No to Children, Yes to Childfreedom:

Pronatalism and the Perspectives and Experiences of Childfree Women

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Pronatalism is a word that undoubtedly most have never heard and a cultural force that most have never contemplated, yet this powerful force defines womanhood and shapes our assumptions of what a woman should be. It makes assertions about what provides a woman’s ultimate fulfillment in life, and what her destiny will be. It is a force that has permeated so deeply into the fiber of our unconscious that it is almost as imperceptible as breathing. Most people don’t notice it, don’t question it, and don’t give it a second thought.

Pronatalism refers to any attitudes or policies which encourage reproduction and exalt the role of parenthood (Peck). The forces of pronatalism are particularly salient to women as it is the ideology responsible for the pervasive idea that a woman’s destiny and ultimate fulfillment are wedded to childbearing and motherhood. Pronatalism stresses the advantages of having children while minimizing the disadvantages (Veevers). It creates the motherhood mandate – the idea that regardless of whatever else she chooses to do in life, a woman’s role must involve maternity (Russo, 1976). The force of pronatalism informs public policy, resulting in institutional incentives which encourage and reward reproduction, while simultaneously discriminating against those who do not have children (Park). It comes at us from every angle, from religious imperatives to mother, to psychological theories which define maternity as a requirement for healthy female psychological development (Daniuk, 1999; Ireland); to medical imperatives in which childbearing is encouraged and women who wish to be sterilized are turned away (Daniuk, 1999; Gillespie, 2000; Hollingworth; Morrell, 1994; Tyler May; Veevers). It is at work in the media – on television and in magazines in the media’s obsession with celebrity pregnancy “bump watches” and in its failure to show the unpleasant side of
mothering. It is the idealization of maternity in art, song and poetry (Hollingworth) and of female archetypes such as Virgin, Venus and Mother Earth, who are bound to reproductive functions (Landa). It is evident even in the minutia of everyday life – from the mother who tells her daughter, “when you have children some day...”, to the looks of suspicion and disbelief between women in the face of one who boldly announces she does not wish to have children; to the silence women keep about the harsh realities of motherhood. Pronatalism is everywhere.

Because motherhood is so idealized in our culture and in cultures across the world, it can at first be difficult to perceive the dangers inherent in pronatalist ideology. As Peck explains, the danger of pronatalism is that it “denies or at least limits choice to individuals...and compromises opportunities for individual freedom and reproductive choice” (p. 2). It stigmatizes those who are childless, whether by circumstance or choice, and creates an environment in which women who are not mothers are pitied or vilified and in which incorrect and unfair prejudices and assumptions are made about them (Gillespie, 2000). It defines womanhood as motherhood, thus limiting a woman’s capacity to be fully realized, appreciated and defined by qualities, aspirations, endeavors and accomplishments outside the boundaries of maternity. Its dangerous impact is felt environmentally in an exploding population that the earth cannot necessarily sustain, as evidenced in part by our current crisis of global warming. It leads the childless and childfree to be unfairly discriminated against with a heavier tax burden, fewer tax breaks, and a shouldering of the burden of other public subsidies for which they have no use (childcare, flextime benefits, adoption subsidies, maternity/paternity leave, etc.) (Burkett; Peck; Russo, 1979).
The repercussions of pronatalism are felt most keenly by the intentionally childless; hereafter referred to as the childfree. Having turned their back on society's maternalist expectations, childfree women come up against pronatalism face-on in their everyday lives. By refusing to accept the pronatalist definitions of womanhood and instead, explore and express themselves through their many other potentialities, childfree women reject the idea that a life without children is one of loss, but rather embrace it as a self-determined life of growth and opportunity; hence their rejection of the term childless.

What is interesting about pronatalism, and what makes it a fascinating subject of study is that it creates conditions in which women are pressured into believing that motherhood is essential for a happy and fulfilling life; yet most childfree women are living happy and fulfilling lives while being free of the many burdens and sacrifices involved in childrearing. Additionally, childfree women enjoy many benefits and experiences that mothers must forego in order to take on the tremendous responsibilities of parenthood. Despite these benefits and opportunities, our culture treats the childfree lifestyle as one solely of lack and one that is not a viable option for women. The childfree lifestyle is either ignored or outright condemned and women who choose the childfree lifestyle are usually perceived as misguided, confused and selfish. This discussion will expose our culture as rampantly and unnecessarily pronatalist and will argue that such rigid and limiting lifestyle requirements for women have no place in a society built on the ideal of self-determinism. It will also illuminate the real-life experiences and perspectives of childfree women, exploring their feelings about the joys and challenges of being childfree.
To accomplish this goal, I conducted an in-depth investigation into the area of intentional childlessness to uncover the academic research that has been conducted to date. I was specifically interested in research and writings on the subjects of pronatalism, the experiences of childfree women, and comparisons between the lifestyles of parents and the childfree. As a married, childfree woman who lives a very full, active and happy life, I was interested to see if the research confirmed my suspicion that the pronatalist motherhood mandate insisting that women can only find ultimate happiness and fulfillment through motherhood is selling women a “bill of goods”.

I also decided that it would be a benefit to this project, and the community at large, particularly the childfree community and those contemplating the childfree lifestyle, to conduct written interviews with childfree women and to publish this project, and their interviews in web site form (link: http://yestochildfreedom.blogspot.com). To accomplish this, I posted a request for female childfree-by-choice participants on two childfree weblogs as well as on a women’s health and fitness discussion board. The participants responded via e-mail and were directed to a survey web site where they completed the survey. The survey consisted of ten open-ended questions touching on such areas as the factors that influenced their decision to be childfree, the kinds of reactions they received to their decision, the way society perceives the childfree, as well as asking them to compare the advantages, disadvantages and overall life satisfaction of the childfree and parental lifestyles. My instructions to the participants informed them that their written interviews would be published on my project’s web site and gave them the option of remaining anonymous by using a fictitious name. I was delighted by the swift and very enthusiastic response I received. With minimal promotion, I received a
total of fifty-three participants through the internet, and an additional two through in-
person associations with childfree women who asked to participate. Out of the fifty-five
completed surveys I received, four were eliminated due to the respondents’ indication
that they wished to have children in the future. This left me with a total of fifty-one
female childfree-by-choice participants. Excerpts from these interviews will be used
throughout this project. The full, unedited text of all fifty-one interviews may be viewed
here: http://cfwomeninterviews.blogspot.com/

THE ORIGINS OF PRONATALISM

Pronatalism can be traced to early patriarchal religions in which women were
clearly tied to their reproductive role and motherhood was promoted as a woman’s
primary purpose and duty to God. Tying women to their reproductive role ensured that
the population of a religion’s members increased (thus strengthening the power of that
religion), and also ensured that patriarchal power was maintained, since a woman tied to
childbearing and childrearing becomes more dependent and submissive to the men of her
community for protection and financial support.

