

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF VOLUNTARILY
CHILDLESS MARRIED COUPLES: A LIFETIME DECISION

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BY
DENISA MARIE VALENZUELA, B.S., M.Ed.

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Tomas and Esther Rebeles,
who instilled in me the value of education
and taught me about what matters most in life.

To my sister, Laurie Molinar,
for her support.

To my husband, Robert Valenzuela,
for his love, patience, support, and constant encouragement
during my pursuit of this degree,
and always.

To my precious daughter, Ellison Grace,
who has brought more love and joy
into my life than I ever knew was possible.

To my fur kids, Claudia Jean (CJ) and Logan Blue,
who have provided companionship
and stress relief throughout this long process.

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ABSTRACT

DENISA MARIE VALENZUELA

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF VOLUNTARILY CHILDLESS MARRIED COUPLES: A LIFETIME DECISION

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The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of voluntarily childless married couples. This study explored the experiences of five voluntarily childless married couples within the framework of Elder's (1998) life course perspective. The researcher conducted interviews using semi-structured questions and prompts to obtain participants' experiences regarding the decision to remain voluntarily childless and how they were treated because of their decision. Interviews were digitally recorded for transcription. Qualitative data were coded and themes were identified. Analysis of the participants' narrative revealed five themes: (a) Commitment, (b) Sacrifice, (c) Poor Parenting, (d) Social Stigma, and (e) Substitutions; the overarching theme was Creating. The study helps illustrate the phenomenon of choosing to remain voluntarily childless and provides insight into this growing population and different pathways couples experience over their life course. Additionally, implications, limitations of the research, and recommendations for future research are included.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A strong emphasis on marriage, children, and family life is present in America today. A majority of men and women view having children as fulfilling, and a number of young people also believe that they will want to have children if they get married (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). However, trends in attitudes suggest that a number of individuals no longer perceive parenthood as necessary for successful adult living (Abma & Martinez, 2006; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001).

Couples in today's society have a number of influences that impact the decisions that they make in their everyday lives, and these decisions can impact the individual as well as their relationship with others. Couples may decide to remain childless for a number of reasons, and may be influenced by a number of different factors, such as historical and societal factors. Gillespie (2003) suggested that the choice is an ongoing process that takes place over time and in the context of life events. This choice to remain childless may affect individuals' lives in a number of ways, including how others perceive them.

Couples who choose to remain childless may create meaning in their lives based on their experiences of being different than the societal norm. Existing research on voluntarily childless couples is outdated and limited in scope. Therefore, this study sought to explore the experiences that the decision to remain voluntarily childless has on couples.

Statement of Problem

Although the makeup of American families is changing, social norms continue to support childbearing (Heaton, Jacobson, & Fu, 1992; McQuillan et al., 2012).

Childlessness, however, appears to be increasingly more common in the United States, although for many women their social identities are still defined in terms of their status as mothers (Koropeckyj-Cox, Romano, & Moras, 2007). Improvements in and availability of contraceptives and medical procedures provide options for remaining childless.

According to the National Center for Health Statistics (2012), among women 15-44 years of age in 2006-2010, 43% were childless. Of those women, 6.0% classified themselves as voluntarily childless, up from 4.9% in 1982. According to Ambry (1992), married couples with no children represented the fastest growing household type in the 1990s and 2000s. The U.S. Census Bureau (2016) used data from the Current Population Survey during selected years from 1976 to 2014. In 1976, 15.6% of women aged 30-34 were childless, compared to 28.9% in 2014. Of women aged 35-39 in 1976, 10.5% were childless, compared to 18.5% in 2014. In 1976, 10.2% of women aged 40-44 were childless, compared to 15.3% in 2014. While research on childlessness is substantial, the majority of the research is outdated and did not address couples who choose to remain childless. Studies on involuntarily childless couples far outnumber those addressing voluntarily childless couples (Cudmore, 2005; Daniluk & Tench, 2007; Peterson, Newton, & Rosen, 2003; Schapiro, 1980; Veevers, 1973a).

Voluntarily childless couples often tend to be viewed more negatively than involuntarily childless couples and are also viewed more negatively than couples that choose to have children. Society may view voluntarily childless adults as selfish, materialistic, and unfulfilled (Somers, 1993). Voluntarily childless couples are perceived to be lonely in old age (Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995), socially isolated as older adults (Wenger, Dykstra, Melkas, & Knipscheer, 2007), and are viewed as disliking children (Somers, 1993). Voluntarily childless couples may also be viewed as less happy in their marriage, less well adjusted, and less loving than couples who have children (Peterson, 1983). A number of studies on perceptions of voluntarily childless individuals are available in earlier literature (Calhoun & Selby, 1980; Callan, 1985; Jamison, Franzini, & Kaplan, 1979). However, because a majority of data were obtained in the late 1970s and 1980s, a difference may exist in how voluntarily childless couples are currently viewed.

Another limitation in the literature is the focus of the research. Existing research on the voluntarily childless has focused more on women (Callan, 1986, 1987; Veevers, 1973b, 1975). This focus on women neglects the views and experiences of voluntarily childless men. Rowland (2007) noted the increase of childlessness among more recent birth cohorts. Therefore, older cohorts represented in the existing studies may not reflect the experiences of a contemporary cohort of voluntarily childless individuals. Additionally, limited research is available on childless older adults, who have been described as invisible within social science literature (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007b).

A limited amount of research on the voluntarily childless exists in the United States. A greater focus has been on the voluntarily childless in other countries (Bean, 2005; Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007; Gonzalez & Jurado-Guerrero, 2006; Ibisomi & Mudege, 2014; Koropecj-Cox & Vaughn, 2007). Research to investigate declining birthrates and increasing childlessness has resulted in more current research on voluntarily childless individuals. Childlessness has increased in certain parts of Europe (Frejka & Sardon, 2006), among young Finnish adults (Miettinen, 2010), and in Australia (Rich, Taket, Graham, & Shelley, 2011). Since World War II, rates of childlessness have shown a steady increase among Dutch women (Keizer, Dykstra, & Poortman, 2011).

Therefore, existing research is both outdated and limited in its scope. Choosing to remain childless represents a shift in family composition (Somers, 1993). This shift in family composition and how this decision is viewed is deserving of further investigation. Existing research does not address the meaning and the lived experiences of choosing to remain childless or how these individuals create personal meaning of childlessness in their daily lives. Further research on voluntarily childless couples and the meaning of their experiences can contribute to the lack of current research addressing this phenomenon.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of voluntarily childless married couples. The focus of the study was to describe how

couples make the decision to remain childless and describe how these couples were treated because of their decision.

Theoretical Frameworks

Two theoretical frameworks guided the research question and the study protocol. Phenomenology provided the methodological design for the research study. This approach framed the qualitative nature of the study in gathering analysis of the data. Phenomenology was used in the analysis of the participants' subjective experiences of making the decision to remain voluntarily childless. The life course perspective was the conceptual framework that the researcher used to frame the research. It was used as the theoretical framework to facilitate understanding of the experiences of the voluntarily childless married couples.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is an approach that aims to achieve systematic and intersubjective knowledge by describing what is experienced (Creswell, 2007). It first describes what is subjectively experienced, to the extent that it is experienced, in its essence, and acknowledges the way the phenomenon appears and the way in which it constitutes itself in consciousness (Spiegelberg, 1975). This describes the concept of lived experience. A meaning-context exists within the mind of the producer, or individual. Phenomenology allows us to view the lived experiences, and gain a better understanding of the processes and meanings that are assigned to the experiences by the individuals (Schutz, 1967).

In-depth interviews may be used in phenomenological studies to allow participants to take an active approach in the research. Interviews allow participants to address perceptions and emotions of the topic under study. The interview becomes a meaning-making experience and serves to produce knowledge for both the researcher and the participant (Hiller & DiLuzio, 2004). The assumption for this study is that individuals who choose to remain voluntarily childless have shared experiences and have generated meanings based on those experiences, and these meanings and experiences will be shared in the interviews.

Life Course Perspective

The life course perspective is useful in addressing changes in families over time, as well as for identifying the consequences of those changes for individual family members. Elder (1998) described key principles of the life course perspective: (a) historical time and place, (b) timing of lives, (c) linked lives, and (d) human agency. The historical time and place principle addresses the notion that an individual's life course is embedded in and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their lifetime. The timing of lives refers to the developmental impact that life transitions or events can have, depending on when they occur in an individual's life. Linked lives is the idea that lives are interdependent, and social and historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships. These influences are multidirectional and reciprocal. The final principle, human agency, states that individuals construct their own

life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and limitations of history and social circumstances.

Trajectory, transition, timing, sequencing, and duration are important concepts in the life course perspective. Throughout an individual's life, socially shaped pathways or trajectories of transitions and states are followed. A transition is a point where new states or roles are entered into, which may add to an individual's social identity (Hagestad & Call, 2007). Other authors use the term turning point to refer to transitions, which can be described by their timing and sequencing. Timing describes the age at which a transition occurs, and sequencing describes the timing of multiple transitions. Duration is used to describe the time it takes to complete two or more transitions (Featherman & Sorenson, 1983).

The life course perspective looks at turning points, or "transitions" across the life span, such as birth and marriage, rather than static stages. The life course perspective also considers individual lives in relations to collective others, such as age cohorts and the family, as well as to changing historical conditions. The meaning of roles and activities differs across life stages. Some connections during the life course reflect values and preferences (Oesterle, Johnson, & Mortimer, 2004).

Life course is socially and biologically conditioned; however, it is also created by the individual. Individuals make choices among the options open to them. This study addresses couples that have made the choice to remain voluntarily childless. Historical times and timing within their lives may have had an impact on their decision to remain

voluntarily childless. The couples' relationships and societal influences may have also impacted their decision.

Researcher Perspective

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument. Through reflexivity, the researcher can acknowledge personal biases and values brought into research (Creswell, 2003). Before seeking to understand the phenomenon, the researcher sought to clarify personal knowledge and beliefs.

The researcher's experiences as part of a childless couple for over 13 years contributed to the formation of personal knowledge and individual beliefs regarding couples choosing to remain childless. During most of the research, the researcher was part of a childless couple. The researcher's religious and cultural background also affected beliefs and experiences about remaining voluntarily childless. Hispanics, as well as Catholics, traditionally tend to have large families. As a Catholic Hispanic female, those expectations were placed upon the researcher. Having been married for 14 years, throughout her 30s other individuals consistently assumed the researcher had children. When others learned that the researcher was childless, constant questioning occurred regarding why children were not present.

While the researcher had not decided to remain voluntarily childless, the researcher's experiences were similar to what the voluntarily childless couples experienced. The researcher's childlessness affected lifestyle and friendships. The researcher's personal experiences with childlessness were perceived as negative.

While the researcher believes that children are a gift from God, the researcher also respects the decision of couples who choose to remain voluntarily childless.

Additionally, throughout the study, the researcher was aware that married couples who made the decision to remain voluntarily childless might not have had the same negative perceptions and experiences.

Research Question

The following research question guided the research:

What are the beliefs and perceptions of voluntarily childless married couples?

Six interview questions were used to answer the research question. The researcher used probes for clarification when necessary. The questions were:

Interview Question 1: How did you make the decision to remain childless?

Interview Question 2: How do you feel about children in general?

Interview Question 3: If any exist, tell me about times when you have thought about changing your mind.

Interview Question 4: Tell me about your experiences of remaining voluntarily childless.

Interview Question 5: How does your family feel about your decision?

Interview Question 6: How do other people react when you tell them?

Definitions

Certain words used in the study are defined below. Definitions of themes emerging from the data are also included.

1. Voluntarily childless refers to couples who have never been parents, and who have chosen not to have children in their marital relationship. This excludes couples who are biologically unable to have children.
2. Commitment refers to the couples' dedication to their decision to remain voluntarily childless.
3. Sacrifice refers to the losses that result from the couples' decision to remain voluntarily childless and those that would be incurred if children were present.
4. Poor parenting describes the couples' fear of having a lack of parenting skills if they decided to have children and also refers to the parenting practices that are perceived as negative.
5. Social stigma refers to the perceived negative treatment based on how others treat the couples based on their decision to remain voluntarily childless.
6. Substitutions refers to pets or other activities that fill couples' time that would have otherwise been spent on rearing children.

Assumptions

Assumptions of this research included:

1. Participants in the study will respond openly and honestly about being voluntarily childless.

2. Participants will be willing to share their insights and experiences in relation to being voluntarily childless.
3. Participants in the study will meet all inclusion criteria.

Delimitations

This study was delimited to participants who are married, who are 18 years and older, who have never been parents, and who have chosen to remain voluntarily childless within their current marital relationship. The study was further delimited to participants who agreed to be interviewed by the researcher. Participants were located in Texas.

Summary

While childbearing is still viewed as the norm, a number of couples, although still in the minority, choose to remain childless. Couples who choose to remain voluntarily childless have different experiences than couples who choose to have children. Using the phenomenological research method allowed the researcher to describe the experiences of couples who choose to remain voluntarily childless. Allowing participants to share their experiences can lead to a better understanding of the meaning of this decision for these couples and provide greater insight into how this decision affects couples' lives.

A review of literature on voluntary childlessness is provided in the next chapter. Characteristics of the voluntarily childless are given. Reasons for choosing voluntary childlessness and perceptions of the voluntarily childless are also addressed.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of voluntarily childless married couples. The focus of the study was to describe how couples make the decision to remain childless and describe how these couples were treated because of their decision. The body of research on voluntary childlessness was outdated and limited in scope. Existing studies in the areas of voluntary childlessness were explored. The life course perspective, characteristics of the voluntarily childless, reasons for choosing voluntary childlessness, and perceptions of the voluntarily childless were addressed.

Life Course Perspective

Reviewing the literature on voluntarily childless couples revealed the applicability of Elder's (1998) principles of the life course perspective. Family life is not experienced in the same way by all families, including within or across societies, or across the life stages of family development (Mitchell, 2010). Voluntarily childless couples were exposed to different historical times, and had particular options or constraints in making their choice. Marital relationships do not remain static over time (Umberson, Williams, Powers, Chen, & Campbell, 2005). With the timing of lives, voluntarily childless couples possessed certain characteristics, and they entered into some roles, but not others (Williams & Umberson, 2004). The trajectory of couples changed in response to changing life course demands and greater demands affected relationships (Umberson et

al., 2005). Through linked lives, voluntarily childless couples were embedded in social relationships, and certain perceptions of the voluntarily childless were encountered. The principle of human agency allowed couples to construct their own life course through the choices they made. For voluntarily childless couples, remaining childless was a decision that could affect their life course.

