouse's] illness, ummm, I wouldn't have graduated seminary and become a pastor. That just would not have happened....So now we have this wonderful ministry, this opportunity to nurture others. We have been given a ministry and spiritual children rather than physical children. (Participant 6F)

> I discovered writing during this time [after the bi-polar disorder diagnosis] and I loved doing it. I'm a writer who uses his journey, which was originally a source of pain, to assist others who are also struggling with mood disorders. (Participant 6M)

All but 13 of the 15 women interviewed had at least a bachelor's degree and 13 of the 15 have or had professional or managerial jobs.

> After I got my master's degree I worked as the city director of social services. I handled child abuse cases. We had more kids at our front door than you can imagine.....I loved working with those children and their families. I just like kids, but I didn't want any of my own.(Participant 1F).

> I think we've just chosen a different way to live our lives. I mean, I loved my career. I taught school for a while, then went back for an advanced degree and became a school counselor...I've always had an entrepreneurial bent and back in the 90s I. decided to leave education and go into the tech world. I couldn't have done that if we'd had children. (Participant 3F)

> I like being free, free to move around in my career and decide I want to go in a completely different direction. [Spouse] has always supported that in me, too, which I love about him. He didn't worry that I was ending a lucrative career to jump out there....he had confidence in me. (Participant 5F)

> I was not ready to give up my career. Having a career and having a child just did not seem to go together. I'm much more comfortable in a professional business environment than in a nursery. We're both involved in full time

careers and we do a lot of things outside the home and in the community. Children, and this should be the case, they completely change where you spend your time and your focus. (Participant 11F)

I'm a very disciplined person, hard working, and I like working hard. That's a good thing because my job demands it. If I had decided to have children, I would have been an excellent mother. I would have worked hard to be an excellent mother. It's what you must do if you decide to take on that responsibility. (Participant 13F)

The couples interviewed all talked about the time they have to enjoy their passions, hobbies, travel, friends and each other.

I had this passion, this passion to pursue acting and so you begin doing it in a community theater atmosphere, and that was our hobby for 25 years. She got involved, too, and turned out to be very talented herself. We spend a lot of time doing that, loving doing that and we could not have, had we had kids. (Participant 2M)

For most people, their children are their legacy and we have decided to leave a legacy in other ways. We have invested ourselves in our church and we are heading up the construction of a new building that will remain for

generations to enjoy. The people there that we have formed relationships with will be important to me as an elderly woman. (Participant 2F).

Well, I'd say right off the bat, not having children has given us opportunities to do tons of things we wouldn't have been able to do if we were spending 18 years operating on a child's schedule, school calendar, summers off, two weeks at Christmas. We just went to [vacation destination] to ski for a couple of days....just decided to go and 3 days later we were skiing. We have a blast traveling. (Participant 3M)

And that leads to something else about being childless. We don't have to pay for children. We've been able to save handsomely and still enjoy traveling. This is quite a luxury for us. We'll be able to retire earlier than most, too. Now, we're not wealthy, please know that, not wealthy by any means. (Participant 3F)

After I got out of the army, I got a real education, the kind you can't get out of a book. I went all over the world for four years and didn't go to college until I was 28. It was then that I discovered this passion I had for art, sculpture, architecture. I still have it. Those are the things that are always on my mind....creating something that's original and beautiful. (Participant 4M)

In addition to the increased time for themselves and their shared activities, many participants were grateful for the time to be involved in the lives of friends and family. With children of their own, they would not be able to invest wholeheartedly in the lives of others, which is a source of joy for them.

> Because we're childless, it's made it easier for us to take in family members from time to time. His mother was very ill and she was with us for about a year, and then later his younger brother and sister, who were in really bad straits, stayed with us for a year and a half. (Participant 2F)

> We have plenty of really close friends that we're around who have children who are now having children and they all bring us into that circle. So because we never had children, a lot of our friends have become like family to us……we will be involved with our nephew more now since [her sister's] death, helping, guiding him in any way we can....our hearts are more open to others because we don't have kids. (Participant 5F)

> Yea, so [spouse] stepped in in a situation with her mom. I don't think we could have done it if we were raising kids, too. She was amazing and our friends and even our priest said she was amazing. When her mom was ill, and she was ill for a long time, neither of her sisters stood up. [Spouse] stepped in and proved herself to be this fantastic caregiver, not just surface

stuff, but really took good care of her even with working full time. It gave me even more reasons to respect her.... And now that her sister is disabled, she's living with us, too. She has such a depth and such a heart. (Participant 11M)

Many participants recognized that there was loss associated with their childless choice. If given the chance to relive their lives and rethink their decisions, no participant said they would do anything different. For a few, however, they saw that their choice, as with any choice, has permanent consequences.