As societies developed, pronatalist forces arose to “offset the wastage of war and
disease” (Hollingworth), and to encourage population growth, which traditionally has
expanded the industrial, political and military advantages of countries.

In *Barren in the Promised Land*, Tyler May examines the historical roots of
pronatalism and childlessness in American culture. She explains that for early American
settlers, having children was necessary for survival, since children were reared, not for
pleasure, but for the economic benefit and expansion of the community, since children
were a cheap source of labor. Infant mortality was high, so couples needed to have twice
the number of children to ensure that a number of them would make it to adulthood and later be able to care for them in old age. The average colonial woman had eight children. (Chapter 1). Pronatalist forces exerted themselves through Puritan religious and community imperatives mandating women to bear many children and tying a woman’s role completely to motherhood. Intentional childlessness was not an option at all, and a woman making such a choice would be cast out of the community. A woman who was infertile was perceived as having received punishment from God for transgressions she committed and was put into service in other ways (for example helping to take care of other women’s children).

In the early 1900s, the United States government took a visible pronatalist stance when President Roosevelt placed reproduction center stage in declaring that Americans were committing “race suicide”. This was not due to declining population as the population was increasing, but the increase was coming from immigrants who were bearing more children than the American-born middle class. Roosevelt’s stance helped to fuel the powerful eugenics movement, encouraging some Americans to reproduce while preventing others from doing so.

The “race suicide panic” was not successful in boosting the birth rate, but during the post World War II years, the Baby Boom ensued, fueled both by an economic boom but also by a change in the national political culture in which “the nation’s security suddenly became fused with a vision of the American home. The ideal of domesticity, focused on the nuclear family with children, came to embody the hope for the future of the nation and the ultimate achievement of happiness and personal fulfillment for its citizens.” (Tyler May, p. 129) Parenthood was seen as patriotic and childlessness was
seen as deviant, selfish and pitiable. Also, during World War II, women had entered the work force out of necessity, taking over men’s jobs while they were away at war. When the men returned from war, they needed their jobs back and women were pushed out of the work force and back into the home. This fueled the domesticity ideal and the push for reproduction, since reproduction ties a woman more tightly to the home. This image was reinforced by the expanding media of the time including a glut of women’s magazines, television shows and advertising, which emphasized and romanticized domesticity and a woman’s role as mother and housekeeper (Peck).

During the cold war, the focus shifted to alleged threats to the nation’s future, namely “internal enemies, bred from the middle class itself, who posed a threat to the nation’s security because they were ‘soft’...so called subversives, pinkos, and homos were the children of ‘neurotic’ women.” (p. 153). A standard of “natural” motherhood took shape in which women were expected to embrace a submissive role as wife and mother and in which any woman who consciously or unconsciously avoided this role was vilified.

In the 1970s, the childfree movement emerged, “consistent with and supported by a number of political philosophies, including feminism, environmentalism, zero population growth, gay and lesbian rights, the movement for reproductive choice and the New Left’s rejection of the domestic ideology and compulsory pronatalism of the early years of the cold war.” (Tyler May, p. 184). Although the movement gave voice to the voluntarily childless, it neither erased the stigma nor fully articulated the various motives for opting out of parenthood. It may have widened the cultural space for the childless in American society, but that space remained on the margin.” (Tyler May, p. 183)
In the 1980s a new pronatalist push arrived on the heels of the childfree movement of the 1970s. Suddenly the focus shifted to the career women and the supposed “infertility epidemic” of women delaying motherhood. While Tyler May points out there is no evidence that infertility rates actually increased during this time, nevertheless the pressures on women to become mothers increased and the numbers of people seeking fertility treatments rose dramatically. One may view this pronatalist push as a conservative backlash against the post-1970s feminist movement and subsequent shift of woman away from stay-at-home motherhood and toward a dual role of career woman and mother.

Why does pronatalism persist today? Certainly, when we consider the pressing social and environmental problems such as overpopulation, suburban sprawl, pollution, the disappearance of forests and farm land, global warming and the substantial population of orphaned children, it seems nonsensical that procreation pressures (and the resulting stigmatization of childfreedom and childlessness) should continue. Perhaps this may be explained by thinking about who benefits from a growing population – the government in a larger tax base and potential increase in military power, religions in the potential for increased membership, and mass marketers who rely on and profit from a growing number of consumers to purchase their goods.

THE MANY FORMS AND EXPRESSIONS OF PRONATALISM

The forces of pronatalism which construct cultural discourses on femininity around motherhood take shape in many forms, but these can be generalized into three categories: the glorification of motherhood and children; powerful religious,
psychological, medical and social imperatives which steer women toward mothering and
away from the childfree lifestyle; and societal incentives and rewards for mothering.

The Glorification of Motherhood and Children

The glorification of motherhood and children is evident in all areas of our lives
and is expressed in persistent messages about what it means to be a woman; that a
woman receives ultimate fulfillment in life through mothering (Veevers); that
womanhood equals motherhood and a woman is not completely a woman until she
becomes a mother (Veevers; Daniluk, 1998 and 1999; Morell 1994; Gillespie, 2000;
Hollingworth; Landa), that a woman’s feminine identity is derived from motherhood
(Veevers; Landa); that motherhood is a beautiful, wonderful, enjoyable and fulfilling role
for women (Hollingworth; Maushart, Daniluk, 1998, Knowles, Morell, 2000; Russo,
1976); that children are wonderful; that motherhood improves a woman’s life and makes
her a better, healthier and more noble person (Morell, 1994; Veevers, Earle, Burkett),
and finally, that the rewards of motherhood are well worth the sacrifices.