Voluntary Childlessness

Married couples throughout the generations have made the decision to become parents or remain childless. Early research by Adams (1946) addressed voluntary childlessness in relation to family instability. Rejection of parenthood by voluntarily childless couples and childless marriages was cited as a factor contributing to family instability. Later research showed that childless couples were more likely to divorce (White & Booth, 1985) and childless men had a higher risk of divorce than parents (Kinnunen & Pulkkinen, 2003).

Seminal research sets the framework for addressing voluntary childlessness. Veevers (1973a) described the “selective inattention” that occurs in research. Areas of study within the field of marriage often reflect the value preferences and biases of researchers, which are often congruent with the dominant norms. The area of voluntary childlessness is one such area. Veevers addressed two important mores: (a) married people should have children and (b) married people should want to have children and should rejoice at the prospect of becoming parents. While some views have changed

over the past 40 years, there is still a stigma associated with voluntary childlessness and these mores are still quite relevant even today.

Characteristics of the Voluntarily Childless

Research (Abma & Martinez, 2006; Park, 2005) indicated that voluntarily childless individuals tended to possess certain characteristics. The voluntarily childless were more likely to be employed in professional or managerial occupations. Childless individuals were found to be well educated, and both spouses were more likely to be earning relatively high incomes. These individuals tended to reside in urban areas, were less religious, and had less traditional gender role orientations (Park, 2005).

Abma and Martinez (2006) explored whether childless older women who planned to have children differed in socioeconomic status than those that did not plan to have children, and compared them on areas such as work experience, full-time employment, occupation, income, and levels of education. Trends in voluntary, temporary, and involuntary childlessness were examined. Researchers found that voluntarily childless women tended to be disproportionately White. Compared to involuntarily childless women, a higher percentage of voluntarily childless women reported no religious affiliation and a higher percentage of voluntarily childless women had been working full time. Voluntarily childless women exhibited the highest levels of workplace investment, suggesting a greater focus on career goals. Voluntarily childless women tended to be more nonreligious, possibly affecting childbearing decisions. Among older women, the voluntarily childless women had the highest individual incomes, had the highest

percentage of professional and managerial occupations and the most extensive past work experience. Additionally, voluntarily older childless women were also found to share more egalitarian views (Abma & Martinez, 2006).

Voluntarily childless individuals had high levels of workplace investment (Abma & Martinez, 2006). This commitment to work, however, sometimes resulted in discriminatory practices against the voluntarily childless (Hayden, 2010). Hayden described inequities that could be created by work-family policies. Childless individuals were assumed to have greater time availability. Therefore, if parents were unavailable to work due to conflicts related to childrearing, childless employees acquired those additional work responsibilities, without any additional compensation (Jenner, 1994). Lowen and Sicilian (2009) found that parents were often allowed more flexible work schedules. Lighter travels assignments were also given to parents (Kirby & Krone, 2002).

Choosing to Remain Voluntarily Childless

Veevers (1973b) suggested two types of individuals who choose to remain voluntarily childless. One type decides early in life, whereas the other decides through a series of postponements. These groups have been referred to as early articulators and postponers (Houseknecht, 1974). Research suggested that the voluntarily childless often reflected carefully on why they did not want children (Letherby, 2002). Research indicated the importance of understanding context when addressing voluntarily childless individuals. In adulthood, the choice to remain childless created conditions for later

transitions. The possibility existed for men and women to encounter different experiences (Hagestad & Call, 2007). Structural and social issues, such as the social environment or social relationships, also influenced personal choices (Bernardi, Keim, & von der Lippe, 2007).

Studies (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007; Gillespie, 2003) addressed reasons that individuals choose to remain childless, although the main focus was on women. Factors were identified as influencing the decision for women to remain voluntarily childless. Factors were linked to increased opportunities for women of their generation (Gillespie, 2003). Historically, women stayed home to care for children (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007a). Women who had chosen to stay home to care for children encountered difficulty when they reentered the workforce (Looze, 2014). Once women reentered the workforce, conflicts arose between work responsibilities and caregiving responsibilities (Earle & Heymann, 2012). Wage gaps also existed between mothers and childless women (England, 2005).

Women who chose to remain childless may have decided from an early age that motherhood was not central to their identity (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007), whereas others associated motherhood with a loss of identity (Gillespie, 2003). Gillespie (2003) indicated that women's perceptions on motherhood are associated with sacrifice and loss. Motherhood and the nurturing and caring roles associated with it did not appeal to some women. Additionally, motherhood was viewed as a burden.

McQuillan et al. (2012) examined whether the reason women had no children was related to childlessness concerns. Childlessness concerns included difficulties during holidays and family gatherings because of not having children or feeling left out or sad that others had children. Authors used the life course framework and identity theories to guide the study. Voluntarily childless women perceived more social messages to have children. However, they had lower childlessness concerns because motherhood was less important to them when compared to other childless women who considered motherhood important in their lives. Researchers found that for childless women, life course norms shaped life choices and outcomes through the filter of identity.

The conscious decision to remain childless was sometimes based on recognition of lifestyle opportunity costs associated with parenthood. Remaining childless provided more freedom, which was associated with wider choices and greater opportunities. Remaining childless allowed for an adult-centered existence. Voluntarily childless women cited maintaining intimacy in the couple relationship as a factor that influenced their decision (Gillespie, 2003).

Often, other areas of their lives influenced their decisions. Some individuals chose to remain childless because they worked with children, and did not want to come home and take care of their own children. Pets also served as child substitutes. Some individuals chose to remain childless because of the state of the environment (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007) or concern about population growth (Park, 2005).

While few studies have examined males and their decisions to remain voluntarily childless, Carmichael and Whittaker (2007) found that childless individuals of both sexes wanted monetary security, a flexible lifestyle, and stress free relationships. They also had shared concerns about the environment. Men tended to emphasize rewarding careers and long-term financial planning, whereas both sexes shared negative recollections of childhood. Women, however, described childlessness as necessary for their own career satisfaction and success (Park, 2005).

Feelings have also been cited as influencing the decision to remain childless. Feelings about children were one reason for remaining childless. Men and women mentioned discomfort or disinterest in children, and women cited a lack of perceived maternal instinct. Other individuals chose to remain childless because of a feeling of inadequacy towards parenthood. Men and women identified personality traits they felt were not associated with good parenting. Traits included anxiety, introversion, perfectionism, and impatience (Park, 2005).

Perceptions of the Voluntarily Childless

Research (Calhoun & Selby, 1980; Gillespie, 2000; Letherby, 2002; Letherby & Williams, 1999; Veevers, 1975) indicated that a number of stereotypes existed towards voluntarily childless individuals, with a particular focus on women. Letherby (2002) argued that women without children represented the “other” in societies that value children and motherhood. Women were often stereotyped as selfish and deviant

(Veevers, 1975) and portrayed in ways that emphasized them as aberrant, immature, and unfeminine (Gillespie, 2000). Poor psychological adjustment was another attribute ascribed to voluntarily childless individuals (Calhoun & Selby, 1980; Shafer & Pace, 2015). The term childfree was often associated with individuals who were voluntarily childless. The term childfree was also associated with the term carefree, which implied a childlike state. Therefore, individuals who chose not to have children were considered to be free from responsibilities and were viewed as being like children themselves (Letherby & Williams, 1999).

Other research (Gillespie, 2000) found that voluntarily childlessness was discrediting. Women have described the ways that others disbelieved the choice to remain childless and the choice was often recast through assigning more legitimate explanations, such as infertility. Cover stories were often created to explain why they were childless (DeOllos & Kapinus, 2002). Others also disregarded their choice by inferring that the women would change their minds (Gillespie, 2000).

Some viewed individuals who were planning to remain childless as lazy, insensitive, lonely, and unhappy (Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995) and as possessing less interpersonal worth (LaMastro, 2001). Earlier research (Jamison et al., 1979; Polit, 1978) indicated that voluntarily childless individuals were viewed as rebellious, non-conventional, and self-centered, as well as less friendly and less good-natured. Compared to parents, voluntarily childless men tend to be viewed as atypical, unfulfilled, less-well adjusted, and less sensitive and loving (Jamison et al., 1979).

Summary

While studies on voluntarily childlessness individuals were available, the focus remained on voluntarily childless women. Literature on voluntarily childless men was limited. There were a number of reasons given by individuals to remain childless. Gillespie (2000) suggested that the decision to remain childless was an ongoing process that took place over time and in the context of life events. At some point in the life cycle, individuals might consider the benefits and costs of having children (Callan, 1987). The experiences of voluntarily childless individuals are complex and are not always presented and understood. Voluntary childlessness was a key identity for some individuals. However, for others, the status and experience of this aspect of their lives was related to other experiences and statuses (Letherby, 2002). Voluntarily childless individuals, however, faced some negative perceptions related to their decision. Additional research focusing on both men and women can help assess social and cultural circumstances and provide a better understanding of the processes associated with the choice to remain childless.

The next chapter will provide information on the methodology of the research study. The chapter will describe the research design, including information on data collection and the protection of human participants. A description of sampling and participants is provided. Procedures, data analysis, and ways to establish trustworthiness are also included.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of voluntarily childless married couples. The researcher used a qualitative approach. Phenomenological research methods were used to capture the rich meanings of voluntarily childless couples. Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The interviews were digitally recorded for transcription. Qualitative data were coded and themes were identified.

Research Design

While the life course perspective is the conceptual framework that the researcher used to frame the research, this study used a phenomenological research design. Phenomenological research is the study of lived experiences. This type of research asks what the experience is like for an individual in order to find meanings in everyday lived experiences (Laverty, 2003). Researchers must maintain a phenomenological stance in order to be open enough to understand the experience, and by trying to prevent judgment from interfering with their openness to the descriptions. The researcher tries to set aside preconceived judgments about the phenomenon, which results in the researcher placing the phenomenon in epoche. Doing so allows the researcher to focus on searching for the phenomenon's essence (Sadala & Adorno, 2002).

Research Question and Interview Questions

The research question that guided the study was:

What are the beliefs and perceptions of voluntarily childless married couples?

Six interview questions were used to answer the research question. The researcher used probes for clarification when necessary. The questions were:

Interview Question 1: How did you make the decision to remain childless?

Interview Question 2: How do you feel about children in general?

Interview Question 3: If any exist, tell me about times when you have thought about changing your mind.

Interview Question 4: Tell me about your experiences of remaining voluntarily childless.

Interview Question 5: How does your family feel about your decision?

Interview Question 6: How do other people react when you tell them?

Data Collection

This study used a semi-structured interview to collect data on voluntarily childless married couples. The predominant method of data collection in phenomenology is the interview (Creswell, 2007). The purpose of the phenomenological interview is to understand shared meanings from the participants by allowing them to share a vivid picture of the lived experience. The interview allows participants to describe the detail and the context that shape their experiences (Sorrell & Redmond, 1995). Interviews allow the researcher to remain centered on drawing out the experiences of the participants

so that the phenomenon can be revealed (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). Observation of the way that participants live in their environment through time and space provides information on how they might personalize meaning (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

Semi-structured Interview

The interview process is used to gather data in qualitative research. Interviews put the researcher in the role of the research instrument (Creswell, 2007). The interview is a collaborative process in which the researcher shapes the interview, but also is shaped by the process, which helps create awareness of new meanings of lived experiences (Sorrell & Redmond, 1995). Phenomenological interviewing requires the researcher to put aside preconceived ideas regarding the subject of the interview prior to data collection. This involves the process of “bracketing,” or setting aside pre-judgment (Mapp, 2008).

Participant Demographic Questionnaire

A demographic questionnaire was used to gather data from each participant. The questionnaire included questions such as age, ethnicity, marital status, and number of years of marriage. Additionally, the questionnaire obtained information such as education level, religious affiliation, occupation, and income.

Protection of Human Participants

This study was presented to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Texas Woman’s University in Denton, Texas. Additional recommendations made by the IRB were implemented to further protect the participants involved. A consent form was

completed prior to beginning the face-to-face interview. Participants were assured that the information they provided would remain confidential. Participants were also informed that participation was voluntary and that they could change their minds at any time and withdraw from the study without repercussions of any kind. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire after the interview. Participants were assured that their participation was kept anonymous through a coding of responses. Pseudonyms were used in place of names for qualitative interviews and possible contact information.

Documents containing identifiable data were safeguarded. Audio recordings were downloaded to a flash drive, with files coded with a pseudonym. Audio recordings were then transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions from the interviews were coded with a corresponding pseudonym. This information was stored on a password-protected computer that only the researcher could access. Paper documents, the computer, and flash drive were stored in a locked cabinet with limited access in the researcher's home. Upon closing the study with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Texas Woman's University, the transcriptions and demographic questionnaires were shredded and the flash drive was physically destroyed.

Sampling and Participants

A convenience sample was used for this study. Convenience samples are recruited by soliciting volunteers in an effort to obtain individuals with particular characteristics (Hultsch, MacDonald, Hunter, Maitland, & Dixon, 2002). Participants were recruited from a meeting group for childless singles and couples, from a dog agility

group, and from postings on Facebook. Participants had to meet the inclusion criteria and both spouses had to participate in order to be considered for the study. The sample consisted of five couples who had never been parents and who had chosen to remain voluntarily childless within their current marital relationship. Participants had to be 18 years and older. In order for the researcher to conduct a face-to-face interview when applicable, participants had to live in Texas. A demographic questionnaire was used to obtain data pertaining to age, ethnicity, education level, religious affiliation, occupation, income, marital status, and number of years of marriage.

Procedures

Participants were recruited from a meeting group for childless singles and couples, from a dog agility group, and from postings on Facebook. Recruitment information (Appendix A) was sent to members with information requesting participation in the study. The request for participants included some of the necessary characteristics for participation in the study. Information provided assured participants that information that was provided would remain confidential and that participation was voluntary and could be discontinued at any time without any repercussions.

After receiving replies, the researcher contacted participants through the participants' preferred mode of communication in order to set up a face-to-face interview. The researcher set up a time to meet each individual at a mutually agreed upon location and at a specific time. In order to address safety issues, the researcher used discretion and made case-by-case decisions as to where the interview occurred. If two married

spouses wanted to participate and meet at the same time, the researcher explained that while both were welcome to meet at the same time, each interview would occur separately and any information shared with the researcher would be kept confidential from the other spouse.

The researcher used a semi-structured interview (Appendix B), with prepared questions and possible probes. The interviews were audio recorded for accuracy, and were transcribed in order to analyze the data. Only the researcher and her advisors had access to the audio recordings. In case the recorder did not work properly, the researcher had an additional recorder to serve as a backup. Charging devices for both recorders were available as well. The researcher also had paper and writing instruments available.

