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PREVIEW

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**The effects of voluntary childlessness or voluntary parenthood
on marital satisfaction and communication**

Golden-Scaduto, Carol J., Psy.D.

Pace University, 1989

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PREVIEW

THE EFFECTS OF VOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS
OR VOLUNTARY PARENTHOOD
ON MARITAL SATISFACTION AND COMMUNICATION
BY
CAROL J. GOLLEN-SCADUTO

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY
DYSON COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES
DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY
PACE UNIVERSITY

NEW YORK

1989

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THE EFFECTS OF VOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS
OR VOLUNTARY PARENTHOOD
ON MARITAL SATISFACTION AND COMMUNICATION

PREVIEW

To my husband Claudio
with love

PREVIEW

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people contributed to this study, and I would like to thank them all. First, to the couples who so kindly agreed to give of their time - you are the heart of this work

To Lynn Passy, teacher and advisor, who has been with this project since its inception and who was instrumental in helping me to narrow and define my area of investigation. Her comments and questions throughout all phases of its development have been insightful, and she has been consistently available as a source of support. I sincerely thank her for her part in my growth and development as a psychologist.

To Al Ward, teacher and consultant, who has also been with this project since the beginning. He has been the source of my knowledge in research, design, and statistics. His excellent teaching and his patience, support, and understanding have given me an important tool for my future work as a psychologist. He was always available, for hours at a time; his sense of humor and good cheer made even the most difficult problems seem easy. I sincerely thank him for his part in my growth and development as a psychologist.

To Steve Salbod for his help in making sense out of thousands of pages of computer printout. To Richard Levenson, Jr. and Margot Gelman-Lacey for their friendship, support,

laughter, peer supervision, and hours spent together in the pursuit of our graduate degrees.

To my parents, Jules and Martha Golden for their unequivocal support, patience, and love through all the years of my life. To my brother and sister-in-law, Ronald and Diane Golden, for their love and support. And last, but always first, to my "non-traditional" husband Claudio for his love and his support of my personal and professional goals.

PREVIEW

ABSTRACT

This study compared voluntarily childless couples to voluntary parents on the variables of marital satisfaction and communication with the goal of contributing to a broader understanding of the marital relationship that chooses to remain childless and to diminish the negative stereotypes of this choice. Findings in the literature on the relationship between children and marital satisfaction and communication have been inconclusive, and relatively few studies have compared the voluntarily childless to voluntary parents with the appropriate controls. Even fewer studies have used both husbands and wives as subjects.

The present study compared 23 voluntarily childless couples with 23 voluntary parents using the Marital Satisfaction Inventory and A Marital Communication Inventory. The data was analyzed using a Two-by-Two Mixed Model MANOVA in order to determine whether the subjects differed significantly on the measures. The findings indicated that there were no significant differences between voluntarily childless couples and voluntary parents on their reports of marital satisfaction or communication. However, Univariate ANOVAS performed after the MANOVA analyses revealed a significant difference between the two groups on the Family History of Distress Scale of the Marital Satisfaction Inventory with voluntarily childless couples showing

a significantly higher history of family distress than parent couples. Findings also indicated that husbands differed significantly from their wives on their reports of marital satisfaction and communication. Specifically, husbands were more ineffective than their wives with problem solving communication and more dissatisfied with the sexual relationship whereas wives were more dissatisfied with affective communication, time spent together, and the global, overall quality of the relationship. Finally, parent wives were more successful than parent husbands at marital communication ($p < .05$).

It is hoped that this research will lend support to the voluntarily childless lifestyle and will encourage professionals and lay people to be more aware of alternatives. It is expected that the findings might serve to encourage a new type of socialization and preparation for family life which would include implications for parent training as well as marriage, birth, and family counseling.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Over the past 25 years, the women's movement, new methods of birth control, and concern with overpopulation have combined to change the meaning of marriage and family formation. A generation ago, a couple never questioned whether or not they would have children; this was an automatic assumption instilled from childhood. If a woman entered the work force or went on for higher education, it was for the purpose of having something to do "when the children grew up" or to pursue as a goal secondary to that of being a wife and a mother.

The women's movement and the effective demystification of the "feminine mystique" have begun to change traditional views held by society and have broadened the possibilities which allow women, as well as men, to seek alternative life-styles. More and more women are entering the work force, not only because they have to, but because they want to. Couples are postponing the decision to have children. In fact, no longer is the question "when to have children" but "if one should have children at all."