In this glorified portrayal of motherhood exists the “parenthood mystique” which
Veevers describes as the belief that children are not only compatible with self-fulfillment
but are necessary for it. Parenthood is depicted as the healthy and preferable lifestyle,
promoting and strengthening marriage and adjustment to marriage, proving femininity,
demonstrating normal mental health, social maturity, stability of personality, while
fulfilling religious and civil responsibility (p. 4). Womanhood is equated with
motherhood and those who are not mothers are deemed to not be “complete” women.
Landa sees childless and childfree women in danger of internalizing notions that they are
not real women:
While raising children in our society is difficult and many of us may envy non-parents their freedom, it also seems likely that most of us have accepted cultural formulations which define femininity in terms of fertility: a woman is a mother; a non-mothering female is an insult to her gender. While manhood is not defined in terms of fatherhood, the female archetypes remain bound to reproductive functions: Virgin, Venus, Mother Earth. Childless women...feel defensive about the confounding of womanhood with motherhood, but they are in continual danger of internalizing the prejudicial stereotypes. (p. 146)

Survey respondent, Sharla W., 28 comments:

A dominant cultural belief is that children are irrevocably tied to womanhood – not only do ALL women want children to the point of irrationality, but you’re not a real woman unless you’ve given birth to a child or somehow nurtured and raised a child. Motherhood itself is marketed as the most sacred of all bonds and ‘nothing’ can compare to the joy and love between a mother and child. This is a powerful, influential message because it is tied to women’s own identity and sense of self-worth. The woman who cannot or will not conceive is viewed either with pity or as an unnatural monstrosity, respectively. Womanhood and the gendered concept of ‘femininity’ are not, of course, tied in any way to fertility – babies are simply a reproductive function of all sexual animals, and in no way tied to a person’s identity, value or sense of self-worth.

Motherhood is also glorified in being “inextricably linked with a woman’s creative capacity” (Ireland). Since a woman is endowed with the ability to create life, she is required to demonstrate and express her creativity through reproduction. Respondent Danee D., 37 feels there is danger in linking creativity with reproduction and not encouraging other avenues of creative expression in women.

....we as human beings have an innate need to create. The most popular way to do this is to procreate, but there are many other options that we as a society do not value or even mention. The perception that a woman is not really a woman and that her worth is derived from having children does a great disservice to young women who are struggling to find and build self-esteem. This can go even further for poor women who may find the only time they qualify for subsidized programs is when they’re pregnant or have children.
The glorification of parenthood is rampant in the media, from advertisements and television shows which portray happy, loving families, well-behaved children in neat and tidy homes (while failing to show the not-so-rosy side of family life), to our media’s obsession with celebrity breeding and pregnancy “bump watches” to endless coverage of a celebrity family’s every move and loving moment with their child(ren). Maushart discusses the media’s obsession with celebrity moms and its unrealistic portrayal of motherhood:

In traversing the distance between June Cleaver and Murphy Brown, we’ve come a long way, baby, without making any appreciable progress at all. Today’s media has shifted to the celebrity Supermom, She-who-has-it-all. The headlines tell us ‘Celebrities’ Lives Change Completely After they Give Birth’. Kathleen Turner volunteers for library duty at her child’s school. Meg Ryan takes her kids along on shoots. Julie Walters’s newly-delivered daughter smelled so ‘divine’ that she ‘wanted to lick her all over’. With such tales of metamorphosis to sustain us, it’s no wonder we’re starving to death. Such images are the maternal equivalents to Playboy bunnies, nicely proportioned lives with soft curves in all the right places. Trouble is, they bear about as much relation to reality as backlit, airbrushed cleavage does to a set of lactating glands with cracked nipples.”

(9)

Advertisers tailor their marketing to families with children, even when the advertised product has no particular relevance to “family” life, as pointed out by respondent Claire T., 32:

...advertising seems to be needlessly oriented toward moms. Like one time I saw an ad for Suave shampoo. And the message was something along the lines of, ‘perfect for busy moms’ and I thought, ‘...this is a shampoo.’ I can understand marketing diapers or baby food to ‘busy moms’ but when they advertise SHAMPOO as being ‘perfect for busy moms’ I find it off-putting. The end result is that I draw the conclusion that this shampoo is NOT perfect for ME, and I choose another product. It would be nice if advertisers didn’t make the assumption that all or most women are moms, because so many every day products seem to be marketed only to moms.
With or without dominant pronatalist messages glorifying parenthood, most people are well aware of the positive and rewarding parts of mothering — the love between a mother and child, the reward of guiding and shaping a developing person, the pride in (hopefully) watching the child blossom into a productive citizen, the possibility of future grandchildren. What is missing from our understanding of motherhood is “the extent to which it is a painful relationship and an exhausting, often thankless, occupation” (Knowles) and the tremendous sacrifice and losses incurred in the selection of the parenthood lifestyle. This fact is not lost on the childfree respondents to my survey. Respondent, Helen Q. points out, “Advertisements use kids a lot. A visitor from Mars viewing them could conclude that everyone lived in a happy Kodak family with two parents and two kids. The bad parts of being a parent are not mentioned though the evidence (screaming kids, smell, mess) is everywhere.” Respondent Phoea G. comments:

Movies and t.v. shows make having children out to be easy (for the most part). Children are generally well behaved and you can easily reason with them. Even when they make a mistake, there is a loving moment where the parent explains what the kid did wrong, and everyone understands and hugs and that’s the end. That’s not even moderately realistic. Having children is a lot of hard work, but the movies don’t show you that...the women lying to each other about what motherhood is like and pretending it’s so glorious...just look at the number of kids on (prescription) drugs to control their behavior with ADD...and whatever else. The movies and the other women don’t tell you THAT — that you could get stuck with a kid with some undesirable disorder.

Theresa K., 33, comments

The message all around us is BREED. Babies are fun and cute and they will all cure cancer...[these messages] are complete claptrap...The reality is dirty, grubby, expensive, tiring, screaming...they don’t show that it in all its grittiness. ‘Cute’ baby faces covered in puke and screaming do not adorn billboards.
Sharla W., 28 agrees:

The media promotes to people only one image of ‘family’ – an idyllic image of smiling parents with attractive, healthy, laughing children who all get along and share in life’s tenderest moments. People are spoon-fed this image and want its perfection; they are only shown, however, the perceived ‘best possible moments’ of parenthood. The media certainly doesn’t show the children’s inevitable bad behavior, boredom, fighting with parents, constant craving for attention, demand for toys, yelling and destruction of property; nor the parents’ exhaustion, financial sacrifices, loss of freedom, and meeting constant demands – certainly a misleading picture if ever there was one.

Peggy N. explains, “I think the only commercial that came close to telling the truth about ‘real’ motherhood was the Calgon commercial where the house is in chaos and the mother screams, ‘Calgon! Take me away!’”

In addition to portraying parenthood in its best light, the media also portrays motherhood as bringing out the best in women and making them softer. Daniluk cites the examples of television shows Murphy Brown and Grace Under Fire. However, when they do not become mothers, they are often portrayed as embittered and angry. These women pose a threat to home and family (as in the case of Glenn Close’s character in Fatal Attraction). These portrayals of the childless woman “represent the most negative version and feared outcome of a stereotype of the childless woman: a socially isolated, career-driven woman consumed by fatal jealousy and envy of motherhood and the nuclear family. Portrayals such as these imply a subtle (and occasionally obvious) belief that women who are not mothers must have fewer and/or poorer relationships, or at least value relationships less.” (Ireland, p. 8). The implicit message is that, even more than marriage, motherhood is essential to fulfilled womanhood.