Not being a parent does have its disadvantages. Now our friends are becoming grandparents and I see how unbelievable that experience is for them and I think sometimes, "Oh, I wish we had grandchildren." (Participant 1F)

It's still the right choice, but our footprint ends here, you know what I mean? I'm the end of the line in my family. (Participant 2M)

We may learn that there is a disadvantage later, like when we get too old to take care of ourselves, but I've never thought that was a good enough reason to have kids. I wouldn't want or expect them to take care of us, anyway. (Participant 5M)

I wonder sometimes, this world is going in such a funny direction. Could our kid have been a part of a solution to the problems? Could they have helped turn things around? We'll never know. (Participant 7F)

We did everything possible, with the exception of IVF and adoption, and it didn't happen. I don't really understand why because we would've been good parents. It just wasn't meant to be. And jointly we can say, [looking at spouse] we don't feel remorse. I'm glad to be able to say that [spouse nods]. (Participant 10F)

Creating a Different View of Family

The increasing number of couples who are childless by choice is both a cause and a consequence of a new generational era, one in which identities exist outside the traditional family image of mother, father and child. These couples who were interviewed reflect current cultural values of individualism, freedom, and personal growth. Many see friends as extended family members. Many also described sharing household and economic responsibilities, all indicative of a relationship that is egalitarian in nature.

My perspective on that is that it's brought us a lot closer together than a lot of couples I know who have kids....which is not to say everything's perfect. There's no such thing. But we are really there for each other. There's such a

compatibility and strong communication and we share everything as a team. We are a small family of two. (Participant 2M)

We made a conscious decision that when we met couples we liked, we made sure that we included the children. Now those children are grown and in college or married, and we can say that we've been a part of their lives and they ours for all these years. They are not immediate family, but it feels like it sometimes. (Participant 12F)

Becoming an adult and getting married has been a different experience for us compared to our growing up, you know, as children growing up with our families. We both had moms who worked, you bet they worked, but not for an income. Our dads made the money and our moms took care of us and the house and all. We could not see ourselves that way. We had plans that had nothing to do with having kids. (Participant 3M)

Since I never wanted children, I never thought I was giving up anything. On the contrary, not having children meant freedom to me....freedom to do our own things. Instead of changing diapers, sitting though soccer games, dealing with puberty, choosing colleges, we've been able to focus on

ourselves. And, yes it may sound selfish, but it was the right thing for us. (Participant 4M).

I've always made more money than [spouse] and he has mostly worked from home, so our roles are kind of reversed in that way....[Spouse] is very nurturing with our dogs, although I love them, too, but he takes on the day to day care of them more than I do.... And I'm probably the more financially savvy partner. (Participant 5F)

I wish we shared in the household stuff more. I mean, I still do the laundry, and make sure the house is cleaned, although I don't do it myself. [Spouse] really started doing more of that though....he likes to do projects around the house since he retired and I love that....and [looking at spouse] I guess I should pay you for that, shouldn't I? (Participant 7F)

We have such a good friendship. I don't know if you can have that kind of compatibility when you have kids to deal with. I mean....children are the reason some couples divorce....we weren't divided by that responsibility of me wanting one thing for a child and her wanting another. (Participant 8M)

Our careers are so important to both of us. And as a result, we've had to make adjustments in our home.....you know, who does what....buys the groceries, cleans the bathroom, makes sure the bills are paid. [looking at spouse] It's been pretty natural, hasn't it?....easily could have been a problem, but it hasn't been. (Participant 11F)

I don't think about it that much, but I do feel some sense of responsibility when [spouse] is gone, to take care of things around the house. [looking at spouse] When you travel I might go out for drinks or dinner with the guys, but I always make sure I'm home early to take care of things. (Participant 11M)

We've never felt cheated and we never believed we missed out on anything. We saw it as an opportunity that our parents never had. To us it has been good only, good only, can't think of a down side. And as we move into our later years, I would still view it as good and I'd view it as a wise decision, too.... Not having children fits our lifestyle and our values. (Participant 13F)