Statistics published by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1984) showed that, in 1964, 1.7% of wives under the age of 30 expected to have no children. In 1967 the percentage rose to 3.4%, and by 1975 it had reached 4.6%. In 1980 it was 5.5%, and in 1982 it

rose to 6.4%. According to Veevers (1978), voluntary childlessness is likely to reach a rate of at least 10% of ever married women.

This 25 year period of change is best understood in light of the more than 4,000 years of emphasis on procreation: an emphasis that was both secular and religious. Both Hammurabi in Babylon and Caesar Augustus in Rome passed legislation to encourage childbearing. In seventeenth century Spain and France, tax advantages and pensions were provided for men with large families (Whelan, 1975). Both Orthodox Jews and Catholics have always viewed procreation as the sole purpose for sexual intercourse, and in the sixteenth century Martin Luther commented, "If a woman grows weary and at last dies from childbirth, it matters not. . . . She is there to do it" (Burgwyn, 1981, p. 2). These pro-natalist views have been strengthened in the twentieth century by psychoanalytic writers and theorists such as Freud, Erickson, and Deutsch.

Despite this pressure toward procreation, birth statistics in the United States began to show marked changes during the Depression years of the 1930s and the war years of the early 1940s when birth rates dropped to an all time low. After World War II, and continuing until the early 1960s, birth rates soared again and reached an all-time national record (Burgwyn, 1981). Once again pro-natalist views and propaganda were being espoused on television shows, in women's magazines, and, more subtly, by

government through its support of parents in the areas of taxes, health and life insurance programs, and military benefits.

In contrast to this pervasive pro-natalist history, there were only a few advocates of voluntary childlessness prior to the feminist movement which began in the early 1960s. Burgwyn (1981) summarizes these first powerful and daring steps of women such as Charlotte Gilman Perkins (Women and Economics, 1898), Leta S. Hollingsworth ("Social Devices for Impelling Women to Bear and Rear Children," 1916), Jean Ayling (The Retreat from Parenthood, 1930), and Simone de Beauvoir (The Second Sex, 1953). Finally, The Feminine Mystique, written in 1963 by Betty Friedan, served as the catalyst for the women's movement, a period in history which has done more than any other to change the condition of women's lives. Once the movement began, other writers jumped on the bandwagon. Peck and Senderowitz (1974) claimed that "parenthood is neither an inevitability, nor a universally desirable condition, nor a prerequisite for a full life - but a vocation for which only some of us are suited, by aptitude or choice" (p. 9). Harper (1980) and Rollin (1974) refuted statements claiming that having and wanting children is natural. "There is no innate drive for children. Otherwise the enormous cultural pressures that there are to reproduce wouldn't exist" (Rollin, p. 148).

During the 1970s, there existed a nationwide organization whose goal was to provide support to couples who opted for non-parenthood, The National Organization of Non-Parents (NON), which

changed its name to The National Alliance of Optional Parenthood (NAOP) in 1978. Personal communications with Marie Bernardi (June 1987) and Gail Thoen (September 1987), former directors of NAOP, informed the present investigator that, by the early 1980s, this organization's main goals were incorporated into Zero Population Growth and Planned Parenthood, and thus NAOP ceased to exist. Clearly, inroads were being made and "choice" was becoming a possibility.

Nevertheless, the childfree lifestyle has by no means been accepted by society at large. As late as 1980, in a study done by Calhoun and Selby using undergraduates in a Southeastern university as subjects, perceptions of voluntarily childless couples were still in the mode of traditional stereotypes. Both husbands and wives who were described as being voluntarily childless were seen as more psychologically disturbed and less well adjusted than those with children, and non-parent wives were also liked significantly less than parent wives.

The purpose of the present study is to compare voluntarily childless couples to voluntary parents on the variables of marital satisfaction and communication. It is hoped that the results will contribute to a broader understanding of the marital dyad that chooses to remain childless and to give support to the viability of this choice.

Research done in the social sciences since the 1960s has examined both the correlates of satisfaction in marriage and the effects of children as they relate to various aspects of

marriage. It is important that this research continue. The possibility for making choices, and the respectability of choosing "to have or to have not," has positive implications for everyone. To continue to assume the desirability of parenthood for all couples has negative implications for both parents and non-parents. Many future parents tend not to question their suitability for the role and subsequently feel trapped and frustrated. Drug abuse, suicide, and runaways among the teenage population, as well as child abuse and neglect, are, in part, a testament to the dysfunctional family. On the other hand, social stigmatization is often the price to be paid for choosing not to parent.