Author Susan Maushart, herself a mother, explains in The Mask of Motherhood: How Becoming a Mother Changes Everything and why we Pretend it Doesn’t how the
glorification of motherhood extends to the unattainable “Supermom” or “have-it-all”

ideal which she asserts amounts to “doing it all” – and ‘doing it all’ means doing none of

it particularly well.”  She also describes the silence women keep about the non-rosy

realities of motherhood as:

...an assemblage of fronts – mostly brave, serene and all-knowing – that

we use to disguise the chaos and complexity of our lived experience...the

mask of motherhood is what mutes our rage into murmurs and softens our

sorrow into resignation...the mask keeps us quiet about what we know, to

the point that we forget that we know anything at all...or anything worth

telling. (p. 5).

Respondent Phoea G., 34, notices that mothers who are open about the
difficulties of mothering will back away from their stance when their audience perceives
their statements as being anti-motherhood:

Women...lie to each other about [family life]. I might be sitting in a room
full of women bitching about motherhood and if I say, ‘Wow, makes me
glad I don’t have kids’, they quickly switch gears and start lying to me
about how it’s the most wonderful thing in the world and how much joy
having kids will bring me and how my life is incomplete without children.
Wait, this from the same women who were just bitching about
motherhood? On the other hand, I love my husband and my pets, and you
will rarely hear me bitch about either. I don’t have much to complain
about because I’m happy with my home life and family.

Mel H., 42, reports similar experiences:

It’s funny. Parents bitch constantly about their kids and I’ll say ‘maybe
you shouldn’t have had kids’ and they look aghast and back-peddle ‘oh,
no I LOVE my children. It’s just that we’re having a hard
day/week/month.’ But once the kids are grown and out of the house,
suddenly they come clean: ‘I would never have had them if I’d known...’
‘I wish I never made that mistake.’ ‘I love her but I wish I could go back
in time.’ But they only make these statements once they are ‘free’ of the
children. It’s like they are afraid to admit the truth while the child is at
home and really, who can blame them? It’s not like you can give them
back...But yes, once the kids are gone, they all say ‘I can’t believe how
nice it is to have time to myself” and ‘I understand now why you didn’t
want to give this up.’ But only once the kids are out of the house. I’ve
NEVER had any of them come up and say, ‘you know, I'd do it all again.’
NEVER.

Price sees the silence women keep about the “much bleaker” side of motherhood as stemming from a rosy “male mythology” of motherhood which mothers know is wrong, but who tend to keep silent. To “speak against the myths [of motherhood] risks the individual woman being branded a bad mother.” (p.125) Perhaps this fear of being a bad mother is what keeps women silent about the harsher realities of motherhood, or results in them backing away from their critical statements of motherhood when they do take the opportunity to be open about the downside of parenting.

**Religious Imperatives to Mother**

Motherhood and womanhood have been intertwined since the Garden of Eden and most traditional religions throughout the world still reinforce this link (Daniluk, 1999). Judeo-Christian religious constructions of woman as mother place an emphasis on bearing children (and the associated pain) as God’s curse on Eve for her sins. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is held up as the perfect mother and woman — obedient, passive and open to God’s will (Gillespie, 2000). Dominant religious groups in North America support the directive of “be fruitful and multiply” and all define parenthood a religious responsibility (Veevers). The Catholic Church continues to sanction only marriages in which the couple agrees to reproduce while the traditional Jewish faith continues to define childbearing as a woman’s highest achievement (Daniluk, 1999; Gillespie, 2000). Some Eastern religions encourage polygamy in order that their wives may bear more sons and a woman who is infertile is considered useless (Daniluk, 1999). American fundamentalist religions and conservative political groups continue to exert pressure to
restrict women’s reproductive rights (Daniluk, 1999; Gillespie, 2000). Emphasizing “family values”, these groups reinforce the motherhood ideology. Religious beliefs contribute to the many ways in which women are defined by a “destiny” of motherhood, and thus access to contraception and abortion is institutionally controlled (Earle and Letherby).

Psychological Imperatives to Mother

Pronatalism has also found a voice in traditional psychological theory. Influential theorists such as Freud, Erikson and Benedek promote motherhood as essential for a woman’s healthy psychological development and “these theories persist despite criticism for their phallocentric and sexist assumptions and their lack of empirical validity” (Daniluk, 1999). Most theories reinforce women’s natural inclination toward motherhood and caretaking and “maternal ambivalence is seen in some ways as pathological, as a woman’s denial of her ‘natural’ impulses and inability to come to terms with her ‘real purpose’ (Ireland). Classical psychoanalytic theory has depicted childless women as deficient and unable to fulfill their feminine role. According to Freud, a girl’s desire for bear a child stemmed from penis envy with the child being a substitute for the missing penis. Adult women who did not seek to become mothers, were suffering from unresolved penis envy and a masculinity complex. Ireland notes that “while fatherhood and male reproductive functioning has never been the centerpiece of adult male development theory, female reproductive capacity and maternity have been central and definitive for normal female development.” (p.7)
Medical Imperatives to Mother

As far back as 1916, scholar Leta Hollingworth identified pronatalism as being enforced by ‘social guardians’ – highly influential and powerful members of society, including doctors. The medical field continues to be a key player in pervasive pronatalist influence, interpreting a woman’s failure to become a mother as a physical or psychological illness. Infertility “is dominated by medical discourses associated with abnormality, treatment and cure. Once diagnosed, the usual course of action is medicalisation and treatment and the hope of bringing about a pregnancy and birth of a child.” (Gillespie, 2000). The medical field continues to encourage “women to relinquish their bodies to years of medical tests and experimentation, pushing the age limits on the ability to bear children and making it increasingly difficult for some women to have closure on this aspect of their lives.” (Daniluk, 1999).

While medicine focuses its resources and technologies on fertility treatments such as in vitro fertilization and embryo implants, funding for the development of safe and effective methods of birth control has decreased while the struggle over laws protecting women’s right to abortion has been ongoing (Morell, 1994). Tyler May wonders why so much scientific attention is paid to fertility technology when there are many more pressing medical and social issues at hand.