Summary

This chapter presented the results of a phenomenological research study that explored the lived experiences of 15 heterosexual married or partnered couples, aged 50 and older, in which neither the husbands nor the wives sought pregnancy,

adoption, or fostering and were able to remain childless because of reliable birth control methods. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 couples (30 participants) who agreed to participate. Demographic characteristics of the sample, three emergent themes and verbatim quotes of the participants to illustrate the themes were included in this chapter. Analysis of the interviews identified the themes: (1) Creating a Pathway to Childlessness; (2) Creating a Full, Satisfying Life; (3) Creating a Different View of Family.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative research was to examine the lived experiences of 15 heterosexual married or partnered couples, aged 50 and older, in which neither the husbands nor the wives sought pregnancy, adoption, or fostering and were able to remain childless because of reliable birth control methods. Life course theory was used as a lens through which these couples' experiences could be seen, and a phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to capture each couple's unique, individual meaning surrounding their decision to remain childless. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 15 voluntarily childless couples who agreed to participate in the study. The couples were asked to respond to the following two questions: 1) Can you tell me the story of how the two of you decided to remain childless? 2) What has been the impact of your decision to remain childless? Answers given were occasionally followed-up with questions and prompts to clarify meaning. All transcripts were re-read several times and analyzed for themes. This chapter reviews the conclusions and provides a discussion of the

findings and their implications. Also included are limitations of the research, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

This qualitative research study provided an opportunity for these participants to speak openly about their childless experiences. They are a group of individuals born into a particular point in history (1946-1964), who came of age at a certain time in the 60s and 70s when birth control was available, effective, and affordable. They made a break from the idea of traditional family and chose a life course that was deliberate and that suited the way they wanted to live. Continuity and change, social structures, and the relationships among time, place, and lives as contexts for developmental processes are the focus of life course research. These different yet interrelated principles are used to examine and to explain the couples' decisions to remain childless.

All reported satisfaction with their choice and none stated that they would have children were they given the opportunity to re-think their earlier decision. The following is a discussion of three main themes that emerged from the statements made by the research participants, as well as a comparison of the findings to literature on childlessness.

Creating a Pathway to Childlessness

Early studies of voluntary childlessness (Housenecht, 1987; Peterson, 1983; Veevers, 1975) described the misfortune and emptiness of this lifestyle choice.

Pohlman (1970), however, stands in contrast to this notion. His work gave equal consideration to the negative aspects of having children. Among them are financial costs, interference with marital satisfaction, health costs, and responsibility for childrens' actions and behaviors. Motives for remaining childless are reducing threats of overpopulation, having greater financial freedoms and opportunities, and affording more leisure time. The couples interviewed for this study seem to echo these same sentiments. However, rather than looking negatively at the idea of parenting, they looked positively on the idea of remaining childless. Moreover, they seemed to settle comfortably into their adult identities, relieved of the necessity to change their lifestyles or personalities to be more child-centered.

Only one individual mentioned dealing with stigma, saying that he did not believe there was a stigma attached to their choice, as there may have been a generation ago (Magarick & Brown,1981) . These couples do not believe they have to explain or justify their childless state.

Later research on voluntary childlessness, marked by an increasing recognition of the right to not have children and by a gradual retreat from the centrality of motherhood, is echoed by these childless couples. These participants tend to place their non-parenting choice within the trend of overall change in family behavior associated with the unprecedented shifts in family formation that have occurred since the 1970s. These changes are reflected in non-conformism, a decline

in traditional religious beliefs, growing career opportunities for females, and a higher valued place on personal fulfillment (Lesthaeghe, 1998).

Many of the couples described how different their lives are currently when compared to their family of origin experiences with the traditional two-parent family and siblings at home. Their idealized view of the American family has taken a back seat to the current realities of high divorce rates, co-habiting, decreased religious affiliation, postponed marriages and births for career opportunities, and sex for pleasure rather than for procreation (Tyler-May, 1995). Of the 30 participants, eleven individuals noted that they have no religious affiliation.

Finances also played a role in these couples' decisions to remain childless. As the dollar buys less, individuals become frightened of the burgeoning costs of raising even one child. With greater numbers of women working either out of choice or necessity, motherhood seems to be an onerous added responsibility. All females had or currently have careers that are fulfilling and lucrative, unlike their own mothers. Political, economic, and societal changes had a rippling effect on their values and attitudes, allowing them to question, challenge and ultimately choose a different path for themselves.

Creating a Full and Satisfying Life Together

Previous research has described the increased marital satisfaction that childless individuals enjoy (Houseknecht, 1987; Lunneborg, 1999). Many couples in the study echoed this sentiment in describing the quality of their relationships,

using terms such as best friend, life mate, and life partner to describe their mates. Additionally, couples spoke of the personal rewards of being childless, such as the opportunity to develop a closer relationship with their partners and the freedom to embrace the energy and excitement of new forms of creativity and nurturance with one another.