Once the participant and the researcher arrived at the meeting place, the researcher followed a specific protocol for conducting the interview. This protocol involved spending several minutes establishing rapport, and trying to help the individual feel at ease. Establishing rapport included establishing and maintaining eye contact, smiling and greeting the individual sincerely, matching non-verbal signals, and engaging in small talk. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and the interview process, including the estimated time that would be spent in the interview and filling out the demographic questionnaire. Steps taken to maintain confidentiality and how the information collected by the researcher would be handled were explained. The participant was given an opportunity to ask questions. When the participant indicated that he/she did not have any questions and they understood his/her role in the process, the

written consent form was explained and offered to the participant. The purpose of the study, the potential risks, and the anticipated length of time were repeated and time was allowed for additional questions. The participant was told that participation was voluntary and that he/she could change his/her mind at any time and withdraw from the study without repercussions of any kind. The participant was required to sign two copies of the consent form (Appendix C). The researcher kept one copy, and the participant was given the other one. After the consent form was signed, the participant had another opportunity to ask questions. After any questions were answered and the participant indicated understanding of his/her involvement in the study, the interview began. The researcher explained that questions would be asked and encouraged participants to give open, honest answers.

Before beginning the interview, the participant selected a pseudonym. The researcher tested the recorder to make sure it was properly recording both the researcher's and the participant's voices. If everything was working correctly, then the researcher informed the participant that the recorder would be turned on and then the interview began. Completion of the interview and the demographic questionnaire was expected to take approximately 90 minutes. The interview consisted of six interview questions, with probes used as needed. After the interview, the researcher asked the participant to fill out a demographic questionnaire (Appendix D). After the participant filled out the questionnaire, the researcher answered any additional questions, provided

the resource list (Appendix E), and then thanked the participant for participating in the research.

On the informed consent, participants had the option of receiving the results of the study through regular mail or email. If a participant indicated that he or she wanted to receive the results of the study, the results were sent within six months of the conclusion of the study.

Data Analysis

After the interview, the researcher downloaded the audio-recorded interviews to a flash drive that was used on a password-protected computer only accessible to the researcher. The researcher transcribed information from the audio-recorded interviews into a word processing program. Audio recordings and transcriptions were stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home.

Phenomenological data analytic techniques involve understanding the subjective meaning of experiences for the participants themselves (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002). The phenomenological analytic approach involves seeking unique themes of meaning within the data, as well as across the data. Data analysis includes reviewing, identifying, and coding recurrent themes within data for each participant. Common themes are also identified across participants. Identified themes are brought back together in meaningful relation to develop a synthesis of the core elements of the experiences described (Davidson, Stayner, Lambert, Smith, & Sledge, 1997).

Each interview was listened to at least twice and each transcript was read through twice. The researcher carefully analyzed the content of the interview transcripts. Initially, the researcher employed Holistic Coding. Saldaña (2016) described the applicability of Holistic Coding “to ‘chunk’ the text into broad topics as a preliminary step before more detailed analysis” (p. 165). The data from the participant responses was examined as a whole. Next, In Vivo Coding was used. In Vivo Coding is appropriate for “studies that prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” (p. 105) and In Vivo Codes can also lead to rich category and theme development (Saldaña, 2016). The researcher identified common or repeated words, phrases, ideas, and relationships expressed in each participant’s answers. The researcher repeated this process multiple times to determine whether any additional codes were found. Once no additional codes appeared to the researcher, the codes were reviewed. The researcher then identified certain categories, or themes, that each code could fall under. Initially, the researcher identified 10 themes. In order to locate and reduce any possible overlap and redundancy among the themes, the researcher further analyzed and synthesized the themes, resulting in five themes. Identification of the five themes in data analysis and one overarching theme allowed the researcher to develop the essence of the experiences of the participants as a whole.

Trustworthiness

Different criteria are available for building trust in qualitative research (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). However, the most common are those proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Lincoln and Guba described four general types of trustworthiness in qualitative

research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In order to establish trustworthiness in the study, the researcher employed the following strategies: (a) credibility, (b) triangulation, (c) peer debriefing, (d) member checks, (e) reflexivity, (f) transferability, (g) dependability, and (h) confirmability.

Credibility

Shenton (2004) described ways that researchers could establish credibility to promote confidence in accurately addressing the phenomenon under study. According to Shenton, tactics that help ensure honesty in participants can contribute to credibility. Persons approached to take part in research should be given opportunities at different times within the research process to refuse to participate. This helps ensure that data collection sessions involve individuals who are genuinely willing to take part and contribute freely. The researcher should aim to establish rapport with participants and encourage participants to be open with their ideas and information. The researcher in this study attempted to establish rapport. Establishing rapport included establishing and maintaining eye contact, smiling and greeting the individual sincerely, matching non-verbal signals, and engaging in small talk. The researcher also provided participants with the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time.

Triangulation. Triangulation during the collection and data analysis also adds credibility to the research results (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Triangulation can include the use of different methods, such as individual interviews, observation, and field notes (Shenton, 2004). In the study, the researcher conducted individual interviews with

participants. The researcher also kept a reflexive journal. Observations and notes were written immediately after the interviews were completed. Researcher notes included information such as the date, time, and location of the interview. Additionally, the researcher noted observations about the participants, including aspects such as behavior before, during, and after the interview. Observations such as body language, reactions to questions and probes, and areas that were emphasized during the interview were noted.

Peer debriefing. Creswell (2007) described how peer debriefing can also establish credibility by providing an external check of the research process. A peer debriefer was used in the study. The peer debriefer was an individual possessing a doctorate from Texas Woman's University. The peer debriefer was provided a copy of all of the transcribed interviews. This individual read all transcriptions and independently analyzed and coded the data into themes. Comparisons were made between themes identified by the researcher and the peer debriefer. No major discrepancies between the themes were found.

Member checks. The most important way to establish credibility within a study is through member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Checks relating to the accuracy of the data can take place immediately or after data have been collected. The emphasis is on whether the words match what was originally intended (Shenton, 2004). In the study, the researcher conducted member checks with participants. The member checks occurred during the interviews, as the researcher asked for clarification and through reflective listening. Additionally, after the interviews were transcribed, the researcher contacted

five of the participants. A summary of the interview was given to the participant in order to insure that the researcher accurately understood the meaning and message that the participant was trying to convey. The five participants agreed that the researcher accurately represented the message they were trying to convey.

Reflexivity. Researchers cannot avoid taking value positions into the research process. However, reflexivity seeks to recognize and value the researcher's participation in shaping data and their analysis (Angen, 2000). Bracketing is "an iterative, reflexive journey that entails preparation, action, evaluation, and systematic feedback about the effectiveness of the process" (Ahern, 1999, p. 408). This subjectivity can serve as a resource instead of error or bias and the researcher's reflexivity can lend credibility to the findings (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004). Reflexivity allows the researcher to identify preconceptions brought into the research project. These preconceptions, however, are not the same as bias, unless the researcher fails to mention them, which involves addressing these beliefs in the study (Malterud, 2001). Reflexive bracketing focuses on making the researcher's personal values, background, and cultural beliefs transparent (Gearing, 2004). Bracketing was employed by the researcher in this study to establish credibility. The researcher kept a reflexive journal during the research study. Prior to collecting data, the researcher reflected on experiences during the time of childlessness. Additionally, before and after interviews, the researcher also added emerging thoughts and perspectives. Reflexive journaling was also used during data analysis and throughout the

research process. This process allowed the researcher to monitor the extent that values and beliefs could impose on the data.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the ability of transferring research findings or methods from one group to another by providing rich descriptions of participants and their experiences (Williams, 2015). Thomas and Magilvy (2011) described how providing a dense description of the population studied, such as through providing descriptions of demographics and geographic boundaries of the study, can establish transferability. The emphasis is on creating thick descriptions, including research methods and examples of raw data. A detailed presentation of the findings, with appropriate quotations, can enhance transferability (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). The researcher in this study provided information on data collection methods and recruitment inclusion criteria. Direct quotations from participants' interviews were also provided. Geographic locations were provided and demographic information collected using a demographic questionnaire were also included.

Dependability

Dependability refers to when another researcher can follow the decision trail used by the researcher (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Thomas and Magilvy discussed how audit trails include descriptions of the purpose of the study, how and why participants were selected, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures, discussing the research findings, and describing techniques used to determine credibility of the data.

Additionally, the authors indicated that strategies for establishing dependability included providing a detailed description of research methods and having peers participate in the analysis process. The researcher in the study used those strategies. A detailed description of research methods was given and a peer participated in analysis of the data.

Confirmability

Confirmability occurs when credibility, transferability, and dependability have been established (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). The qualitative research must be reflective, with the researcher examining how his or her preconceptions affect the research. After interviews, the researcher can take field notes that include personal feelings, biases, and insights. Reflective research allows for “developing confirmability of the research and, overall, leading the reader or consumer of the research to have a sense of trust in the conduct credibility of findings and applicability of the study” (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 154). Besides identifying preconceptions, keeping a reflexive journal can help a researcher see participants’ meanings more clearly (Williams, 2015). The researcher in this study used bracketing and kept a reflexive journal. The researcher attempted to establish credibility, transferability, and dependability in order for confirmability to occur.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to describe the experiences of voluntarily childless married couples. The researcher used a phenomenological research design. Participants were obtained through a convenience sample, with a questionnaire providing

demographic characteristics of the participants. Data were gathered through the use of semi-structured interviews, which were digitally recorded and then transcribed. Data analysis included coding and identification of themes to construct a composite description of the meanings and essence of the participants' experiences.

The next chapter will provide results from the study. The life course perspective was used in the study. The researcher's reflective analysis of establishing trustworthiness in the study is provided. Data analysis procedures are described and information about the sample is included. The chapter will describe the five themes and one overarching theme that emerged from the data.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The analysis of this phenomenological study of the experiences of voluntarily childless married couples is presented in this chapter. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The life course perspective was used to examine the experiences of voluntarily childless married couples. The researcher interviewed five couples, including five male participants and five female participants. A description of the research sample, the process of data analysis, and the findings and themes are presented.

Phenomenological data analytic techniques involve understanding the subjective meaning of experiences for the participants themselves (Fossey et al., 2002). An emphasis was on identifying the meaning and essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher analyzed data by using Holistic Coding and In Vivo Coding (Saldaña, 2016). The researcher analyzed data as a whole and then identified word repetitions and key words or phrases to identify themes. Themes of meaning were sought within the data. Data analysis involved reviewing, identifying, and coding recurrent themes within data for each participant. Common themes were identified across participants in order to allow the researcher to develop the essence of the experiences of the participants as a whole.

The research question that guided the data collection and analysis was:

What are the beliefs and perceptions of voluntarily childless married couples?

Six interview questions were used to answer the research question. The researcher used probes for clarification when necessary. The questions were:

1. How did you make the decision to remain childless?
2. How do you feel about children in general?
3. If any exist, tell me about times when you have thought about changing your mind.
4. Tell me about your experiences of remaining voluntarily childless.
5. How does your family feel about your decision?
6. How do other people react when you tell them?

Reflective Analysis of Trustworthiness

The researcher used strategies to establish trustworthiness in the study by addressing areas such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. In order to establish credibility, participants were provided multiple opportunities to withdraw from the study. The researcher also attempted to establish rapport with the participants. Triangulation was also used during data collection and data analysis. Semi-structured interviews were used in the study and the researcher kept a reflexive journal with observations and other notes.

To further address credibility, an external check was provided through the use of peer debriefer. The researcher also used member checks both during the interviews and after transcribing the interviews. After transcribing was completed, some of the participants were given the opportunity to determine whether the researcher accurately represented the message they intended to convey. Reflexive bracketing was also used by the researcher. The researcher used the reflexive journal to reflect on experiences prior to

collecting data and to document any additional thoughts before and after the interviews. Reflexive journaling was also used during data analysis and throughout the research process.

In order to address transferability, information on data collection methods and recruitment inclusion criteria were provided. Rich descriptions were provided through the use of direct quotations from participants' interviews. Geographic locations and demographic information were also included in the study. Dependability was addressed by using strategies that would provide an audit trail. Detailed research methods were provided. The purpose of the study, how participants were selected, procedures on data collection and data analysis, a discussion of the research findings, and techniques to determine the credibility of the data were included in the study. Additionally, a peer was used in the analysis process.

Reflective research helped develop confirmability. The researcher kept a reflexive journal that allowed for examination of preconceptions brought into the study. Use of the reflexive journal also provided the researcher with the opportunity to document feelings or biases that emerged during the research process. Therefore, in order to address trustworthiness in the study, the researcher attempted to establish credibility, transferability, and dependability so that confirmability could occur.

Analysis of Data

After the interviews, the researcher downloaded the interviews to a personal computer. The researcher transcribed the information into a word processing program.

Each interview was reviewed at least twice and each transcript was read through twice. The researcher carefully analyzed the content of the interview transcripts. The data from the participant responses was examined as a whole and Holistic Coding was used (Saldaña, 2016). Holistic coding is an attempt “to grasp basic themes or issues in the data by absorbing them as a whole rather than analyzing them line by line (Dey, 1993, p. 104). Next, In Vivo Coding (Saldaña, 2016) was used, leading to theme development. The researcher identified common or repeated words, phrases, ideas, and relationships expressed in each participant’s answers. The researcher repeated this process multiple times to determine whether any additional codes were found. Once no additional codes were emerging, the researcher then reviewed the codes. The researcher then identified certain categories, or themes, that each code could fall under. Initially, the researcher identified 10 themes. In order to locate and reduce any possible overlap and redundancy among the themes, the researcher further analyzed and synthesized the themes, resulting in five themes emerging from the data. Identification of the five themes in data analysis allowed the researcher to develop the essence of the experiences of the participants as a whole.

A peer debriefer was used to establish credibility by providing an external check of the research process (Creswell, 2007). Credibility helps establish trustworthiness in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher asked an individual who obtained a doctorate in the field of Family Sciences from Texas Woman’s University to serve as a peer debriefer during data analysis. The peer debriefer was provided a copy of

all of the transcribed interviews. This individual read all transcriptions, independently analyzed the data, and coded the data into themes. Comparisons were made between themes identified by the researcher and the peer debriefer. Similarities and differences were addressed with the researcher in order to arrive at common themes.

Description of Sample

Demographic questionnaires were used to collect descriptive data about the participants. Data collected in the questionnaires included gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, number of years married to current spouse, education, and occupation. Additionally, data were also collected on religious affiliation, whether religious services were attended on a regular basis, individual income, and whether the decision to remain voluntarily childless was one that they were committed to for a lifetime.

Participants included five couples. All of the participants lived in Texas. Two couples resided in the Dallas/Fort Worth area and three couples resided in the Houston area. Data gathered from the demographic questionnaire, including age, gender, ethnicity, marital status, and number of years in their current marriage are included in Table 1. Eight of the participants were Caucasian, one was Hispanic, and one was Hispanic/Pacific Islander. Nine of the participants were in their first marriage, and one participant was divorced and remarried. Four of the participants were in their 30s (32, 33, 33, and 38). Three of the participants were in their 40s (40, 43, and 48). One participant was 53, one was 62, and one was 70 years old. Two of the couples had been

married for 8 years, one couple for 14 years, one couple for 25 years, and one couple had been married for 33 years.