It is well worth asking why so much scientific expertise and so many medical resources have been devoted to costly, risky, and painful procedures that may enable the infertile to procreate, at a time when so many other health problems need attention, such as the scandalously high infant mortality rate in this country. Many of the children who have already been born need better health care, and we certainly do not need more children. Children rarely make economic contributions to their families; as everyone knows, they are a significant economic drain. And the nation surely does not need more children to consume resources, strain the school system, and pollute the environment. So why has so much
energy been devoted to enabling more people to have more children – and why these self-defined ‘childfree’ Americans have to defend their position against the still-powerful pronatalist norm. (p. 11)

Medical pronatalism creates roadblocks for childfree women who wish to exert control over their reproductive choices. One of the medical hurdles childfree women come up against is the refusal by doctors to perform sterilization procedures. Annily Campbell (2003) conducted a study on 23 childfree women who chose to become sterilized. Their subjects described encounters with (mostly male) doctors in which they were put in the position of explaining their desire to become fertilized and convincing the doctors that their decision was well thought out and not whimsical and ‘spur of the moment’. Many reported “being laughed out of the surgery”, meaning the doctor would not take them seriously and dismissed them as foolhardy. Tenacious subjects reported having to persist through multiple refusals by doctors before being approved for the surgery.

Understandably, women put in the position of having to seek permission to exert control over their reproductive choices experience a multitude of negative feelings including the feeling of being infantilized, feeling humiliated, angry, frustrated and enraged. A respondent to my survey, Brigette, 30, expresses anger at the fact that “no doctor will agree to ‘fix’ me as I have not popped out anything, although this country readily taxes [me] to feed an ever increasing number of welfare mothers every year”. Anne H., 31, sees it as discrimination when “[childfree women] try to get sterilized and are denied authority over their own bodies. While choosing to have children is instantly accepted, choosing not to have children defies belief.”
Social Imperatives to Mother: Pro-Motherhood

In addition to the glorification of motherhood, other social imperatives to mother exert powerful pronatalist influence on girls and women pushing them toward motherhood.

Powerful social messages convey assumptions that all women should and will reproduce. From the time a female baby is born, powerful sex role socialization conditions her to develop expectations of what women can and cannot do, should and should not do, and the most powerful socialized expectation of girls is that they eventually become mothers. Traditionally, “the personality of a young girl has been shaped so that she is more likely to tend to be dependent, passive and conforming, making it more difficult for her to free herself from the demands of a pronatalist social context.” (Russo, 1976). Role models in school, in books and the media tend to reinforce motherhood while the growing trend toward single and/or childfree lifestyle is unmentioned (Russo, 1976; Peck). As previously mentioned, celebrity mothers and their babies are all over the news, their roles as mother glamorized and glorified, but completely absent in the coverage of celebrity lifestyles is even the mention of the choice by many celebrities to live happy and fulfilling childfree lives (Oprah Winfrey, among many others). Representations of childfree women and the childfree lifestyle are absent from social representations of womanhood “...There are few role models of women leading satisfying and fulfilling lives outside the role of mother, and there are few stories of the life paths of childfree women.” (Danikuk, 1999)

Pronatalist conditioning exists in the encouragement of little girls to play with dolls at the limitation of other toys as well as the repeated “when you have children some
day”, which reinforces the inevitability of motherhood (Peck). During their growth and development, girls and women are persistently delivered the message that motherhood is their destiny. Even feminism, which has made great strides in the past forty years to broaden opportunities for women, has been oddly silent about childlessness as a viable possibility for women (Morell, 1994). A woman can opt out of higher education or a career, but what has not been encouraged is for women to opt out of motherhood.

Motherhood must be one of her roles. Daniluk (1999) notes:

In continuing to promote motherhood as women’s destiny and primary justification in life, the social construction of mothering within patriarchal societies necessarily informs and shapes the experiences not only of women who mother, but also of women who do not. In the absence of societal reinforcement of women’s many other life paths and creative labors, pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood remain an intrinsic part of all women’s experiences, regardless of whether or not we decide to give birth to children. The ‘women-as-mother’ assumption continues to persist, despite substantial gains made by the feminist movement.

Social imperatives celebrate motherhood and assess non-motherhood as a sorry state. Pregnant women are showered with praise and compliments, thrown parties and showered with gifts to celebrate what is deemed an esteemed accomplishment, yet equivalent praise and celebration are rarely heaped upon women who pursue alternative paths and achieve other fulfilling accomplishments. The social reinforcement shapes women’s ideas of what is good and praiseworthy about being a woman, and according to our culture, this is motherhood.

Social imperatives to mother are so powerful and far-reaching, that all women are assumed to either be mothers or be on the road to motherhood. Childfree women constantly come up against these assumptions.
Caroline N., 32, comments:

When I remodeled my kitchen, I was trying to decide if I wanted a plain or fancy edge on the granite countertops, and the sales person advised me that at my age, I should get the plain edge because it’s not as painful as the fancy edge when kids bump their heads. I’m still annoyed by this stranger’s assumption that I was or was going to be a mother. If I could have gotten that particular stone somewhere else, I would have!

Denise D., 43 bristles at the notion that she should have children because she can:

...someone told me I was ‘going against God and nature by not having kids’. This is how I tried to explain it to him. Just because I have the parts, doesn’t mean I am meant to reproduce. It’s kind of like saying, ‘Because you have two hands, you must be a plumber.’ Well, no, because to become a plumber, you must first have the desire to do it, and you must have some bit of innate skill for it, and are going to have to put a great deal of money into it in order to learn to do a proper job of it. But no one would ever argue, ‘Well, you have two hands, so you must become a plumber.’ So why the attitude that because you have the reproductive organs, you must reproduce? I believe you must also have the desire, an innate skill at it, and the financial means to do a proper job.

Even mothers are not exempt from feeling the pressure of social pronatalism. Mothers are pressured to have more than one child due to the pervasive myth that an “only child” is likely to be spoiled, maladjusted or otherwise disadvantaged. This myth persists “despite evidence that such children are more likely to possess many valued qualities, including independence, high self-esteem, social acceptance and sociability.” (Russo, 1976; Clausen & Clausen, Terhune).