According to life course theory (Elder, 1998), marriage and parenthood are seen as normative steps in adult lives. Within the trajectories marked by transitions and life events, are the traditional expectations of partnering, marrying, childbearing, and childrearing. This has not been the case for the couples interviewed for this study. Their socialization experiences have weakened their pronatalist tendencies and strengthened their desires to create their own definitions of marriage and family. These definitions emphasize choice and companionship, each reflecting the life course principles of agency and linked lives. Further, in an economic environment that they believe is inconsistent with childrearing, Elder's principles of historical time and place and timing in lives are seen..

These freedoms are characterized in some research as selfish and often stigmatizing (Gillespie, 2000; Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Magarick & Brown, 1981; Veevers, 1975). The notion that they might be considered selfish not only did not resonate with these childless couples, it was overwhelmingly absent from their descriptions of their lives. They believe themselves to be altruistic in ways they could not be had they been parents. Further, three of the fifteen couples reported

their choice as being the right decision for these uncertain times. Overpopulation concerns and fears about the instability of the world in which we live fueled their decisions, which they saw as morally responsible.

Many of these participants described the most striking absence in their lives as the absence of stress they see with their friends and family members who have children. Much of the recent research on voluntary childlessness described the freedoms associated with this lifestyle choice (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Connidis & McMullin, 1999). The deliberate decision to remain childless is seen by these couples as a chance to explore and discover the things that give their lives richness, meaning and purpose that couples with even one child could not have had. Not having previous generations to model a childless lifestyle, these couples have blazed a trail for themselves, creating, over time, narratives that reflect the freedoms they can now enjoy. Whether it is a career that is fulfilling, a hobby that gives them joy, an opportunity to pursue a passion, a season to nurture others, or time to create and leave behind a different kind of legacy, these childless couples all describe full, satisfying and rewarding adult experiences, reflecting the life course principles of linked lives and agency.

Creating a Different View of Family

Strict gender roles have broken down considerably in the last 30 years. Young women assume that they will be working outside the home, and their choices are far greater than choices of traditional female occupations of the 1960s. Too, men

are participating more and more in childrearing responsibilities, often being the primary caregiver to children while wives work outside the home. According to Ireland (1993), the meaning of gender and personal identity may carry more ambiguity and yet more mutuality today, as well. Reproductive choice is just one domain that has changed as a result of social reconstruction and practice, occurring within the cultural/historical climate of our time. These couples interviewed for this study are living and breathing examples of changes in the family system of the 21st century.

A gendered division of labor, with the husband/father working outside the home and the wife/mother at home caring for the home and children, is not the version of family with whom this group of individuals identifies. Theirs is a much different version, where caring for the home is equally shared by both partners and where financial decisions are mutually agreed upon. These partners have roughly equal salaries and work requirements that can be taxing, and many of these couples naturally assumed an agreeable non-gendered division of labor. Postmodern thinking emphasizes socially constructed family forms and these couples have constructed an arrangement governing family life that fits well into their childless lifestyles.

Erikson (1950) wrote of the eight stages of man. Generativity, in stage seven, establishes and supports the next generation, primarily through the rearing of children. According to Erikson (1950), failure to achieve this important task foils

generativity and results in stagnation or a sense of purposelessness. These participants not only believe their lives are purposeful, but also show important levels of commitment and concrete action with their socially constructed extended families. They believe their gifts and their fortunes should be shared. Many of them were employed in professions linked to generative acts -- teaching, nursing, medical research, pastoring, rehabilitation, and social work. Their interests outside employment also demonstrated convictions about helping others and the community at large. These participants expressed their generative convictions, not through the traditional way of childrearing, but through contributions to the development of their own and future generations.

Finally, an important way these couples view family differently is in their inclusion of friends and animals as distinct family members. Throughout the interviews, many of these participants described relationships with non-family members that had been grafted into their family networks, whether they be neighbors, co-workers, children of long time friends, and even companion animals. The socially constructed ideas of the postmodern world are seen in their nontraditional view of family.

Conclusions

A phenomenological research design was used to capture the experience and meaning of childlessness for these 15 voluntarily childless couples. Their individual stories gave voice to the depth of thinking that went into their decisions. The first

question focused on their paths to childlessness. Some were childless by design and some by default. Although they arrived at their childless states through different circumstances and at different times in their lives, these couples were among the first generation of individuals whose lives were grafted into a historical period in which parenting was a true choice. Consistent with Elder's (1998) conceptualization of life course theory and with family systems theory, the individual life course and the developmental trajectory of these individuals are embedded in the lives of others and in a sociocultural context.