Table 1

Participant Age, Gender, Ethnicity, Marital Status, and Years in Current Marriage

Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Marital Status	Years in Current Marriage
Couple 1					
Gwen	48	Female	Caucasian	Married (1 st marriage)	25
Charles	53	Male	Caucasian	Married (1 st marriage)	25
Couple 2					
Maria	38	Female	Caucasian	Married (1 st marriage)	8
Maverick	33	Male	Caucasian	Married (1 st marriage)	8
Couple 3					
Kay	62	Female	Caucasian	Married (1 st marriage)	33
Robert	70	Male	Caucasian	Divorced and Remarried	33
Couple 4					
Vanessa	40	Female	Hispanic/Pacific Islander	Married (1 st marriage)	15
Drew	43	Male	Hispanic	Married (1 st marriage)	15
Couple 5					
Anne	32	Female	Caucasian	Married (1 st marriage)	8
Matt	33	Male	Caucasian	Married (1 st marriage)	8

Education level, occupation, and individual income data gathered from the demographic questionnaire are included in Table 2. One of the participants had some

college/tech school, three of the participants had bachelor's degrees, five had master's degrees, and one participant had a doctorate. Individual income data indicated that one participant made less than \$25,000, one made \$25,000-49,999, four made \$50,000-74,999, three made \$150,000-199,000, and one made \$200,000 or more.

Table 2

Participant, Education Level, Occupation, Individual Income

Participant	Education Level (highest completed)	Occupation	Individual Income
Couple 1			
Gwen	Master's Degree	Budget Officer	\$50,000-\$74,999
Charles	Master's Degree	Teacher	\$50,000-\$74,999
Couple 2			
Maria	Master's Degree	Exec Assistant/Chef	\$150,000-\$199,999
Maverick	Master's Degree	Finance	\$150,000-\$199,999
Couple 3			
Kay	Bachelor's Degree	Retired Flight Attendant	Less than \$25,000
Robert	Doctorate	Attorney	\$200,000 or more
Couple 4			
Vanessa	Bachelor's Degree	Teacher	\$50,000-\$74,999
Drew	Some college/Tech School	Gymnastics Coach	\$25,000-\$49,999
Couple 5			
Anne	Master's Degree	Speech Therapist	\$150,000-\$199,999
Matt	Bachelor's Degree	IT Specialist	\$50,000-74,999

Data on participants' religious affiliations, whether they attended religious services on a regular basis, and how they answered the question asking whether the decision to remain voluntarily childless was one that they were committed to for a lifetime are included in Table 3. Three participants identified as Catholic, one as Protestant, one as Methodist, one as Christian Science, three as No formal religious affiliation, and one identified as Catholic/No formal religious affiliation. Nine of the participants indicated that they did not attend religious services on a regular basis. Nine of the participants answered, "yes" when asked whether the decision to remain voluntarily childless was one they were committed to for a lifetime. One participant wrote in, "Not necessarily."

Table 3

Participant, Religious Affiliation, Religious Service Attendance, Commitment to Decision to Remain Voluntarily Childless

Participant	Religious Affiliation	Attends Religious Services on Regular Basis	Committed to Decision to Remain Voluntarily Childless
Couple 1			
Gwen	Methodist	No	Yes
Charles	Protestant	No	Yes
Couple 2			
Maria	No formal religious affiliation	No	Yes
Maverick	Catholic/No formal religious affiliation	No	Yes

Couple 3			
Kay	Christian Science	Yes	Yes
Robert	No formal religious affiliation	No	Yes
Couple 4			
Vanessa	Catholic	No	Yes
Drew	Catholic	No	Yes
Couple 5			
Anne	Catholic light	No	Yes
Matt	No formal religious affiliation	No	Not necessarily

Gwen, age 48, and Charles, age 53, were both Caucasian. They had been married to each other for 25 years. Gwen and Charles each held a master's degree. Gwen identified as a Methodist and Charles identified as a Protestant. Neither of them attended religious services on a regular basis. Gwen was a budget officer for municipal government and her individual income was in the range of \$50,000-\$74,999. Charles was a teacher and his individual income also fell within that range. When asked about whether the decision to remain voluntarily childless was one they were committed to for a lifetime, they both answered yes.

Maria, age 38, and Maverick, age 33, were both Caucasian, and had been married to each other for eight years. Both Maria and Maverick had a master's degree. Maria identified herself as not having a formal religious affiliation. Maverick identified himself as Catholic on the Demographic Questionnaire, but also indicated no formal religious affiliation. Neither of them attended religious services on a regular basis. Maria was an

executive assistant/chef and her individual income was in the range of \$150,000-199,000. Maverick worked in finance and his individual income was also in the range of \$150,000-199,000. When asked about whether the decision to remain voluntarily childless was one they were committed to for a lifetime, they both answered yes.

Kay, age 62, and Robert, age 70, were both Caucasian. They had been married to each other for 33 years. For Kay, it was her first marriage. However, it was Robert's second marriage. He had also been voluntarily childless in his previous marriage. Kay identified as a Christian Scientist and attended religious services on a regular basis. Robert identified himself as having no formal religious affiliation and did not attend religious services on a regular basis. Kay held a bachelor's degree and was a retired flight attendant. Her individual income fell in the range of less than \$25,000. Robert was an attorney. He had a doctorate and his individual income fell within the range of \$200,000 or more. When asked about whether the decision to remain voluntarily childless was one they were committed to for a lifetime, they both answered yes.

Vanessa, age 40, and Drew, age 43, had been married to each other for 15 years. Vanessa was Hispanic and Pacific Islander and Drew was Hispanic. Vanessa and Drew both identified themselves as Catholics, but neither of them attended religious services on a regular basis. Vanessa had a bachelor's degree and was a teacher. Her individual income was in the range of \$50,000-\$74,999. Drew had completed some college/tech school and was a gymnastics coach. His individual income was in the range of \$25,000-

\$49,999. When asked about whether the decision to remain voluntarily childless was one they were committed to for a lifetime, they both answered yes.

Anne, age 32, and Matt, age 33, had been married to each other for eight years. Both Anne and Matt were Caucasian. The highest level of education completed by Maria was a master's degree and the highest level of education completed by Matt was a bachelor's degree. Anne identified herself as Catholic, but wrote in the word "light" after Catholic on the Demographic Questionnaire. Matt indicated that he had no formal religious affiliation. They both indicated that they did not attend religious services on a regular basis. Anne was a speech therapist and her individual income was in the range of \$150,000-\$199,999. Matt was an information technology specialist and his individual income was in the range of \$50,000-\$74,999. When asked about whether the decision to remain voluntarily childless was one that she was committed to for a lifetime, Anne answered yes. On the Demographic Questionnaire, when Matt was asked whether the decision to remain voluntarily childless was one that he was committed to for a lifetime, he wrote in "Not necessarily."

Themes

The participants' responses to the interview questions revealed insight into the beliefs and perceptions of voluntarily childless married couples. Once the data were analyzed and coded, several themes emerged regarding the experiences and perceptions of the participants. The themes as they related to the research question were discussed.

In the analysis, the participants' narrative revealed five themes and a single overarching theme. Verbatim participant quotes were used to support the themes. The five themes were: (a) Commitment, (b) Sacrifice, (c) Poor Parenting, (d) Social Stigma, and (e) Substitutions; the overarching theme is Creating. Figure 1 illustrated the themes and how they related to the key principles of Elder's (1998) life course perspective: (a) historical time and place, (b) timing of lives, (c) linked lives, and (d) human agency. The overarching theme of Creating, the five themes, timing of lives, linked lives, and human agency are all affected by historical time and place. Social and cultural ideologies as well as geographical location had an impact on decisions that couples made as they created different pathways through their commitment to remain voluntarily childless. Poor parenting practices they had experienced often factored into their decision. Although they experienced sacrifices and social stigma, couples were provided with the opportunity to have substitutions in their lives. Historical time and place also impacted timing of lives and when transitions occurred. Historical times accelerated, disrupted, or postponed key transitions (Hagestad & Call, 2007). The decision to remain voluntarily childless created linked lives, such as within the marriage and in familial relationships. Human agency allowed the couples to make the decision that would affect their life course.

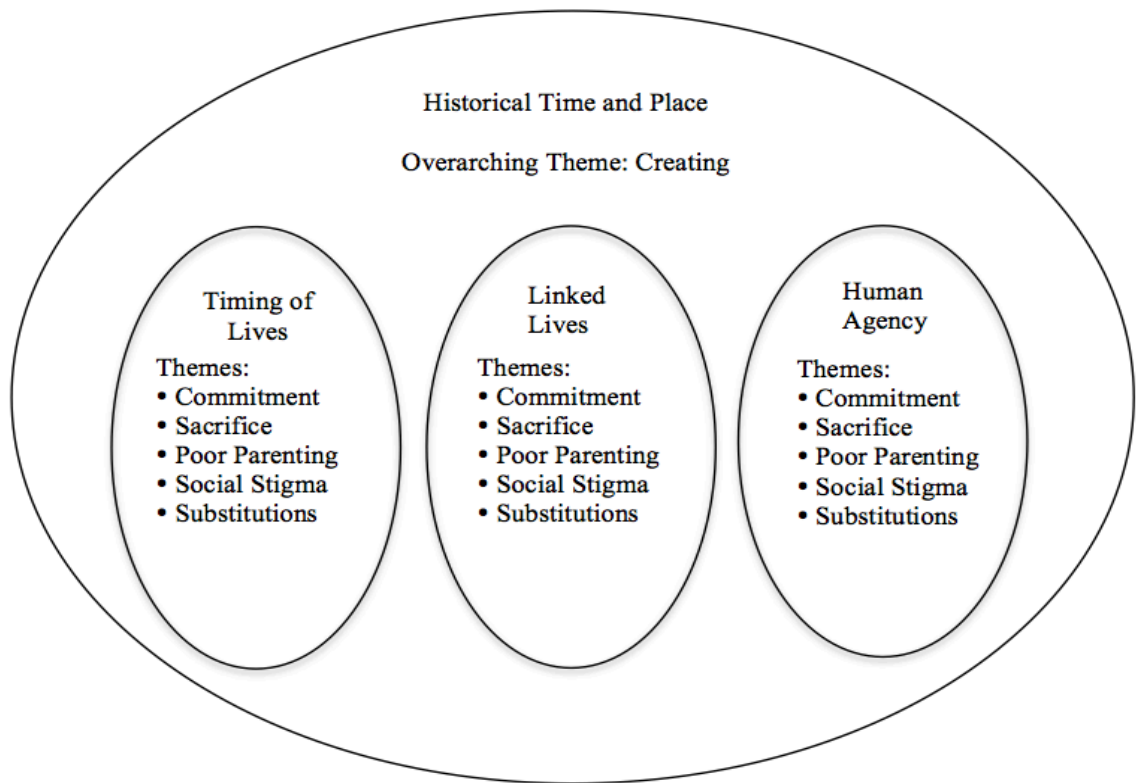


Figure 1: Relationship between life course principles and themes

With timing of lives, the commitment to the couples' decision to remain voluntarily childless was affected by transitions, such as marriage or establishment of their careers. Life course transitions can change opportunities and incentives to be socially involved (Lancee & Radl, 2014). In areas of work and family, social roles will be acquired or lost (MacMillan & Copher, 2005). During those transitions, sacrifices were made. Poor parenting that they witnessed or experienced during various times in their lives also affected their decision to remain voluntarily childless. The social stigma couples encountered was also shaped by transitions, such as the expectation that couples

should have children after they married. Substitutions depended on where they were in their life course. Some couples interacted with children through work, and had time for pets based on factors such as whether they were established in their careers, or even retired. Some couples also had more time to volunteer. Volunteering changes as individuals occupy different social positions across their life course (Lancee & Radl, 2014).

Couples experienced linked lives through their commitment to remain voluntarily childless. The meanings of roles and activities differed across life stages (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). Interdependence existed between family and work careers and between individuals whose lives are interwoven (Hagestad & Call, 2007). In addition to the marital union, couples' lives were interdependent with their families and social relationships and were affected by their decision. Linked lives affected family relationships, friendships, and relationships with colleagues. Couples encountered sacrifices within those relationships. Through their connection with their families or other social relationships, couples' observed poor parenting. Their social ties also affected the social stigma that they experienced. Lastly, substitutions such as volunteering provided the opportunity to create additional networks of shared relationships.

In terms of human agency, couples made the deliberate decision to remain voluntarily childless and have expressed a sincere commitment regarding that decision. Some couples had experienced poor parenting and that influenced their choice. Through

whichever method they reached their decision, they recognize that the decision to remain voluntarily childless has led them to experience sacrifices, as well as social stigma. However, their decision has also provided other opportunities. For example, substitutions have allowed them to make choices on how they want to spend their time.

Commitment

Interviews with the couples indicated a serious commitment to their decision to remain voluntarily childless. Many of the participants expressed a common interest not to have children. Female participants in particular indicated that they did not feel the urge to have children, as is the usual expectation for women. Gwen indicated, “The women I meet that have that compulsion, I didn’t have it. I didn’t have it at all.” Maria said, “I think, some women, when they are 20, 25, they only think about having a baby. I never had that. I never had that.” Kay said that she never even liked babysitting. Additionally, she said, “I was not really, I’m not really maternal.” Anne indicated that she knew even as a child. She expressed, “I have pretty much always had a feeling ever since I was a small child that I would never have children. When I was little, I didn’t play with baby dolls. I didn’t play that I was the mom. I played like I was the babysitter or maybe like a nanny, but never that I was a mom.”

Gwen indicated that, “It just suddenly was something that neither one of us seemed to want, you know. He even says, he says I think that is what attracted us to each other. That was not our goal.” Her husband, Charles, stated the following:

My own personal opinion is that you’re attracted to a person who’s not interested in having children prior to marriage, or at least you have those common feelings. Prior to marriage I certainly had relationships with other girls who, that was clearly their agenda, and I didn’t marry them.

Maria said that when she got married, they just didn’t think about that and “the thing of having a child was never a priority for us and we never thought about having a child. It wasn’t ever a desire for any of us....we both said that’s not something we want.” Kay indicated that when she was dating, her current husband indicated he did not want to have children. He was the leader in the decision, but she was happy either way. Her husband Robert said, “Well, I guess I never wanted kids. From the very beginning, I never had any desire to have children. I just never wanted any kids.” Matt said, “Uh, as far back as I can remember, I never wanted kids...” His wife, Anne, said,

When we first got together we both just...I don’t want kids, you don’t want kids, let’s just not have kids. So it’s been...For years we’ve always just known that we weren’t, we weren’t going to have kids. That’s just not my cup of tea and it’s always been a very mutual decision that we both made long ago.