People contemplating this irrevocable decision want to know, and should be able to learn about, the negative as well as the positive effects that their choice may have.

A Review of the Literature

Voluntary Childlessness

The topic of voluntary childlessness as an area of scientific study was persistently avoided until the early 1970s. This began to change as a result of the research efforts of a Canadian journalist by the name of Jean E. Veevers. Veevers (1973a) suggested that this selective inattention

reflects systematic bias due to the pervasive influence of two important mores regarding procreation: one, the norm that married people should have children; and two, the norm

that they should want to have them and should rejoice at the prospect of becoming parents (p. 199).

Veevers believed that undertaking the study of voluntarily childless couples would contribute to the body of knowledge on the family and the effects of children on marital adjustment. This population would serve "both as a deviant minority group of intrinsic interest, and as a basis for contrast and comparison with the conventional conforming majority" (1973a, p. 204).

Veevers (1973a) described two routes to childlessness: one involves a decision by the couple before they are married of an intention never to become parents; the second and more common route involves the prolonged postponement of childbearing until it is no longer considered desirable. Prolonged postponement consists of four stages. First, the couple take the stance of future parents; i.e., they postpone having children only for a definite period of time. Second, the definite period of time becomes a vague indefinite period, but the couple still consider themselves committed to parenthood. Third, thinking changes and the couple openly acknowledge the possibility of not having children. This is the critical stage. Once the couple openly consider the positive and negative aspects of becoming parents, the probability of deciding not to have children increases. Finally, the couple come to the conclusion that they will never have children. For most, this is never an explicit decision but rather the realization that they have made an implicit decision.

Veevers (1973b) identified two types of women who had decided to remain childless--those who rejected parenthood because of the negative aspects of children (reactive factors) and those who rejected parenthood because of the positive aspects of the adult centered life style (attrahent factors). Among these attrahent factors were spontaneity, commitment to the husband-wife dyad, and the desire to pursue their occupation. Other researchers have identified additional motivating factors for the childfree decision: more personal freedom, greater time and intimacy with spouse, less responsibility, disinterest in becoming a parent, personal growth and accomplishment, concern for population, commitment to career, and financial considerations (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Bram, 1974, 1978; Cumber, 1977; Gustavus & Henley, 1971; Movius, 1976; Ory, 1976).

Prior to the research of the seventies, the voluntarily childless woman and the voluntarily childless couple were labeled abnormal, unnatural, immature, and sexually inadequate. The couple was assumed to have an unhappy and unstable marriage (Veevers, 1972b). These non-parents were also considered to be selfish and self-centered (Popenoe, 1936; Rainwater, 1965). Psychiatric judgments of voluntarily childless women based solely on theory described her as being inferior in social adjustment, less healthy mentally, and less feminine on measures of sexual identity, interest, and attitudes (Teicholz, 1977). Popenoe did not mince words when he wrote that "the great bulk of voluntary childless marriages are motivated by individualism, competitive

consumption economically, and an infantile, self-indulgent, frequently neurotic attitude toward life" (p. 470).

Contrast this with the consistent, composite profile that has emerged with the empirical research of the seventies and eighties. When compared to samples of mothers of similar socioeconomic levels, women who choose to remain childless place greater value on work and achievement (Teicholz, 1977), are more likely to be employed in full time professional jobs (Houseknecht, 1979; Ritchey & Stokes, 1974; Scanzoni & McMurry, 1972) are more supportive of the goals of the women's movement (Bram, 1974, 1978), rate themselves as dominant rather than dependent (Bram, 1974, 1978), are more likely to value masculine traits without devaluing feminine traits (Feldman, 1981; Ory, 1976; Teicholz, 1977), and are thus more likely to be androgynous (Teicholz, 1977). They are as identified with feminine values and interests and are as feminine on tests of unconscious sexual identity (Teicholz, 1977).

An in-depth study of 70 married women in the Boston area, all of whom were from above average socioeconomic backgrounds with college or graduate degrees, found that over twice as many future mothers (39%) as non-mothers (18%) were unable or unwilling to articulate a philosophy of life. Four times as many non-mothers as future mothers expressed world views that had primary philosophical, religious, social, or political concerns (Teicholz, 1977).