Regarding the second research question, in which they reported on the impact of their decision to remain childless, all participants shared their stories of a full and satisfying life with their partners. In early and even more recent childless research, childlessness represents a disruption of the expected life course, leading to a perception that non-parents are not meeting social expectations and may have depressed self evaluations (Giles, Shaw, & Morgan, 2009). This was not the case of the couples interviewed for this study. Although a few individuals were candid in recognizing that their childless choice represented a lost experience for them, none reported having regrets or choosing a different path had they been given an opportunity.

Traditional gender roles were blurred within this group of childless couples. It was clear from the earliest contact with these individuals that they had purposely

created an egalitarian life together. They share, they nurture, and they plan as equals.

Additional conclusions drawn from this research are:

1. Childless couples are not a homogenous group.
2. Childless couples, 50 and over, enjoy generative experiences outside the traditional parenting roles.
3. Childless couples have egalitarian roles.
4. Childless couples have strong support networks.
5. Childless couples are comfortable with their "different" choice.
6. Childless couples did not disproportionately report unhappy family of origin experiences.
7. Childless couples do not dislike children.

Implications

The results of this research study ideally provide insight into how intentionally childless couples find full and satisfying lives outside the traditional family model. These insights were found in the couples' affirming reports of their childless states long after their childbearing years were behind them. Previous research on this group has shown them to be somewhat independent, achievement oriented and career focused (Gillespie, 2003; Ireland, 1993), rather than child focused. Indeed, these couples could be described similarly. It is interesting to note, however, that most of these participants did not believe themselves to be different, selfish or interesting because of their choice to remain childless. Rather, they simply knew that choice was available to them and they were able to make life decisions consistent with their values of autonomy, freedom, responsibility, and integrity. They saw themselves as fortunate, having been able to choose a lifestyle generations before them had been largely unable to do.

This research highlights the importance of recognizing life course theory and using a systemic perspective in working with this population. Individuals cannot be known and understood outside the systems in which they live. The individual life course and its personal developmental trajectory are embedded and interconnected with the lives and development of others. Changing societal conditions and social forces influence individual patterns of stability and change over time (Elder, 1994). Counselors can help clients recognize that situations encountered in adulthood are

shaped by earlier experiences, suggesting that a couple's decision to have a child is shaped partly by their previous relationships and the meanings attached to those relationships.

For marriage and family therapists who may work with childless couples, this research may be relevant. It will provide narratives of those who have made this earlier decision and who are now experiencing the consequences, both positive and negative, of their earlier decision. In addition to couples who are contemplating this lifestyle choice, there may be those who are unable to have children, or who may be unwilling or unable to adopt. They, too, may find these participants' stories insightful. Further, therapists should not assume that a couple's childlessness is a source of pain or dissatisfaction. Theories of adult development (Erikson, 1950; Levinson, 1968) that have espoused mid-life developmental tasks associated with the transmission of values to the next generation may no longer be fulfilled in the same way with the current generation and in this sociocultural period.

Although no couples in this study changed their minds about their childless decisions, reproductive choice can be a fluid process where an unanticipated change of heart can occur over the life course. Marriage and family therapists may encounter this event and may be asked to provide grief support for the individual who now sees himself or herself as having lost a part of themselves they will never experience.

was not reported by couples in this study, it has been reported in the literature (Gillespie, 2000; Koropeckyj-Cox, Romano, & Moras, 2007) as parents focus on rearing their children. Childless couples may feel some estrangement and may be challenged to renegotiated their long time relationships. Family therapists could offer support and understanding as these couples voice feelings of loneliness. Further, therapists could reframe their childless choice as one of independence. Choosing a different life course has costs and benefits.

These findings also may offer a different view of the future in which the expression of values and the meanings associated with treasured ideals can be explored safely in the family therapist's office. Finally, therapists must be aware of and comfortable with their own biases about the childless choice. As couples navigate this decision, family therapists can help them with the exploration, the possible ambiguity, and the meanings associated with childlessness in a still pronatalist culture.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study. The participants were largely a homogenous group. The 30 individuals who participated were all Caucasian and were all originally from large cities in Texas. It has been reported that the phenomenon of childlessness is associated with Caucasian, middle class, educated women (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Houseknecht, 1987). The females and the males in this study reveal that race, socioeconomic status, and education levels are certainly

consistent with previous findings. This study, however, is limited in that the meanings of childlessness for couples of different ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds could not be shared. Moreover, the fact that couples were interviewed conjointly many have impacted their answers. Had they been given the opportunity to speak privately, they may have voiced some disagreement with their partners.