The couples came to the decision to remain voluntarily childless through a variety of methods. Three of the couples made the decision before they were married. One of

the couples that decided after marriage described coming to the decision as a process.

The other couple that decided after they got married described that it was just never good timing and it just kind of happened. While they all came to the decision through different processes and at different times, they all indicated that the decision to remain voluntarily childless was one they were committed to for a lifetime, with no regrets.

Sacrifice

Sacrifice was another underlying theme in participants' narratives. Their decision to remain voluntarily childless was influenced by the sacrifices they would have to make if children were present. Areas of sacrifice that were addressed included relationships, freedom, career, money, and time. Additionally, they described some of the sacrifices they already had to make because of their decision.

Many of the couples indicated that they had already had to sacrifice relationships because of their decision to remain voluntarily childless, whether it was a complete loss of the relationship or significant changes in their social relationships. Gwen indicated that she seemed to gravitate towards friends who do not have children. She said,

A lot of the other people I spend a lot of time with don't have any. It's getting more and more that I'm at the age where when I do meet new people, or new friends or whatever, their kids are grown. So they virtually, don't have any children.

Her husband, Charles, also said,

Our circle of friends now contain a large number of childless people, so it certainly affected who we associate with. Most of the people we have sought out in the last 10 years, I would say, have been childless couples.

Maria said,

Uh, I think it's very hard to adjust when you don't have children. All my friends have children and when you decide not to have children, you lose all your friends. That's the truth, because you don't have the same schedule. The conversation is not the same anymore. They only want to talk about children.

Those same sentiments were expressed by Kay, who stated,

In the early years of our marriage....my, our friends did start having babies and um, and so we found other friends. And it is true that once your friends have babies, that's all they want to talk about. That's all they want to do, is be with their children, or talk about potty training, or whatever, and that's not your vocabulary anymore. And so they seek their own friends that are doing potty training at the same time and they flock to that. But, um, yes, our friends became older couples who had already raised their children, which we, or at least I, found almost stimulating because they, they hadn't...I hate to say adult conversation but it wasn't about dirty diapers. It was about world affairs and about things that were more civically oriented. So our friends became older couples or the friends

that didn't have children but, but we don't have a massive amount of friends because we're not doing the family thing.

Her husband, Robert, concurred. He stated,

And, you know, at our age now, the people we associate with, their kids are long grown up and gone so they don't have any kids at home. I guess I noticed whenever my wife and I were much younger and could have had children that, um, some of our friends, uh, who were single and then got married... We'd go out to dinner with them and associate with them and they'd be over at our house and vice versa. But once they had kids, that all kind of stopped, you know, because their path, their life took a different path and so it's kind of like we took separate ways and didn't spend as much time together. Of course, they couldn't get away because they're having to raise kids. You know, you can't go out to dinner every night if you've got two or three screaming kids at home. Your whole life changes whenever you have kids. So I guess we lost a couple of friends along the way from that...

Another couple sought out a club for adult couples and singles who had never had children. They joined a NoKidding! Chapter to meet people. Anne said,

So I joined it before we even came and one of the first things we did when we moved here was go to a NoKidding! Party. Yeah and I met people almost right away through that. Several of the other members have other Meetup groups that

we'll go to, and they'll be people with kids, but usually, I really try to stick with the NoKidding! one.

Her husband, Matt, said,

I tell you the biggest thing that sucks right now is that everyone who's my age has kids, so it's hard to make a friend, or get a best friend, or just hang out with people 'cause they're always doing things with their kids. The people that I end up hanging out with are either way older than I am or way younger than I am.

Participants were happy with their lifestyle and knew that having children would have a significant impact. Areas that would be affected included the freedom to do what they wanted and spend their time and money the way they wanted. Gwen said,

I would look around at my life and think, wow, everybody says it's the biggest change you go through. I would think about things that would have to change, and I would be like, yeah, no. I'm pretty happy. I'm happy with the way my life goes. I'm happy with my lifestyle. I'm happy with my schedule. The idea of clearing out space and paying for daycare and running around like that had no attraction to me whatsoever.

Maria commented on observations she made about people who had children. She said,

Uh, one thing that I notice, basically, is looking at people that have children...one thing that I notice is that they are always tired. They never have time for themselves. So the experience I have with people that have, that my close friends that have children, they are very, very, they have a very chaotic life.

Maria's husband, Maverick, commented,

Probably one of the many reasons we decided not to have kids is that we don't want to spend our time managing the kids and thinking about that, so we like to do our own thing. We do what we always do. If we just want to get up and go out, we do. If we want to travel, we do. But I mean, if we just want to go to a restaurant, we just go to a restaurant. We don't have to think about anything. We just make our plans and go.

Robert described how children could be difficult at times. He said,

So I guess I didn't want the responsibility either. It's a lot of responsibility to have kids and it costs a lot of money, too. So I just never wanted any kids. I've enjoyed having the extra money to do other things, you know, like fly and build an airplane, travel." Mark me down as childless. What is it they call it? I'm a DINK, Double Income, No Kids...couldn't be happier about it.

Drew described how time was a factor. He stated,

I worked, like I said, almost 18 to 20 hours a day, if you can believe that. Um, I saw, I would come home. I'd see my wife and then go back to work. I was there maybe an hour or two because work was just right around the corner. So without kids, I was able to do that.

He changed jobs, and time was still a factor. He said, "And then again, with gymnastics, I'm off all over the place traveling, just me and the boys, and the other coaches. With a little one, I wouldn't be able to do that."

Drew's wife, Vanessa, stated simply, "I'm selfish. I want to have time for me. I don't want to worry about, you know, taking care of anybody little." Another female participant, Maria, commented, "I'm very happy with my husband, and we have a very good relationship. Sometimes I think, I don't want anything to change." Anne frankly stated that she didn't want to deal with children. She commented,

Everything. The responsibility. The monetary commitment. The, um, just time away from what we want to do. We love to travel. We've traveled and we want to keep traveling. There's a whole world to discover. Not that you can't do it with kids. You can bring the kids wherever you want, but imagine for a second just doing it and being free. We love to go and do whatever we want whenever we want to do it. We just don't....I cannot see this fitting into my life. I want to be able to go and do whatever I want. I don't want to have to think about a baby and I don't want to feel like I'm not worth...that I'm only worth having a child. I'm a strong and independent, very successful woman, very educated, and that's enough for me.

Poor Parenting

The theme of Poor Parenting encompassed couples' fear of having a lack of parenting skills if they had decided to have children. Additionally, several of the participants indicated that poor parenting during their childhood had affected their decision to remain voluntarily childless. Participants' witnessing of poor parenting and misbehaving children also factored into their decision.

Witnessing poor parenting skills was something that numerous participants addressed. Gwen, who worked with teenagers, admitted to being judgmental. She had mentioned to her husband, “I can’t believe they’re doing that. They’re doing it all wrong.” Working with teen parents and with troubled parents, she saw how they disrespected their parents. With some of her more troubled students, she stated, “...man there are a lot of people out there doing a really bad job of this. It’s not something I felt compelled to do.”

One of the male participants, Robert, described a visit from family members who had adopted an attitude of permissiveness and letting their children do whatever they wanted. He described one incident that occurred and how he couldn’t believe the child’s parents had allowed it to happen. He said, “...and, uh, you know, I was thinking to myself that little kid wouldn’t...I’d bust, bust her butt real fast, you know, before I’d let her do something like that.”

Another male participant, Matt, described the bad behavior that parents allowed. He stated,

We’ve often been out and it seems like, it seems like if there’s a kid there he’s ruining our good time. Because if we’re having dinner then he’s screaming or the kid’s running around the table. Or if you’re at the theater they’re talking.

He added,

The things that I think people let their kids get away with nowadays, it’s almost unconscionable. You’re not doing that kid any favors. When that kid grows up,

the things that you're allowing him to do now that he sort of sees as okay behavior are not gonna fly.

Several participants expressed doubt in what they would be like as parents. Matt expressed a fear aspect to parenting. "Can I do it? Would I do a good job?" One of the female participants, Maria, described some friends whose teenagers had become involved with drugs. She summed it up by stating,

For me, it's very scary. I think I'm a very loving person and it would kill me too.

One thing that also makes me think about not having children is I would suffer too much. I think I'm very possessive. I think I'm very jealous. I would try to protect too much and I don't think that's something that I want to go through.

Her husband, Maverick, stated, "I just don't have a lot of patience to take care of kids."

Vanessa stated that she liked having time for herself, and added,

What if I start to really just resent my kids because of everything that I want to do, but I can't? It doesn't mean I won't love them, but I'd rather not put anybody through that. I don't know how I would handle having kids, and again, that's just not something I would be willing to risk.

Her husband, Drew, did not know how he would handle children. He described worrying about their cats and stated,

That drives me crazy, where I stay up late at night worrying about them. Could you imagine if I had a little one? It would be a hundred times worse than that.

You know, I don't know how I would feel. Like I said, if I worry about a pet all

night long if he's got a fever, could you imagine a little one? I would probably go nuts.

Past experiences with their own parents influenced participants. When asked about his decision to remain voluntarily childless, Robert stated,

I probably formed that attitude or that feeling pretty young, a lot because I wasn't real happy as a child. I didn't feel like I had a real good childhood. I didn't want to inflict that unhappiness on somebody else. So I think that's probably how it got started. I just never wanted any kids. I didn't want to have to put them through the same unhappiness I was in.

Matt said, "For the longest time, I didn't want to end up like my mom, who lived in the ghetto."

Social Stigma

The decision to remain voluntarily childless has affected participant experiences, often resulting in being treated negatively. Gwen said her coworkers would make comments about her not understanding, since she did not have children. The same participant had a person from her Human Resources Department make a comment to her as well. When discussing leave, a coworker said, "Oh, that's right, you're one of those."

Several participants described feeling irritated or annoyed by others when they found out about their decision. Maria explained, "Oh, they always want to change my mind. They always want a huge explanation why and they are always sure that I'm going to change my mind so it's very annoying." She described an incident that had occurred at

her birthday party. A few guests started to press her on when she was going to have a baby in front of all the other guests. She ended up making something up. She told the guest,

Do you know how hard it is for me? Do you know how many nights I cry my eyes out because I've been trying for 10 years to get pregnant and I just can't?

And every time you ask me something like that it kills me.

While her statements were not truthful, she felt as though it was something she had to say in order for others to leave her alone. Her husband, Maverick, admitted that his wife had experienced more pressure from her friends. With him, when he told people, they asked him, "Oh, not yet?" Other people asked why, while others questioned whether he was sure about the decision. He went on to say,

But people always....you see the reaction on people, like, this is not normal, this is not, uh, not normal in a sense that this is wrong. It's just like, that's not what people usually do. Uh, so there's always that comment that people feel like they have to make afterwards, just to, maybe because they feel like they have like a face that's telling you, like, what a dumb idea, or things like that.

Vanessa had someone tell her, "You know, you should have kids. Having a niece and a nephew doesn't mean as much as having children of your own." She indicated that she has just reached a point that if she saw someone starting with certain comments, she just turned and walked away, "cause I just....It just, it irritated me. It didn't make me feel sad or anything like that. It was just irritating, because I'm glad that you want kids, but that

doesn't mean that everyone else does." Her husband, Drew, described that his friends tried to convince him that he needed to have children so he would not be by himself. He mentioned some of his friends, who were very religious, that had said, "Oh, you need to have kids. It's very important that you have kids, and I've had some Muslim friends that have said, oh you're SUPPOSED to have kids."

Anne described how prior to moving to a larger metropolitan area, others would ask her how many children she had, not if she had any. It was an automatic assumption that she should have children. She also described comments that her former boss would make. She explained,

She would walk past me every day when I was on duty and go tick, tick, tick.

When you gonna have those babies? Time's running out. You not gonna have those babies yet? Every day was a question about when I was gonna have a child, and it'd just come to a point of...Lady, my uterus is not your concern, you know.

That mindset, that whole when are you gonna have kids...almost every woman I encountered as a professional, and my friends, they were all baby, baby, baby, baby, and I'm like.....

She went on to say that she often was asked why she did not want to have children. She stated,

And so..I, I've struggled with that, especially, because it's a sore point sometimes because I've felt so much pressure over the years, and I can get a little defensive about it because I'm proud of it. I'm proud of my decision and I feel like it makes

me, not special, but it shows something about me that I could stand up to society's pressures and that I'm just not gonna just give in to having a baby 'cause it's expected. So when someone says something, sometimes I may take it as being confrontational when it's not, or sometimes it is confrontational and I'll get really, like, that's not your business. You know, I don't tell people off or anything. It's more like, don't you try to make me have a baby. I'm not....and get like, you know, really emotional about it. So it's really, it's...I think that's been part of growing up for me too. It's dealing, it's finding a way to deal with this question when it comes up, without overreacting. So that's been a work for me. That's been work because it comes up, not every day, not every week. But when it does come up it can be a sore point for me because I don't think he gets as much pressure, definitely. But for me, it's been very much of a...you gonna argue with me, 'cause you're not gonna change my mind.

She mentioned that she did not have a standard answer, but had even been encouraged by her mother to simply tell others that she could not have children. Her husband, Matt, said that when others found out about his decision, they said, "Well, that's what you say now, but..."

The majority of participants stated that their families were supportive of their decision. However, some of the participants described comments that family members made that indicated disapproval. Kay said that her mother became upset and said that "having no children is very selfish." When she told her mother that her husband Robert

had a vasectomy, her mother burst out in tears. Anne mentioned that her husband's whole family thought they were weirdoes. Additionally, every time she saw her father, he asked, "No grandkids, yet?"

Substitutions

Many of the participants seemed to have substitutions in their lives. While they did not have children, all but one participant liked children. Many had interaction with children through jobs, pets served as substitutes, or activities filled any extra time that would normally have been occupied by rearing children.

Gwen was previously a high school teacher, had worked in a daycare, and had taught Vacation Bible School. She had pets, but always tried to keep things in perspective. She stated,

I love my pets. I call them my babies. They bring me so much joy, but I do try to remember, they're dogs. I mean, they're dogs. They're not people. They are dogs. Like I said, I do try to remember, people come first. People do come first, but they are my babies.

She went on to say,

We have hosted now eight exchange students. We've brought in kids from all over the world. I mean, we've had teenagers in our home. I mean we think of them as our children, even though I didn't raise them. I mean, they're not mine, mine, but I mean, we've had kids around. I get calls on Mother's Day. I don't get left out.

Her husband, Charles, liked children, and he taught middle school. He stated, “Well I do see lots of children every day. We’ve hosted exchange students—eight successfully, one unsuccessfully, and then we’ve had dogs. So, I guess that partially fills, has filled, our nonchildlessness.”