**Social Imperatives to Mother: Anti-Childfreedom**

The successful operation of pro-motherhood imperatives can only succeed in the existence of equally powerful imperatives condemning the childfree lifestyle. These anti-childfree imperatives can be summarized into two categories – negative attitudes and opinions of the childfree lifestyle and childfree individuals, and the marginalization of the childfree and childfree lifestyle.
The childfree lifestyle is not conceptualized as a viable or appealing choice and is perceived as an empty, meaningless lifestyle. Childfree individuals are ascribed a number of negative characteristics, the most common being the perception that they are selfish, child-hating, cold, uncaring, lonely, bitter, hateful, unfulfilled/deficient, strange/deviant and immature. In Wonder Women: The Myth of Having it All, author Virginia Hauassegger describes the stereotype of the childfree woman:

While the non-mother remains invisible to the healthy ebb and flow of public discourse, she nevertheless remains highly visible in the negative. When the glare of public spotlight is shone on her, what is projected is not an image of ‘woman’ as a whole, but rather woman with a hole. The stereotype of the childless woman has become so highly pathologised it is a wonder the poor dear isn’t made to wear a womb bandage and perhaps a neck brace to stiffen her spine. One the one hand, the childless woman suspected of being childless by choice, is typecast as the selfish, materialistic, career hungry, predatory deviant. On the other, if she is perceived to be involuntarily childless, she is seen as one to be pitied – a half-woman who is grieving, unfulfilled and barren. Either way, the pathologisation of non-mothers keeps them separate and out of the way. As such, society can avoid dealing with the messy ‘complication’ non-mothers present to our old-fashioned notion of what a woman should be. (p. 280)

LaMastro conducted a study to determine the perceptions of voluntarily childfree married couples compared to parent couples and concluded that childfree-by-choice couples were perceived more negatively and were ascribed poorer marital status and as less caring, sensitive and kind than parents. Similary, Earle and Letherby studied women without children and found that childfree-by-choice women were viewed as “selfish and deviant and portrayed in ways that emphasize this: as aberrant, immature, and unfeminine”. Lampmann and Dowling-Guyer conducted a similar study and concluded that childfree couples were rated less favorably than parents on characteristics such as drive, caring and emotional health. The childfree were perceived as lazy, insensitive,
lonely and unhappy. Jamison, Franzini and Kaplan, found that a childfree, sterilized wife was rated as less sensitive and loving, less typical an American woman, more likely to be active in women’s liberation and less happy, less well-adjusted, less likely to get along with her parents and less likely to be happy and satisfied at age 65 when compared to otherwise identically-described mother of two. Park, who interviewed 24 voluntarily childfree women and men reported that the vast majority of her participants experienced being seen as selfish, cold, materialistic, egotistic, peculiar and abnormal.

My survey results supported these findings with most of my respondents reporting having experienced being perceived negatively by others for being childfree. Close to half of them mentioned that “selfish” was a common misconception about them and a number of my respondents found this attribute particularly distressing. Some found it difficult to understand why the childfree lifestyle is considered selfish. Clio H., 30, notes: “I don’t understand [it] at all, as our income and free time allow us to do many things for our communities that people with children don’t have the time or resources to do.” Rebecca E. is equally perplexed. “I have never been able to understand how choosing not to have a child is selfish. I am not keeping something from someone else.” Sharla W., 28, sees the parallel attribution of selflessness to parents as misplaced:

A dominant message is that somehow parents are less (or not) selfish than those who have not had children. By sacrificing personal freedoms, spare time, and interests for the sake of having a child, parents feel as though they become less selfish than people who refrain from having children and maintain these things. What parents don’t realize is that they have made a conscious decision to give up these things in exchange for the perceived benefits of having a child. They have purposely exchanged one thing for another. Meeting a child’s needs by sacrificing aspects of your own life does not somehow make you less selfish than other people – it is your responsibility as a caregiver to meet those needs, and you are fulfilling needs that were created by your own choice...it is simply responsibility for your own actions. Childfree people are not selfish for having these
personal freedoms, spare time, and interests given up by parents; they have simply made a different conscious decision to not create a need that they must fulfill.

Other respondents replied angrily about the selfish label and feel it more aptly belongs to parents. Amy B., 40 notes that “…I see most families/parents acting with the most bloated sense of entitlement. Time is given to workers for children’s activities, sicknesses, vacations. However, if my dog is suddenly ill, the time I take is my own without pay.” Tina D., 33, comments, “Women who choose not to have children are deemed selfish, although one could argue that it is a selfish act to produce children as a means of insurance of having someone return love out of obligation.” Caroline N., 32 feels that true parental selflessness is accomplished through adoption instead of through the expensive fertility treatments pursued by many couples today:

I think the biggest misconception about the childfree is that we’re selfish, but… if parenthood [was] really just about caring for another person, more people would adopt versus spending tens of thousands of dollars on fertility treatments in hopes of conceiving a little clone. Many childfree people give their time and money to causes and charities. Many of us are more ecologically minded than parents, which is really a paradox since parents are the ones whose children will inherit an ailing planet.

Jasmin S., 42 also balks at being labeled as selfish when the selfish aspects of parenting go unacknowledged:

Because we choose to live the life that makes us the happiest we are selfish, yet nobody ever questions the selfishness involved in having kids – wanting someone who adores you, who will take care of you in old age, who will carry on your name, who you can mold into a little ‘Mini-Me’ to satisfy narcissistic desires.

Another persistent negative misconception about the childfree, and particularly about childfree women, is that their lives are empty, deficient and
unfulfilled. Because most adults’ lives revolve so completely around childrearing, they find it difficult to comprehend that a childfree adult life could be anything except empty and lacking. Sharla W. 28:

Yet another misconception is that childfree people lead empty, sad, lonely lives; we are missing out on children, and every adult’s life should revolve around children. Because parents’ lives are so wrapped up in their children (since children require constant time and attention), they feel as though a person whose life is not run by children would just have a big empty space inside it. Of course, what they do not realize is that that space is filled up with things they have lost; friendships, hobbies, education, personal time, and career. Our lives are not empty; they are filled with the very same things parents gave up before their lives became child-centered.

Morell (1994) finds it interesting that the public discourse about mothering focus on the self-doubts, regrets and loss of the woman who does not have children, yet “mother’s rumblings are a very small part...The implicit suggestion is that non-mothers think (regretfully) about not having children but mothers don’t consider possible losses incurred by their choices. Thus, motherhood is reinforced.” (p.143). Likewise, she points out that while selfishness, materialism and mass-consumption are readily ascribed to the childfree, “there is rarely a focus on the selfishness, consumption and materialism of parents. Parenthood is seen as the way to demonstrate a selfless character, and yet many childfree individuals report they are able to reach out to others in ways that parents might find difficult given their family responsibilities.” (p. 78).

Several of my respondents complained about the fact that they are frequently called on to account for their choice to be childfree, yet nobody ever questions a parent about their choice to have children. Some are distressed by the frequency with which they are pitied and patronized and treated as thought they do not know their own minds.
Anne H., 31, complains:

I think the reaction I dislike the most is when people patronize me. I get this reaction from a lot of casual acquaintances. It’s very frustrating to have someone assure you [that] you don’t know your own mind, or foist their pity on you for a choice you’re actually happy about. I’ve actually had people pat my hand and tell me, ‘don’t worry, your time will come’ despite any protest I make that I’m really very content and very serious in not wanting children.