These couples were not randomly selected, but rather, were found primarily through snowball sampling. Two couples who saw the research flyer that was posted throughout the university responded, and the remaining thirteen couples were recruited through word of mouth. Three of the couples were known by the researcher. Their favorable responses may reflect their efforts to illuminate a more positive image of childlessness in a pronatalist culture. Also, as stated previously, the education and income levels of the majority of the couples were higher than the general population.

While all couples in this study reported satisfaction with their decisions to remain childless, four couples initially contacted refused to be interviewed. It may be that they were unhappy or regretful about their childless state, or it may have been that they had discomfort disclosing information about a subject they viewed as highly personal. In any event, it would have enriched the study had those dissatisfied with their childless choice come forward to tell their stories.

One final limitation deals with the nature of qualitative research, which seeks to illuminate and better understand selected groups. In qualitative phenomenological research, the participant-observer is part of the study and involved with the participants. In this particular postmodern style of scientific inquiry, it is known that the researcher's understanding of a participant's lived experience is an interpreted understanding only, seen through the eyes of his or her biases, gender, age, culture, experience, and socio-historic time, all of which can guide and constrict the research findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The researcher, as part of the study instrument, has an obligation and a responsibility to acknowledge this interpretation.

Consequently, the subjective and interpretative process used produces findings that are difficult to replicate. Even with insistence on efforts to ensure rigor, such as reflexivity, immersion into the data, triangulation, and researcher review (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003), the nature of the phenomenon being investigated may be seen differently by other researchers. After all, qualitative research produces data where objectivity is not assumed or even pursued. Thus, a key question comes to mind: To what degree did the collection of data and the analysis of data maximize the chance of producing discernable patterns of the childless experience for older adults?

Recommendations

This study has added to the scant body of literature on voluntarily childless couples, but more research would broaden the field and better inform mental health professionals who may work with couples who are considering this lifestyle choice. The following are suggestions for future research:

1. This study could be replicated to include participants of other racial, ethnic, religious, geographical, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds.
2. Include in the study those individuals who are voluntarily childless, but who may have experienced regret about their decision.
3. Follow this group over time to see if their attitudes may have changed with increased age or with other changes affecting their lives.
4. In light of the fact that 10 of the 30 individuals interviewed were oldest in their families of origin, a study on how and if being the oldest in one's family may contribute to their views on parenting, would be warranted.
5. Considering the growth of voluntary childlessness in industrialized societies (U. S. Census Bureau, 2008), a study on traditional theories of adult development could elaborate on how and if generativity is established in older childless couples.

6. Feminist research might explore how motherhood and femininity have been reshaped or redefined over the life course for childless couples.
7. Pronatalism in the counseling community could be measured through a questionnaire to ensure that counselors have an open and accepting stance toward reproductive choice.
8. More quantitative research might be used to compare such constructs as life satisfaction, marital quality, values, generativity, friendship networks, and subjective well-being between older parents and older non-parents.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative research was to examine the lived experiences of 15 heterosexual married or partnered couples, aged 50 and older, in which neither the husbands nor the wives sought pregnancy, adoption, or fostering and were able to remain childless because of reliable birth control methods. Life course theory was used as a lens through which these couples' experiences could be seen, and a phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to capture each couple's unique, individual meaning surrounding their decision to remain childless. This chapter reviewed the broader conclusions of the study and provided a discussion of the 3 themes that emerged from data analysis. Also included were

implications, limitations of the research, and recommendations for marriage and family therapists and for future research. This research yielded data to expand and deepen our understanding of this population, but it also serves as an invitation to explore changing developmental pathways now available in the 21st century.

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APPENDIX A
Recruitment Flyer

Are you aged 50 or older and childless by choice?

If you are a married or partnered heterosexual couple, aged 50 or over, have been together for a minimum of 20 years, and are intentionally without children, biological, adopted, or fostered, you are invited to participate in a Texas Woman's University dissertation research project being conducted by Cindy Nelson. The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of couples, aged 50 and older, who have been together for a minimum of 20 years, and who have chosen to remain childless.

Do you and your partner meet the criteria to be in the study?

- you are at least 50 years of age
- you have been together for a minimum of 20 years
- you have chosen to remain childless

Your interview will be conducted by Cindy Nelson in a place that is convenient for you. Your maximum time commitment will be approximately 1 hour.

Participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. If you would like more information on the study, please contact Cindy Nelson at (972) 380-4321 or my advisor, Linda Brock, Ph.D., at (940) 898-2713.

APPENDIX B
Initial Telephone Script

"Hello, my name is Cindy Nelson. Thank you for responding to my flyer. I am a doctoral student in Family Therapy at Texas Woman's University where I am completing this research project as a part of my degree. Not a lot is known about how couples decide to remain childless, so I've chosen this topic to study."

"The purpose of my research is to explore the experiences of married or partnered adults, aged 50 or older, who have been partnered for a minimum of 20 years, and who have chosen to remain childless. If the two of you agree to participate, I will interview you at a place and a time that is convenient for you. The interview will last from approximately 1 hour. When we meet, I'll have consent forms for each of you to sign, collect some background information, and then audiotape our conversation so that I'll be sure to be accurate describing your experiences."

"Here's what I'll be asking. 1) Tell me the story of how the two of you decided to remain childless. 2) What has the experience of being childless been like for you? I'll use a code number to protect your confidentiality and I'll be the only one to know your name. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without penalty to you."

"What questions do you have, so far?" (All questions will be answered by the researcher.)

"Would you like your story to be part of the study?" (If the potential participant says yes, a time and place for the interview will be scheduled.) "Thank you for your time. I look forward to meeting with you on the date and at the time we've agreed upon." [Will re-state time and place]
(If potential participant says no, he/she will be asked if they know of anyone who might be
willing to be a part of the study and if so, to pass on my contact information to them). "Thank you for taking the time to talk with me."

APPENDIX C
Consent Form

TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Study: The Lived Experiences of Older Voluntarily Childless Couples
Investigator: Cindy Nelson, M.S., M.Ed..... (972) 380-4321
Advisor: Linda J. Brock, Ph.D..... (940) 898-2713

Explanation and Purpose of the Research

You are being asked to participate in a research study to be conducted by Cindy Nelson, M.S., M.Ed. as part of the requirement for a Doctor of Philosophy degree at Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas. The purpose of this research will be to examine the experiences of 15 married or partnered couples, aged 50 and older, in which neither the husbands nor the wives sought pregnancy, adoption, or fostering and were able to remain childless.

Research Procedures

You are being asked to participate in a face-to-face interview at a location that is convenient for you. The researcher will conduct all interviews. The interviews will be audio-taped to provide a transcription of the information discussed and to assure the accuracy of the reporting of that information. The maximum total time commitment for this study is estimated to be approximately 1 hour. Your interview will be transcribed and assigned a code number to assure confidentiality.

Potential Risks

Potential risks related to your participation in the study include fatigue and emotional discomfort during the interview. To avoid fatigue, you may take a break (or breaks) during the interview as needed. If you experience emotional discomfort regarding the interview questions, you may stop answering any of the questions at any time. The investigator will provide you with a referral list of names and phone numbers that you may use if you want to discuss this discomfort with a professional.

Another possible risk to you as a result of your participation in this study is release of confidential information. Confidentiality will be protected to the extent that is allowed by law. The interview will take place in a private location agreed upon by you and the researcher. A code number, rather than your real name, will be used on the audiotape and transcription. Only the investigator, her advisor, and a research assistant will have access to the transcriptions.

_____
Participant initials

The audiotapes and hard copies of the transcriptions will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the investigator's home office. All identifiable data will be kept in a separate locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home office. The documents and audiotapes will be destroyed within two years of the study being completed and no later than 6/01/2013.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be published in the investigator's dissertation as well as in other research publications. However, no names will be included in any publication.

The researchers will try to prevent any problem that could happen because of this research. You should let the researchers know at once if there is a problem and they will help you. However, TWU does not provide medical services or financial assistance for injuries that might happen because you are taking part in this research.

Participation and Benefits

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and confidential and you may discontinue your participation in the study at any time without penalty. The only direct benefit of this study to you is that at the complection of the study a summary of the results will be mailed to you upon request. Your participation may contribute to a better understanding of voluntary childlessness among older adults and to the overall body of literature on voluntary childlessness.

Questions Regarding the Study

If you have questions about this research study you may ask the researchers. Their phone numbers are at the top of this form. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this research or in the way this study has been conducted, you may contact the Texas Woman's University Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at (940) 898-3378. You will be given a copy of this signed and dated consent form to keep.