Maverick said, “If we want to travel, we do. I mean, we have cats, so we have to find someone to take care of our cats. It’s not that easy, but it’s almost like kids.” Kay used to work at the church nursery and stated that she was always around children prior to her retirement. However, she said that her life was busy doing other things. She stated, “I volunteer, work at church, several volunteer groups that I’m in and so I fill my days very full with lots of activities. There is no void at all not having children.”

Vanessa, who was a teacher, stated that her students got so much out of her during the day and she could not imagine coming home to take care of children. She stated, “Well, we have cats, and for us two, that’s pretty much our, those are our babies.” Her husband, Drew, who is a gymnastics coach, loves children. He said, “You know, they’re good kids. I consider them MY kids. While they’re with me, those are my kids. So, I kind of do have kids, when you think about it. My boys are my kids.” He went on to say, “There’s a lot of different things that go on with me, ‘cause we have cats. We have cats and those are my kids also. I love my cats.”

Creating

Commitment, Sacrifice, Poor Parenting, Social Stigma, and Substitutions were the themes that emerged from the data. All of these themes are encompassed by one

overarching theme: Creating. Creating involved bringing something into existence, which was what these couples were doing. In these couples' cases, they were deeply committed to their decision to remain voluntarily childless and creating that type of life for themselves, even though it is not what is considered the traditional path. Sacrifice was described by participants both in terms of what they would have to give up if children were present as well as sacrifices they have already had to make because of their decision. Creating this life for themselves based on their decision meant considering sacrifices they would have to encounter if their decision were different, and dealing with different sacrifices because of their choice to remain steadfast in their decision.

Creating this life for themselves involved considering certain factors, such as poor parenting they may have encountered when they were children, considering the type of parents they would make if they had pursued a different path, and considering the poor parenting skills they have witnessed in their adult lives. Their decision to remain voluntarily childless also created different circumstances for themselves, including the social stigma, and often negative treatment, they receive as a result of their choice. Lastly, substitutions were a significant part of the lifestyle that they created for themselves by choosing to remain voluntarily childless. Substitutions included interactions with children or activities and time spent focusing on other interests. The couples' decision to remain voluntarily childless created a lifestyle that allowed them to

make certain choices about how to spend their time. While some of them chose to spend their time with children, some chose to spend their time with pets or pursuing other activities.

Summary

This chapter presented the results of a phenomenological research study that explored the lived experiences of five voluntarily childless married couples, aged 18 and older. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five couples (10 participants) who agreed to participate. Demographic characteristics of the sample, five emergent themes and one overarching theme, and verbatim participant quotes used to illustrate the themes were included in this chapter. Analysis of the participants' narrative revealed five themes: (a) Commitment, (b) Sacrifice, (c) Poor Parenting, (d) Social Stigma, and (e) Substitutions; the overarching theme was Creating.

The next chapter will include a discussion of the findings of the study. A summary of the study and a discussion of the five themes and overarching theme are included. Conclusions, implications, and limitations of the research are addressed. Additionally, recommendations for future research are provided.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This qualitative phenomenological research study explored the experiences of voluntarily childless married couples within the framework of the life course perspective (Elder, 1998). The focus of the study was to describe how couples make the decision to remain childless and describe how these couples were treated because of their decision. The research data were derived from the following research question:

What are the beliefs and perceptions of voluntarily childless married couples?

The participants' narratives and the researcher's observations yielded information regarding the phenomenon of couples choosing to remain voluntarily childless. A summary of the research study and a discussion of the findings are presented in this chapter. Limitations of the study and implications are addressed. Additionally, recommendations for future research are proposed.

Summary of the Study

The study used a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of voluntarily childless married couples. It explored the beliefs and perceptions of married couples who have chosen to remain voluntarily childless. Although this is a growing population, individuals who choose to remain voluntarily childless are still a minority in society as a whole.

A convenience sample was recruited from a meeting group for childless singles and couples, from a dog agility group, and from postings on Facebook. All of the participants were located in Texas. The data collection protocol utilized six interview questions, with probes used for clarification when necessary. The questions were designed to elicit rich descriptions of the participants' perceptions and lived experiences as voluntarily childless couples. Participant narratives were compiled from individual face-to-face interviews. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and analyzed for themes and categories from the data. Trustworthiness in the study was addressed in order to establish credibility. Triangulation, peer debriefing, member checks, and reflexivity were utilized. Additionally, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were also addressed. Five themes, along with one overarching theme, were identified in the participants' narratives and other research data.

Discussion

This qualitative research study provided an opportunity for couples who chose to remain voluntarily childless to discuss their experiences. The principles of the life course perspective (Elder, 1998) are particularly applicable to this population. Simply making the actual decision to remain voluntarily childless is affected by historical time and place. Choosing to remain voluntarily childless creates conditions for later transitions in adulthood for these couples. Relationships between social environment and historical influences and the shared relationships affect when and how the decision is made. Principles such as historical time and place, timing in lives, linked lives, and human

agency are also applicable to this population. The life course for these couples was and continues to be shaped by the times and places they have already experienced or will experience in the future. How and when they made the decision to remain voluntarily childless is shaped by time and place. The developmental impact that life transitions or events have depends on when they occur in their lives.

After analyzing, coding, and synthesizing the research data, several themes emerged. The five themes were: (a) Commitment, (b) Sacrifice, (c) Poor Parenting, (d) Social Stigma, and (e) Substitutions; the overarching theme was Creating.

Commitment

Early research on voluntarily childlessness (Houseknecht, 1974; Veevers, 1975) described how couples choose their path to childlessness. Some decided early in life while others decided after a series of postponements. Half of the participants revealed that they decided early on that they did not want to have children, while the other half indicated that it was more of a postponement. Several of the couples indicated that life just passed by, or that timing was not right, and that at their current age and stage in life, having children was not even an option they would consider.

Regardless of when they decided, participant responses revealed a serious commitment to their decision to remain voluntarily childless. The progression of time and changing cultural mores have allowed couples to have more reproductive choices. Couples have a greater opportunity now, than in the past, to decide when, or if, they want children present in their lives. Many of the couples expressed a common interest not to

have children, while some female participants in particular indicated that they did not feel the urge to become mothers, as is the usual expectation for women. Women citing lack of a perceived maternal instinct for remaining childless has been noted in past research (Park, 2005).

Sacrifice

Sacrifice was another underlying theme in participants' narratives. Their decision to remain voluntarily childless was influenced by the sacrifices they would have to make if children were present. Relationships, freedom, career, money, and time were mentioned as areas that may have been sacrificed. Additionally, they described some of the sacrifices they already had to make because of their decision. The timing of role transitions influenced areas such as how socially accepted and normative the roles were (Williams & Umberson, 2004). Within the timing of lives, sacrifices would have to be made at a particular point in time. The majority of participants were at an age where they were established in their careers. Deciding not to have children was influenced by their age and careers.

According to Gillespie (2003), women's perceptions on motherhood were associated with sacrifice and loss and women who chose to remain childless associated motherhood with a loss of identity. The caring roles associated with motherhood did not appeal to some women and motherhood was viewed as a burden. The participants' narratives were consistent with Gillespie's research. Female participants made comments regarding losing friends and not wanting to change their lifestyle. One female participant

specifically stated that she did not want to have children because they would take time away from things she wanted to do. Another female participant stated that she liked the time that she had for herself. If she had decided to have children, she did not want to risk resenting them for taking that time away from her. In terms of loss of identity, one female participant commented that once you had a child, that was all you wanted to talk about. She had witnessed that with some of her friends, and had lost relationships because they did not share common interests anymore. Carmichael and Whittaker (2007) found that women who chose to remain childless may have decided at an early age that motherhood was not central to their identity. This was consistent with the participants' narratives. One female participant specifically stated that she was not fascinated with babies the way a lot of women are. Another female participant said she knew since she was a small child that she would never have children. Another female participant stated that one of the things she has noticed with parents is that they are always tired and do not have time for themselves.

Monetary security, a flexible lifestyle, stress free relationships, and shared concerns about the environment were reasons cited by both sexes for remaining voluntarily childless (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007). Population growth was another concern (Park, 2005). Participants cited the same reasons, except that none of the participants mentioned anything about environmental concerns. One male participant commented that he understood people wanted to have children to keep the world populated, but he felt that there were too many people, and maybe not the right people, in

the world today, and his decision to remain childless was not going to hurt the world's population much. Children were viewed as a financial burden, although more male participants made reference to the monetary aspect. Three out of the five male participants indicated that children were too expensive. One of the female participants frankly stated that she did not want to deal with anything associated with children, including the responsibility and the monetary commitment.

Factors identified as influencing the decision for women to remain voluntarily childless include increased opportunities for women of their generation (Gillespie, 2003). Historically, men were the ones that worked outside the home and provided financially for their families, while women stayed home and were responsible for housekeeping and caring for children (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007a). Women's monetary contributions to the household were not as great as they are currently. However, as gender roles changed, and as women began to enter the workforce in larger numbers, they encountered greater opportunities for career advancement. A wage gap between mothers and women without children existed, and motherhood appeared to be a key factor (England, 2005).

Participants realized that they would have to make a number of sacrifices if they decided to have children. Participants had a certain lifestyle that double incomes afforded them. Having children might mean that one of the parents, usually the female, would need to stay at home and care for the child, resulting in a loss of income. Additionally, reentering the workforce after staying home for a number of years might make reentry into the job force more difficult (Looze, 2014). Things they were accustomed to, such as traveling or

going out on the spur of the moment, would no longer be as easy if children were present. While both males and females expressed wanting to maintain their current lifestyle, all of the females made reference to how they would specifically be impacted in the role as the mother and the effect parenthood could have on their career. In past research (Park, 2005), women described childlessness as a necessary condition for career satisfaction and success. Consistent with Abma and Martinez's (2006) finding regarding voluntarily childless women, the majority of the participants worked full time, had high individual incomes, and were employed in professional and managerial occupations.

Participants' narratives described how the decision to remain voluntarily childless was based on realizing the lifestyle opportunity costs associated with parenthood. More freedom led to more choices and greater opportunities, and allowed for an adult-centered existence. Research (Gillespie, 2003) cited those reasons, although women cited maintaining intimacy in the couple relationship as a factor influencing their decision. Participant narratives described enjoying spending time with their spouse. However, none of the participants, male or female, explicitly expressed concern over loss of intimacy or loss of marital satisfaction.

Poor Parenting

Individuals have chosen to remain childless because of a feeling of inadequacy towards parenthood. Certain personality traits have been identified by men and women that are not associated with good parenting. Traits include introversion, the tendency to be anxious, impatience, and perfectionism (Park, 2005). All of these traits were

mentioned by participants. One of the male participants indicated that he did not have the patience to take care of children, and two other male participants mentioned anxiety over caring for children, and anxiety about not being able to afford them. One of the female participants mentioned being a perfectionist and always wanting things a certain way. Additionally, one of the female participants mentioned she felt she would be too overprotective as a parent.

Men and women cited negative recollections of childhood in the literature, recalling mothers that did not have their own identity, mothers that lived through their children in a manipulative way, and mothers that were fearful, distracted, or even ambivalent towards the parental role (Park, 2005). Several of the participants shared negative memories from their childhood during the interviews. One of the female participants described a negative experience she encountered as a child. She shared a detailed story about witnessing a child being born in a car and thinking how gross and nasty it was. One of the male participants indicated he did not want to end up like his mother, living in the ghetto. His wife described having an alcoholic father. One of the other male participants simply stated that he did not have a good childhood and did not want to inflict that unhappiness on somebody else.

Park's (2005) research indicated that the decision to remain childless has been influenced by feelings about children, including discomfort and disinterest, or lack of perceived maternal instinct. Four of the five female participants made reference to not having a maternal instinct and not being interested in children. Of the male participants,

two specifically mentioned not having any interest in children. The others were comfortable around children, but just did not want any of their own.

Social Stigma

Society's views during different historical conditions can affect how different populations are viewed. A number of stereotypes exist toward voluntarily childless individuals, with studies focusing more on women (Calhoun & Selby, 1980; Letherby, 2002; Letherby & Williams, 1999; Veevers, 1975). Letherby and Williams (1999) described how the term childfree was associated with being carefree, implying a childlike state, free from responsibilities, viewed as being like children themselves. The term voluntarily childless was used in interviewing participants. One participant, however, expressed that he felt that the term childless was a bad term, and seemed negative. He actually said that he preferred the term childfree, because it was a choice and not like something was missing.

Literature revealed that historically, childless women were often stereotyped as selfish (Veevers, 1975), immature (Gillespie, 2000), self-centered (Polit, 1978), and as having poor psychological adjustment (Calhoun & Selby, 1980). Compared to parents, voluntarily childless men were viewed as atypical, unfulfilled, and less sensitive (Jamison et al., 1979). Many of the participants were viewed by others as possessing these characteristics, although some of them admitted that they really did possess them. One of the female participants said that all of her husband's family thought they were weirdoes because they decided to not have any children. Two of the female participants were told

by their mothers that they were selfish for not having children. One of the female participants described herself as selfish. She specifically said that one of the reasons she told someone she did not want to have children was because she was selfish and wanted to have time for herself. One of the male participants thought that it was actually selfish if you chose to have children. He described a conversation with one of his friends that had children. His friend indicated that if the participant chose to not have children, he would not have anyone to take care of him when he was older. The male participant replied that in that respect, having children was actually selfish, if that was the reason to justify having them.

Voluntarily childlessness was found to be discrediting, with women describing how others did not believe their choice to remain voluntarily childless, or they attributed it to legitimate reasons such as infertility. The choice was also disregarded by inferring that the women would change their minds (Gillespie, 2000). The participants shared different anecdotes about remaining childless. They often encountered others trying to convince them to change their mind or constantly asking them when they were going to have children, although most of the time, it was from friends and coworkers, and not their own family members.

Another female participant described how others would say that she would change her mind or would try to convince her to change her mind. Her husband's former coworkers would always tell her that she needed to have children and should change her mind. Another female participant's boss would remind her at work that time was running

out and would ask when she was going to have children. The majority of the male participants said that they did not feel constant pressure about having children. They did not have to deal with comments others would make about having children or others trying to change their minds. Only one male participant mentioned something about a time that someone found out his decision to remain childless was voluntary. In that instance, they simply asked him if he was sure. When he said he was, they did not pursue the matter any further. One of the males did acknowledge that while he did not feel pressured to have children, he knew that others would often pressure his wife.

In dealing with others constantly asking, female participants handled it differently. One female participant said that she did not always volunteer that it was a voluntary decision. She said often people assume that she cannot have children. She usually would let them assume that unless they asked. When others found out it was a voluntarily decision, they would question her about it. In trying to find ways to deal with the constant questioning about why she did not have children, one female participant's mother suggested she lie and tell others that she could not have children. A different female participant actually became so fed up with others asking that she made up a story about how she had been trying for 10 years to become pregnant and could not conceive.