Sara D., 38, voices a similar complaint:

At first we got the ‘oh, don’t be silly, you’ll change your mind’ reaction, the knowing looks among each other like we were dummies who would wake up any day now and begin procreating. I’ve gotten very few outright rude comments, although I suspect now some people at work avoid the topic with me as it makes THEM uncomfortable to think about a smart, well-educated woman not wanting babies.

Another common misconception about the childfree is that they are child haters.

While certainly a percentage of childfree individuals do not like children, most like them, but are simply not interested in the parenthood lifestyle, do not have a desire to be a parent, would rather engage in other pursuits, or simply do not deem the rewards to be worth the sacrifices. Many are devoted aunts and uncles, teachers and volunteers who are actively involved in children’s lives. Colleen G., 36, comments “I work with very young children every day, and I LOVE my job and I love children. We love our nieces and nephews. But whenever we are with them, and when I am at work, we are always extremely happy that we get to go back to our life with no kids [afterwards].” Morell (1994) found that three-quarters of her subjects either worked with children, did work that benefited children or spoke of friendships or special relationships with children.

“Such relationships with children allow childless women to comfortably join in nurturing activities without becoming mothers, at a level of involvement that suits them.” (p. 120)
In addition to the negative misconceptions already mentioned, other negative characteristics that are frequently ascribed to the childfree are that they are hedonists, had an unhappy childhood, have a life filled with regret, are psychologically maladjusted, career hungry, unable to sustain or develop personal relationships, have unhappy marriages, are immoral, irresponsible, loose/promiscuous, unfeminine, vain, misguided/foolish, “bad parent material” and shallow (Cain, Morell, Daniluk, Park, Veevers, Haussegger, Ireland).

Childfree individuals and the childfree lifestyle are marginalized in every corner of society. As previously discussed, the childfree are rarely able to find role models in the media and when models are present, they are depicted negatively. Childfreedom is never conceptualized as a viable or appealing life choice, if even mentioned at all. With the exception of the internet where childfree discussion boards, weblogs and other supportive communities have begun to flourish, the childfree are virtually ignored in society. Businesses go to far lengths to create a “family-friendly” environment, but the needs of those who prefer an adult environment are often ignored. Even definitions of life stages such as midlife revolve around parenting (“the empty nest”). In such definitions, non-mothers are erased. “The experiences of non-mothering women have yet to be named. Our lives remain untheorized.” (Morell, 1994, p. xv)

**Societal Rewards for Mothering**

While the glorification of motherhood and the social, religious, psychological and medical imperatives to mother would most certainly be enough to ensure the ongoing success of the motherhood mandate, parenthood is further reinforced through additional societal rewards and incentives for those who reproduce.
Federal and local tax laws provide tax benefits and rebates to those who have children, while discriminating against those who do not. In 1999, for example, a childless couple earning $70,000 per year, paid $10,455 in taxes, whereas a couple with two children paid $7,915, a difference of $2,540 (Cain). Cain reported that she spoke with a tax agent who told her, “Social economics dictates everything the government is going to allow you to take as a credit on your income taxes. What the government likes you to do, you get a credit for – such as buying a house or having children; what they don’t want you to do – such as gambling – they don’t allow.” (p. 157).

Parents with children have additional tax-related benefits. Since most local property taxes are allotted to the funding of public schools, parents get fuller value for their property tax dollars. Despite not using the public school systems in their localities, childfree and childless households are expected to shoulder the same (or sometimes higher) property tax burdens as households with children.

Tax discrimination was one of societal rewards for parenting that my childfree respondents felt most upset about. Caroline N., 32, comments:

When the Town Council votes to raise property taxes, it’s almost always to raise money for the schools. Parents receive easy income tax deductions despite the fact that a lot of tax revenue goes toward programs and services that the childfree don’t need or use. I resent that my husband and I are financially penalized by the federal government for not having children and forced by our local government to pay ridiculous taxes to support a school system that we’re never going to use.

Carol H., 37:

I do not believe a person without children should pay as much property tax (if the area’s taxes are mostly given to the schools) as parents. I don’t mind paying reasonable taxes as it does benefit society as a whole, but I object to the fact that I am paying MORE than most parents whose kids use the system. I also feel it is inherently unfair that parents get large federal tax breaks because they reproduced. We have a very, very
large population. Do we really need to reward people for having children?

Lynn D., 45, also questions the reasoning behind rewarding reproduction:

Considering the state of the environment, the decline in farming, the poor economy and the inflated costs of everything, why are we still giving incentives for having children? Haven’t we evolved past that in government and society? My husband’s friend has two children and has mortgaged his home 4 times trying to give them everything. He has high blood pressure and works three jobs but it’s never enough. His family, his church – his environment have him completely indoctrinated that this is what a ‘good’ man does. He gets married and has children – even if he can’t afford them. If we altered our perception of normal and took the stress off that everyone has to own a house, a car and 2.5 children, perhaps we’d all be happier.

In addition to tax breaks and tax rewards, other forms of economic discrimination persist in favor of those who wish to have children. Women who opt to have children are able to utilize their medical insurance for medical care related to pregnancy and childbirth, however as of 1999, less than two-fifths of insurance companies provided coverage for abortion services. Additionally, with the exception of cases of rape, incest or where the mother’s life is in danger, abortion is not among the medical procedures covered by Medicare, the federal-state program that provides health care to many poor women.

The workplace is another area where parents receive special treatment and where the childfree and childless often feel they are subject to discrimination. Some companies offer adoption assistance, paying employees thousands of dollars to help them adopt a child, and yet the childfree and childless employees receive no equivalent compensation.

Parents are frequently accommodated when needing to rearrange their schedules, leave early, take time off and are given preferential treatment over the childless and
childfree in the selection of vacation time. Childfree individuals are expected to “pick up the slack” for absent parents and are not granted similar flexibility, consideration and accommodations. As Lela B., 25, comments:

As far as discrimination is concerned, I do see it in the workplace. This applies particularly to parents leaving early or not coming in because of their children and the childfree being left holding the bag. It seems to be a common misconception that if you don’t have kids, you must not have a life outside of work or any valid reasons to take time off.