_____

Participant initials

_____

Signature of Participant

_____

Date

* If you would like to receive a summary of the results of this study, please provide an address to which this summary should be sent.

_____

_____

_____

APPENDIX D
Demographic Information

Demographic Information

Please complete the following information.

1. Current age _____

2. Gender _____

3. Number of years in a committed relationship with current partner _____

4. Number of years married to current partner _____

5. Have you been married or in a serious partnered relationship previously?_____
If yes, for how long? _____

6. Race/Ethnicity (check all that apply)
☐ African American ☐ Asian American ☐ Caucasian ☐ Native American ☐ Hispanic ☐ Other _____

7. Highest level of education completed _____

8. Occupation _____
Hours worked weekly
☐ Retired ☐ 10-19 hours ☐ 20 - 29 hours ☐ 30 - 39 hours ☐ 40 hours and over

9. Spiritual/Religious affiliation
☐ Protestant ☐ Catholic ☐ Jewish ☐ Muslim ☐ Agnostic ☐ Atheist ☐ None ☐ Other _____

10. Annual Income per Household
☐ Under $20,000 ☐ $20,000 - $39,999 ☐ $40,000 - $59,999 ☐ $60,000 - $89,999 ☐ $90,000 - $119,999 ☐ $120,000 - $149,999 ☐ $150,000 - $199,999 ☐ $200,000 - $299,999 ☐ $300,000 - $499,999 ☐ $500,000 and over

11. What was your predominate form of birth control?

_____

APPENDIX E
Interview Guide

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Participant's Code: Male: _____ Female _____
Date of Interview: _____

"Thank you for agreeing to be a part of my study." (Pause) "The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of married or partnered couples, aged 50 and older, who have been together for a minimum of 20 years, and who have chosen to remain childless. Your participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without penalty. Do you have any questions about the study?" (Pause)

"You may take as many breaks as you need. I'll audiotape our conversation to make sure it's accurate." (Pause)

"Before we begin, I'll give you the consent form to read and then sign."

(Each participant will be given the consent form to read and sign.)

"Do you have any questions about the consent form?" (Pause) "If you notice, there is a space at the bottom of the consent form that asks for your mailing address if you'd like a summary of the study results. Please initial on page 1 and sign and date on page 2. Here's a copy for each of you to keep along with a counselor referral list should you want to discuss this further."

(Researcher will give copies of the signed consent forms to each of the participants and keep one copy for herself. She will also give them a counseling referral sheet).

"Next I'd like you to complete a questionnaire to gather background information. If anything on the form is unclear, please let me know. If you're uncomfortable answering any of the questions, please let me know that, too."

(The researcher will obtain demographic information that the couple is willing to provide. Upon completion, the researcher will ask if there are any questions before beginning the interview questions).

"We're finished with the background information. We'll now move on to the research questions. I'll turn on the recorder to signal the start of the interview. I encourage you to speak freely and openly and to elaborate as much as you are

comfortable."

(Researcher turns on the recorder).
Can you tell me the story of how the two of you decided to remain childless? (Pause)
What has the experience of being childless been like for you?

Prompts, as needed:

What factors contributed to your decision to remain childless?
What do you see as advantages of this decision?
What do you see as disadvantages of this decision?
What more can you say about that?
m-hmm
Smiling
Nodding
I see.
How so?
What more could you say about that?
Let me see if I understand what you are saying.
What has that changed over time?
What else comes to mind?
Anything else?
What more would you like to add?

"We're finished with the interview now and I'll be happy to answer any questions you may have. (Pause) If you've asked for summary results from this study, a copy will be sent to the address you've given me. Thank you so much for your time and for the information you've given."

APPENDIX F
Counseling Referral List

Counseling Referral List

American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy
http://www.aamft.org

American Counseling Association
http://www.counseling.org

AAMFT Therapist Locator
at www.aamft.org

Linda Francis, M.Ed., LPC
5068 W. Plano Parkway, Suite 196
Plano, Texas 75093 972-380-4321

Roseanne Elling, Ph.D.
2800 N. Dallas Parkway, Suite 220
Plano, Texas 75093 972-473-0500
Toll Free 866-676-6704

Jason Branson, M.A.,.LPC
2310 Ohio Drive, Suite 135
Plano, Texas 75093 972-612-7900

Kathryn Luscri, M.Ed., LPC
6301 Gaston Avenue, Suite 824
Dallas, Texas 75214 214-893-0972

Counseling and Family Therapy Clinic
Texas Woman's University
114 Human Development Building (HDB)
Denton, Texas 76204 940- 898-2620