Individuals who were planning on remaining childless were often viewed as lonely and unhappy (Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995). Both male and female participants described others commenting about what they were missing out on by not having children and others telling them about the joys of the experiences of having

children. Participants were also told by others about how sad and lonely it would be for them when they were old and they did not have anyone to take care of them.

The older participants experienced less of a social stigma, as they had the freedom to travel and participate in other activities they enjoyed. However, in terms of the timing of lives for couples, particularly women who were of childbearing age, the social stigma was more evident because of their newer roles as wives, and during a time that the expectation was that they would enter into the role of mother, as well.

Substitutions

The decision to remain voluntarily childless was often influenced by other areas of their lives, including working with children and not wanting to come home to take care of their own. Pets were also mentioned as child substitutes (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007). Many of the participants gave similar reasons. Six of the participants were currently working with children, or had previously held jobs where they worked with children on a regular basis. With one of the couples, the female had previously been a teacher, while the male was still a teacher. The female participant had taught high school, worked in daycare, and taught Vacation Bible School. She and her husband had also hosted exchange students. Her husband added that they also had dogs, so he guessed that partially filled any void that may have been caused by being childless too. While all of the couples had pets, not all of them viewed their pets as child substitutes. One couple in particular said they did not view their pets that way at all. The male participant said that he did not feel that he parented his dog, but that he viewed the dog as his friend. The

female participant viewed the dog as a separate entity and viewed him as an extension of having fun in their lives. However, other participants did view their pets as child substitutes. One female participant referred to her dogs as her babies and a male participant said that his cats were his children.

One of the male participants said he loved children but was glad that they got to go home with their parents and he could simply go home to his wife. He said that he and his wife really were not without children, and that the children they had were just somebody else's. One of the female participants who was a teacher specifically stated that her children at school got so much out of her during the day that she would go crazy if she had to go home to deal with little ones.

Creating

The overarching theme found in the study was creating. One of the principles of Elder's (1998) life course perspective is human agency, in which individuals construct their own life course through their choices and actions they take within their opportunities and limitations of history and social circumstances. These couples that have chosen to remain voluntarily childless are doing that. They have created a life that differs from society's norm and are committed to their decision. A different, yet socially shaped pathway is being followed. They have created different opportunities for themselves because of their decision. Their actions have resulted in sacrifices, including social relationships. As for poor parenting, some of the couples expressed that relationships with their own parents and the permissive parenting practices that they

perceived as more prevalent in society today affected their decision to remain voluntarily childless. These couples' choice and actions have often resulted in a social stigma. However, they have each created and adapted different ways of handling the comments or other negative treatment. While some of their transitions were the same, such as marriage, transitioning to becoming parents was not one they would experience. However, their decision to remain voluntarily childless has created different life transitions. It has provided them with more freedom and has created the opportunity for them to explore other areas they may be passionate about, either dealing with children or their own personal interests. The meanings of roles and activities will change as they progress through their life courses, and will reflect values and preferences (Oesterle et al., 2004). The older couple had witnessed changing historical conditions during the time that they made their decision and how their decision had affected their lives. For many of the younger couples that were in the same age cohort, experiences might be slightly different depending on changing societal times and viewpoints. Overall, however, these couples were creating a different life for themselves, creating and persisting. The single decision to remain voluntarily childless has affected their life course. It will have an impact now and in their future.

Conclusions

A phenomenological research design was used to study the experiences of five couples who were voluntarily childless. The participant narratives revealed that their experiences were similar. Female participants indicated they had encountered more

pressure by others than their husbands had encountered. Couples indicated that making the decision to remain voluntarily childless had excluded them from social relationships and also indicated that they had experienced negative comments because of their decision.

The research question addressed the beliefs and perceptions of voluntarily childless married couples. In Elder's (1998) life course perspective, socially shaped trajectories are followed. For these married couples, their choice led them on a unique trajectory. Socially shaped trajectories, the shared relationships between the sociocultural and historical influences, and the interdependence of their lives with others have influenced these couples. They created their own life course through the choices they made and were taking advantage of the opportunities that have been created because of their choice. While their choice to remain voluntarily childless differed from society's norms, they were managing to navigate and adapt their lives accordingly.

Voluntarily childless couples reach their decision in a number of different ways. However, once they reach their decision, they are committed to their decision. They are happy with their decision and there are very few times when they even consider changing their minds. Voluntarily childless couples continue to encounter negative reactions regarding their decision. With the particular participants that were interviewed, however, the majority received more negative reactions from others. In general, family members were supportive. Couples who have decided to remain voluntarily childless tend to have strong social support networks, mostly with others who have made the same decision.

Difficulty often exists in finding or maintaining social relationships with other couples who have decided to become parents. Younger voluntarily childless couples often have more in common with, or find it easier to associate with, older couples who are empty nesters.

Couples who choose to remain voluntarily childless tend to be professionals, from dual income households. Both husbands and wives contribute substantially to the household income. Additionally, couples who choose to remain voluntarily childless do not hate children. Rather, they like the freedom associated with deciding how they would prefer to interact with children. They can choose to interact with them through their career choice or simply through interacting with family members. However, they do not feel compelled to have their own children at home. Several would rather have pets, whether they consider them as substitutes for children or not.

Additional conclusions drawn from this research are that childless couples want to share their experiences so that others know that making the decision to remain voluntarily childless can be fulfilling, contrary to what society says. Voluntarily childless couples do not feel their decision is “right” or “wrong” but they are respectful of others’ decision to become parents and would like others to be respectful of their decision to remain voluntarily childless.

Implications

Results from the research study provided several implications for family professionals. Family professionals, such as marriage and family life educators, mental

health professionals, including social workers, counselors, and marriage and family therapists may benefit from the research as they work with voluntarily childless couples. Implications from the research are categorized into three areas: (a) practice, (b) work-family policy, and (c) research.

Practice

Results from the research study revealed that married couples who chose to remain voluntarily childless were happy and committed to their decision. While some of the couples were still able to have children, they indicated that they led fulfilling lives and did not feel that anything was missing in their lives. Four out of the five couples indicated that they had never seriously considered changing their mind about having children. Their choice to remain voluntarily childless afforded them freedom to focus on their career or on activities they enjoyed doing, such as volunteering or traveling.

The life course perspective is useful in examining this population, as there are many factors that influence their decision and how they decide to live their lives. Historical and societal conditions, such as changing attitudes toward gender equality, changing family composition, and a decline in traditional beliefs, can shape and influence decisions. Many of the participants indicated that they knew early in life that they did not want children. Whether it was early childhood experiences with negative parental associations, or other childhood experiences, experiences occurring early in life can influence their entire life course. Their lives were embedded and interconnected with the lives of others. Counselors working with clients who have chosen to remain voluntarily

childless can explore early relationships and help clients explore how they are shaped by those relationships. This exploration can provide insight into how they relate to others, how it affects their marital relationship, and how it affects their decision-making process.

The research was pertinent as it provided insight into the experiences that married couples who chose to remain voluntarily childless often encountered. Adams (1946) described factors underlying family instability. Among symptoms and factors contributing to family instability, rejection of parenthood as shown by voluntarily childless couples and childless marriages were cited. While the research was from a different era, with the growing numbers of married couples choosing to remain childless, similar difficulties may exist within families today. White and Booth (1985) noted that childless couples are more likely to divorce. Kinnunen and Pulkkinen (2003) examined data on socio-emotional characteristics and personality traits. Childless men had a higher risk of divorce than parents. Besides childlessness, factors such as low compliance and career instability were found to be the most significant predictors of divorce in men. Family professionals can assist couples in developing an awareness of certain characteristics and personality traits that they may possess and how those characteristics and traits may impact their marriage. Therefore, research on voluntarily childless couples could assist family professionals in helping to strengthen family relationships and assist couples within their marriage.

Research regarding voluntarily childless couples can help create awareness among family professionals. There are a number of dynamics that must be recognized

and understood within a marriage. Marriage counselors are often sought out when couples encounter difficulty within their marriage. The choice to remain voluntarily childless can have a significant impact on the marital union and other familial relationships. As marriage counselors and marriage educators work with these couples and conceptualize the nature of their marriage, it is important to realize the different social pressures that are exerted upon these couples regarding their reproductive decision. There are different needs associated with couples choosing to remain voluntarily childless. In exploring gender differences in depression, Shafer and Pace (2015) stated that for women, childlessness may be a risk factor. Family professionals can work with voluntarily childless couples in areas that affect their mental health and psychological well-being. As family professionals work with younger couples who may be transitioning to marriage and who have made the decision to remain voluntarily childless, they can help them consider some of the situations that may be created by the decision.

Couples who may not have committed to remaining voluntarily childless but who may be contemplating the decision could also benefit by the research. Exploring various situations, both positive and negative, can assist couples in adapting and learning how to deal with situations and people's reactions that they may not have considered. Additionally, family professionals can help couples explore the sacrifices that may be encountered because of their decision. Helping couples understand the potential effects that remaining voluntarily childless can have on their lives can help them make an informed decision.

Voluntary childlessness is relevant to family professionals in a number of ways. Couples who choose to remain voluntarily childless may experience pressure from their families. Family members such as parents and siblings may also be less understanding about their decision, leading to difficulties within those relationships, as well. Therapists and family professionals also need to be sensitive and aware of the issues that these couples face. The majority of the participants indicated that their family was supportive of their decision to remain voluntarily childless. However, this is not always the case with all couples who make the same choice. Participants also mentioned that the most pressure and negative comments came from others outside the family. Voluntarily childless couples often find themselves creating cover stories to tell others to explain why they are childless and to avoid the stigma of being childless (DeOllos & Kapinus, 2002). Some participants mentioned that they had used this strategy. Family professionals can provide interventions that emphasize education with this specific population. Family educators can practice with couples on how they will tell family members. Family educators and even mental health professionals can also help couples explore coping strategies they will use with family members, as well as others outside the family who may not agree with their choice. In addition to working with voluntarily childless couples, family life educators could also work with the extended family to help them explore aspects of the couples' decisions, including focusing on positive aspects of having these couples in the family and promoting acceptance.

Voluntarily childless couples may encounter difficulty within their social circles and experience negative stereotypes. Voluntarily childless couples may experience a difficult adjustment in several areas of their lives because of these negative perceptions. Family life educators can help couples understand the potential effects of remaining voluntarily childless and can help them navigate through difficult situations.

Voluntarily childless couples in the study indicated problems with social relationships. Couples were often friends with others in different life stages. Younger couples who decided to remain voluntarily childless tended to have more in common with empty nesters than with other couples their own age. Some younger couples had much older friends while others simply did not have much of a social network at all and mainly participated in activities with their spouse. Younger couples might experience a sense of isolation and loneliness if they were unable to find other like-minded couples. Additionally, one of the older couples who had travelled extensively when they were younger had already done the traveling they wanted to and were no longer interested in traveling as much now. This differed from others in their age cohort who were retired empty nesters who now wanted to travel the world. In terms of support networks, childless older adults tended to have smaller networks, often with the spouse as the major support provider, and they tended to be more at risk of social isolation (Wenger et al., 2007). Family professionals can assist couples with facing the difficulties in social relationships, including possible feelings of loneliness and isolation, and help couples of all ages with establishing a strong support network. With the resources available today,

family life educators could use tools such as social media to help couples find or establish a support network.

One of the participants answered that he was not necessarily committed to the decision to remain voluntarily childless for a lifetime. He was also the same participant who shared that he felt that older voluntarily childless couple from his No Kidding! group was attempting to parent him, in a way. Reproductive choices may change over time, and even from relationship to relationship. The participant answered that he was not necessarily committed to remaining voluntarily childless for a lifetime because while he had made that decision with his current wife, if something were to happen to her and he was to remarry someone who wanted children, he might be open to becoming a father. This research could be useful to counselors and marriage educators as they work with clients who may change their mind, even if it is not within their current marital relationship. Witnessing the older voluntarily childless couple attempting to parent him might be indicative of some regrets that couples may experience as they are no longer able to have children. Changing one's mind and regretting the decision to remain voluntarily childless, whether in the current marital relationship or in the future, has implications for counselors working with this population as they encounter grief and loss.

Work-Family Policy

Negative perceptions of voluntarily childless couples reflect continued societal expectations that favor parenthood (Somers, 1993; McQuillan et al., 2012; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). While involuntary childlessness and delayed parenthood are

generally accepted, voluntary childlessness can be viewed as undesirable by society (Veevers, 1973b). The increasing number of voluntarily childless couples raises questions on policies that favor couples with children. Policymakers and employers also need to be aware of the voluntarily childless phenomenon. Tax breaks are offered to parents, but not voluntarily childless couples. Many policies are also directed toward certain types of families, but may overlook or even negatively affect couples without children. Benefit plans may provide health care for children at no extra cost, provide corporate day care, and provide scholarships for children of employees. Work-family policies can create inequity or preferential treatment towards employees with children and may be discriminatory against the voluntarily childless (Hayden, 2010). Flexible work schedules (Lowen & Sicilian, 2009) and lighter travel assignments may be given to parents (Kirby & Krone, 2002). Jenner (1994) discussed how childless employees may have to cover for working parents without any additional compensation. In some instances, workplace policies are child-friendly, rather than family-friendly. For example, dependent care options may include children but not elderly relatives and while childless employees may routinely cover for working parents, they may not receive the same support when their needs may require time off from work. Some employers provided a cafeteria-style benefit plan in which employees could use “credits” to select the benefits that best meet their needs (Jenner, 1994). Providing paid leave to care for family members, such as aging parents, as well as providing greater scheduling flexibility for all employees could help in addressing inequities in the workplace (Earle &

Heymann, 2012). Employers and policymakers can explore various options to be able to meet the needs of voluntarily childless families.

Research

While the number of couples choosing to remain voluntarily childless is increasing, they are still in the minority. Further research can help increase the tolerance of diversity in various adult pathways and lifestyles, in order to help the childless lifestyle be a more acceptable option. Further research could provide important insight into long-term effects of this decision. Additionally, continued research can also provide information on how voluntary childlessness contributes to adult and family development over the life course. Family life educators can benefit by incorporating information on voluntarily childless married couples into their programs. These couples constitute a unique family composition that could be addressed.

The majority of the participants were Caucasians. This raises an additional question as to the amount of voluntarily childless couples of other ethnicities. The small sample size limited the transferability of the findings. Recruiting voluntarily childless participants from different organizations could result in a more ethnically homogenous sample. Further research on other ethnically homogeneous participants could provide insight into similarities or differences across ethnic groups. Additionally, cultural implications regarding reproductive decisions and the willingness to participate in research are present.

There are a number of ways that the research can benefit counselors and their clients. Family professionals must examine their own biases towards voluntarily childless couples. Family life educators' own values and beliefs have the potential to have a negative impact in working with this population if their biases are not recognized and addressed. Family professionals must be informed on the existing research surrounding the decision to remain voluntarily childless and the social pressures associated with it.

Overall, the findings provided a number of different areas that family professionals can explore as they work with married couples who have chosen to remain voluntarily childless. Voluntarily childless married couples are creating new lives for themselves. Their decision will affect them in numerous ways that counselors and family professionals, such as marriage and couples educators, can help them explore. Although pronatalism is still the norm in society, there is still a population of married couples who choose to remain voluntarily childless. With the existing number of voluntarily childless couples, as well as the possibility of a growing population, this research can provide insight for family professionals working with this population. Information from the research benefits not only those couples who choose to remain voluntarily childless, but it can also be useful when dealing with others who may have negative perceptions of voluntarily childless couples, or others associated with them, including family members. Creating an understanding of this population is important, especially as the population

grows. The findings can benefit counselors and other family professionals, which will in turn also benefit the clients they serve.

Limitations

Five couples were interviewed for the study. While the sample size is adequate for a qualitative study design, the sample size limited the transferability of the findings. The sample was a convenience sample and participants were recruited from a meeting group for childless singles and couples, from a dog agility group, and from postings on Facebook. The couples that were interviewed were extremely forthcoming with information about their decision. It may be that only the couples that were satisfied with their choice agreed to be interviewed, whereas other couples who chose to remain voluntarily childless and may have been dissatisfied with their choice did not want to be interviewed and share their stories with the researcher. The result of this self-selection could have created a more positive view of remaining voluntarily childless and more favorable responses. Greater insight into the phenomenon of remaining voluntarily childless could have been obtained if couples dissatisfied with their choice had agreed to be interviewed.

Another limitation was that the participants were a relatively homogeneous group. Consistent with Park's (2005) research, the voluntarily childless couples were all well-educated, with both spouses earning relatively high incomes. Abma and Martinez (2006) also found voluntarily childless women to have high individual incomes and be employed in professional and managerial occupations. Nine of the 10 participants had a college

degree, and six of them had graduate degrees. All of the participants were professionals and were middle class, with the majority being upper middle class. One of the participants was retired and reported an income of less than \$25,000. However, she was married to an attorney who made over \$200,000. Voluntarily childless individuals also tend to live in urban areas and be less religious (Park, 2005). Abma and Martinez's (2006) research focusing on older childless women also found voluntarily childless women to be more nonreligious and disproportionately White. Participants in the study resided in the Dallas/Fort Worth area or in the Houston area. According to the demographic questionnaires, four participants indicated that they had no formal religious affiliation. Nine of the 10 participants indicated that they did not attend religious services on a regular basis. Additionally, eight of the 10 participants were Caucasian. Therefore, experiences of remaining voluntarily childless were limited because interviews from a more heterogeneous sample were not included. Interviewing participants of different ethnic, social, and religious backgrounds could provide more insight into the phenomenon and whether their experiences are similar to those included in the study.

Lastly, since the researcher was the primary data collection instrument in the qualitative research, the researcher's bias may still factor into the interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Attempts to ensure rigor included addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Triangulation, peer debriefing, member checks, and reflexivity were used. However, the researcher's experiences and bias may still affect the subjective interpretation of the results. Other

researchers may view the data differently. Therefore, replicating the study is very difficult.

Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this study have revealed additional areas of research that can be examined further. The following are recommendations for future research:

1. Conduct additional research on couples who made the decision to remain voluntarily childless who may not be married, but are in a committed relationship.
2. Include quantitative measures with instruments that can address areas that may be relevant to the voluntarily childless population, including areas such as anxiety and depression, marital satisfaction, and social relationships.
3. Conduct additional research on couples who have chosen to remain voluntarily childless and also specifically on males who have made the decision to remain voluntarily childless. The focus on voluntarily childlessness is often on women. However, the decision to remain voluntarily childless affects both spouses.
4. Conduct qualitative longitudinal research. Research could begin with newly engaged couples and then continue as they marry and encounter various experiences over their life course.
5. Conduct research with couples in the same age cohort to compare experiences. Research could occur with newly married couples in their childbearing years,

couples reaching the end of their childbearing years, and those whose childbearing years were behind them.

6. Conduct research on rates of divorce among voluntarily childless couples.
7. Some participants revealed that their siblings had also chosen to remain voluntarily childless. Research on family patterns of childlessness may be insightful.
8. Conduct research on voluntarily childless married couples who regretted their decision.
9. Conduct research on older voluntarily childless couples and social support, including older childless adults who may have been previously married (widowed or divorced).
10. The study could be conducted with a more heterogeneous sample. The sample could include participants from diverse socioeconomic, educational, geographical, religious, and ethnic backgrounds.
11. Additional research could explore the changing meanings of femininity and identity across the life course for voluntarily childless couples.
12. Conduct research on family educators' knowledge regarding voluntarily childless married couples.
13. Conduct research to explore family life educators' views and perceptions towards voluntarily childless married couples.

14. Conduct research on family professionals and the frequency with which they work with voluntarily childless married couples and/or their families.
15. Conduct research on policies, such as workplace policies, that affect voluntarily childless individuals and explore options that may better address the needs of this population.
16. Research should attempt to be more consistent with what the definition of voluntarily childless couples is and whether they have made the decision for a lifetime. Some couples may be temporarily childless, while others may be permanently childless. Additionally, definitions often refer to biological parenthood. However, individuals within a couple may be voluntarily childless but their family may include nonbiological children, stepchildren, or adoptive children.

Summary

This qualitative, phenomenological study explored the experiences of five voluntarily childless married couples within the framework of Elder's (1998) life course perspective. A discussion of the five themes and single overarching theme that emerged from data analysis, along with conclusions of the study were also included in this chapter. Additionally, implications, limitations of the research, and recommendations for future research were included. This research added to the limited body of literature on voluntarily childless married couples. It helps to understand the phenomenon of

choosing to remain voluntarily childless and can provide insight into this growing population and different pathways couples may experience over their life course.

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APPENDIX A
Request for Participants

Request for Participants

The decision to voluntarily remain childless is a research area for which more information is needed. I am requesting your assistance in helping me to fulfill the requirements for my Doctoral Dissertation in Family Studies at Texas Woman's University. The title of the study is A Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of Voluntarily Childless Married Couples: A Lifetime Decision and it seeks to describe the experiences of voluntarily childless couples. I am seeking married couples, 18 years and older, living in Texas, who have never been parents, and who have made the lifetime decision to remain voluntarily childless within their current marital relationship. I am interested in conducting a face-to-face interview with both you and your spouse.

If you are willing to participate, both you and your spouse will be asked to participate in an audio recorded face-to-face interview and to complete a demographic questionnaire. Each interview will occur separately and any information shared with the researcher will be kept confidential. Completing the interview and demographic questionnaire is expected to take between 60 and 90 minutes. However, completing the interview and questionnaire may not take the whole time. Participation is voluntary and may be discontinued at any time without any repercussions. If you are interested in participating, please contact me at denisa96@twu.edu or 817-xxx-xxxx. There is a potential risk of loss of confidentiality in all email, downloading, and internet transactions.

Thank you for your assistance. Please feel free to contact me or one of my research advisors, Dr. Joyce Armstrong jarmstrong@twu.edu or Dr. Shann Hwa (Abraham) Hwang shwang@twu.edu with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,
Denisa Valenzuela, M.Ed.
817-xxx-xxxx
denisa96@twu.edu

APPENDIX B

Semi-Structured Interview

Semi-Structured Interview

Interview Question 1: How did you make the decision to remain childless?

Interview Question 2: How do you feel about children in general?

Interview Question 3: If any exist, tell me about times when you have thought about changing your mind.

Interview Question 4: Tell me about your experiences of remaining voluntarily childless.

Interview Question 5: How does your family feel about your decision?

Interview Question 6: How do other people react when you tell them?

The researcher will use probes, as necessary. Some examples are as follows:

Probe: Importance of remaining voluntarily childless

Probe: Importance of age

Probe: Importance of length of time married

Probe: Situational examples

APPENDIX C

Informed Consent

TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title: A Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of Voluntarily Childless
Married Couples: A Lifetime Decision

Investigator: Denisa Valenzuela, M.Eddenisa96@twu.edu 817/ [REDACTED]
Advisor: Joyce Armstrong, Ph.D.jarmstrong@twu.edu 940/898-2690
Advisor: Shann Hwa (Abraham) Hwang, Ph.D.shwang@twu.edu 940/898-3155

Explanation and Purpose of the Research

You are being asked to participate in a research study for Denisa Valenzuela's dissertation at Texas Woman's University. The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of voluntarily childless married couples. The focus of the study is to describe how married couples make the decision to remain childless and describe how they are treated because of their decision. You have been asked to participate in this study because you are an individual 18 years of age or older living in Texas, who has never been a parent, and who has made a lifetime decision to remain voluntarily childless within your current marital relationship.

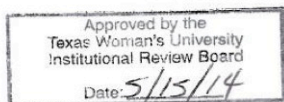
Description of Procedures

As a participant in this study you will be asked to spend up to 90 minutes of your time in a face-to-face interview with the researcher. The researcher will ask you questions about your decision to remain voluntarily childless and how others treat you because of your decision. You and the researcher will decide together on a private location where and when the interview will happen. You and the researcher will decide on a code name for you to use during the interview. The interview will be audio recorded and then written down so that the researcher can be accurate when studying what you have said. You will also be asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire. In order to be a participant in this study, you must be 18 years or older, live in Texas, never been a parent, and have made the lifetime decision to remain voluntarily childless within your current marital relationship.

Potential Risks

The researcher will ask you questions about your decision to remain voluntarily childless and how others treat you because of this decision. A possible risk in this study is physical and/or emotional discomfort with these questions you are asked. If you become tired or upset you may take breaks as needed. You may also stop answering questions at any time and end the interview. If you feel you need to talk to a professional about your discomfort, the researcher will provide you with a list of resources.

Initials
Page 1 of 2



Another risk in this study is loss of confidentiality. Confidentiality will be protected to the extent that is allowed by law. There is a potential risk of loss of confidentiality in all email, downloading, and internet transactions. The interview will be held at a private location that you and the researcher have agreed upon. A code name, not your real name, will be used during the interview. No one but the researcher will know your real name. The audio recordings and the written interview will be stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home.

Only the researcher and her advisors may hear the audio recordings and have access to the demographic questionnaires. Only the researcher, her advisors, and a peer debriefer may read the written interview. The audio recordings will be stored on a flash drive and the drive will be physically destroyed within 6 months after the study is completed. The written interview and demographic questionnaires will be shredded within 6 months after the study is finished. The results of the study may be reported in scientific magazines or journals but your name or any other identifying information will not be included.

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 involvement in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions of any kind. You will not receive any remuneration for taking part in the study. If you would like to know the results of this study, we will send them to you within 6 months of the conclusion of the study through your preferred method, either by email or regular mail.*

Questions Regarding the Study

You will be given a copy of this signed and dated consent form to keep. If you have any questions about the research study, you should ask the researchers; their phone numbers are at the top of this form. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research or 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 or via email at IRB@twu.edu.

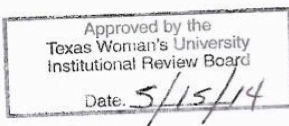
Signature of Participant

Date

*If you would like to know the results of this study tell us where you want them to be sent:

Email: _____ OR Mailing Address: _____

Page 2 of 2



APPENDIX D

Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questionnaire

Please fill in the blanks and circle your answers below.

1. Name

2. Spouse's Name

3. Gender

Male

Female

4. Age _____

5. Ethnicity

African American

American Indian

Asian

Hispanic

Pacific Islander

Caucasian

Other _____

6. Marital Status

Married (1st marriage)

Widowed and Remarried

Divorced and Remarried

7. How many years have you been married to your current spouse? _____

8. Education (highest completed)

Elementary School (K-6)

Junior High (7-8)

High School (9-12)

Some college/Tech School

Bachelor's Degree

Master's Degree

Doctorate

9. Occupation _____

10. Religious Affiliation

Baptist
Buddhist
Catholic
Jewish
Methodist
Mormon (LDS)
Muslim
Protestant
No formal religious affiliation
Other _____

11. Do you attend religious services on a regular basis?

Yes

No

12. What is your INDIVIDUAL income?

Less than \$25,000
\$25,000 to \$49,999
\$50,000 to \$74,999
\$75,000 to \$99,999
\$100,000 to \$149,999
\$150,000 to \$199,999
\$200,000 or more

13. Is the decision to remain voluntarily childless one that you are committed to for a lifetime?

Yes

No

APPENDIX E

Resource List

Resource List

The following websites can assist you in locating a therapist in your area.

American Psychological Association-Psychologist Locator

<http://locator.apa.org/>

Psychology Today-Therapy Directory

<http://therapists.psychologytoday.com/rms/>

Therapist Referral Network

<http://www.1-800-therapist.com>

Mental Health America

<http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/farcry/go/searchMHA>

Network of Care

<http://networkofcare.org/splash.aspx>

APPENDIX F

IRB Approval Letter



Institutional Review Board
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
P.O. Box 425619, Denton, TX 76204-5619
940-898-3378
email: IRB@twu.edu
<http://www.twu.edu/irb.html>

DATE: June 3, 2014

TO: Ms. Denisa Valenzuela
Department of Family Sciences

FROM: Institutional Review Board - Denton

Re: *Approval for A Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of Voluntarily Childless Married Couples: A Lifetime Decision (Protocol #: 17545)*

The above referenced study has been reviewed and approved by the Denton Institutional Review Board (IRB) on 5/15/2014 using an expedited review procedure. This approval is valid for one year and expires on 5/15/2015. The IRB will send an email notification 45 days prior to the expiration date with instructions to extend or close the study. It is your responsibility to request an extension for the study if it is not yet complete, to close the protocol file when the study is complete, and to make certain that the study is not conducted beyond the expiration date.

If applicable, agency approval letters must be submitted to the IRB upon receipt prior to any data collection at that agency. A copy of the approved consent form with the IRB approval stamp is enclosed. Please use the consent form with the most recent approval date stamp when obtaining consent from your participants. A copy of the signed consent forms must be submitted with the request to close the study file at the completion of the study.

Any modifications to this study must be submitted for review to the IRB using the Modification Request Form. Additionally, the IRB must be notified immediately of any adverse events or unanticipated problems. All forms are located on the IRB website. If you have any questions, please contact the TWU IRB.

cc. Dr. Karen Petty, Department of Family Sciences
Dr. Joyce Armstrong, Department of Family Sciences
Graduate School
Dr. Shann Hwa Hwang