Mel H., 42, feels the same, “Childfree misconceptions that drive me crazy include: You can do all the extra work or work overtime because since you don’t have kids, you don’t have anything really IMPORTANT that you are doing with your time anyway…”

Several of my respondents commented on the preferential treatment families get across the board; from restaurants and other places that go out of their way to be “family-friendly” often at the expense of an enjoyable atmosphere for other patrons, to special “stork parking” for pregnant women and women with small children. Mel H. comments,

There are children’s menus, children’s chair, children run amok with corporate permission even in what should be adult-only venues like museums and formal concerts. After all, ‘they are just children’ and God forbid you comment or complain about a child’s behavior, because everyone will look at you aghast because, after all, they are ‘just children’.

THE EMERGENCE OF CHILDFREEDOM

Prior to the 20th century, the option to forego motherhood was not possible for women and only became possible with the onset of urban industrialization (which created more jobs for women), the advent of birth control (which allowed women to control when they had children) and the suffragette movement promoting women’s rights.

A changing cultural context has slowly emerged during the 20th century and into our present decade in which the choice to forego having children has become a social and
psychological phenomenon (Ireland). The seeds of this phenomenon can be traced to the World War II era when women entered the work force and got a taste for having a valuable role outside of motherhood. While women were pushed after World War II to resume their role as homemakers, women’s experiences from the war inspired the second wave of feminism in the 1960s in which views on race, gender roles and sexuality were forever changed, resulting in an alteration of the usual notions of coming of age. No longer were the ideas of previous generations taken for granted. The 1960s expanded ideas of what was possible and therefore, people were encouraged to think and choose carefully, because choices have consequences.

As women began to think about their roles and the expectations foisted on them over the course of generations of patriarchal oppression, the cultural landscape of the second half of the 20th century permitted them to “sidestep the limited female identity their mothers were less able to overcome” and to reconstruct social perceptions of what it means to be a woman (Ireland). Central to these new personal freedoms was (and still is) abortion rights which allowed women to be sexual without being mothers. Because a woman could now have sexual relations without the risk of pregnancy, sexuality could be separated from motherhood, something that had never previously been conceptualized. This separation is crucial to the emergence of the childfree lifestyle as a viable possibility for women.

As the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s kicked into high gear, suddenly women were encouraged to “have it all” and expand their roles beyond the confines of motherhood and homemaking to a combined role of mother and career woman. Many women embraced this new dual-role. Suddenly women found themselves
working two full-time shifts – full time career woman during the day, and full-time mother and homemaker in the evening and on weekends.

Over the last couple of decades, this dual-role remains common for women (for many, out of economic necessity; for others by preference). However, a number of women are opting out of the “have it all” lifestyle. Having been raised by mothers who “had it all” and having watched their mothers struggle with resulting physical, psychological and spiritual exhaustion from being pulled in multiple directions, many modern women are questioning whether that lifestyle is the ideal it has been promoted to be. As a result, in recent years there has been both a resurgence of women choosing to be stay-at-home mothers and also a steady increase in women who are choosing to remain childfree. In both cases, women have evaluated that while they can “have it all”, and are happy to live in a culture where such a choice is possible, some women are questioning the impact such a lifestyle might have on quality of life. Many modern women are choosing to select one role and forego the other, assessing that their quality of life (and the quality of life for their husbands and children [if they have any]) might be higher by not spreading themselves too thin. In this context we also may interpret the growing popularity of the childfree lifestyle as a response to the expansion of women’s roles over the past century, transitioning from one in which a woman can be a mother only, to one in which a woman can be a mother in conjunction with other things, to the childfree role in which a woman can pursue roles completely outside the realm of motherhood and forego motherhood altogether.
THE TRUTH ABOUT CHILDFREEDOM

This discussion has previously focused on pronatalism and its origins - how it exerts control over women to shape their destiny as mother - through the glorification of motherhood and rewards to parents, the simultaneous discrimination against the childfree and the promotion of negative stereotypes about the childfree and their lifestyle. As discussed, these forces can be distressing and unfair to the childfree and as can be seen by the comments of my respondents, the childfree are often (understandably) upset about them.

Despite the fact the childfree lifestyle is not socially sanctioned, and choosing a childfree life can sometimes feel like an uphill battle, the truth about the childfree lifestyle is far from the pitiful life of lack it is portrayed to be. Childfree women choose their lifestyle for the numerous benefits and advantages which are perceived by the childfree to far outweigh any disadvantages. The childfree women that I interviewed (as well as the childfree participants in the studies of other researchers) revel in their lifestyle and long to dispel the false ideas about life without children. They are eager to relay the truth about what it’s like to have a life free of children in which benefits, experiences and advantages are gained as a result of choosing childfreedom, and all the burdens and sacrifice that are avoided by selecting a life that does not revolve around children and parenting.

From the perspective of the childfree women I interviewed and the studies of other researchers, the childfree life has few disadvantages and many advantages. While the advantages listed are numerous, they can be grouped into seven general categories:
freedom, personal growth, happiness and well-being; financial advantages; career advantages; ease in life/quality of life; and relational advantages.

**Freedom**

One of the most commonly cited reasons for choosing the childfree life and one of the greatest benefits of the childfree lifestyle is freedom. Unlike their childed friends and family, the childfree move freely through the world, setting their own agendas and enjoying spontaneity and flexibility in their daily activities. Their lives are self-determined and are not tethered to the demands of children and the responsibilities of childcare.

Research conducted on the childfree lifestyle and on the comparison of the childfree lifestyle to the parenting lifestyle frequently points to freedom as a great benefit of the childfree lifestyle. Callan interviewed 60 mothers, 36 voluntarily childless wives and 53 infertile women. His findings revealed that while levels of personal well-being for all three groups were similar, childless and childfree wives were more happy than mothers about the amount of flexibility and freedom in their lives; their levels of personal privacy, relaxation and independence. Gillespie (2003) who interviewed 25 childfree subjects found her subjects were pulled toward the perceived freedoms and opportunities associated with the childfree life and reported being very pleased with having greater opportunities and wider choices, enhanced freedom and increased autonomy. Lang, who interviewed 63 childless and childfree women between the ages of 36 to 100, reported that four out of five of her subjects cited freedom as the primary reason for not having children. Mollen, who interviewed nine voluntarily childfree women to “capture the broad range of experiences and reasons for the women’s decision not to have children”,

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found that freedom was one of the primary reasons her subjects reported for being childfree – “freedom to travel and the unimpeded ability to move through the world, freedom in their lifestyle to be unencumbered, freedom to devote ample time to career, freedom to devote more time, energy and emotional resources to their intimate relationships.” Morell (2000), who conducted interviews with 34 married, intentionally childfree women between the ages of 40 and 78 years, and who reviewed research conducted in the 1970s and 1980s, found that childfree women want freedom from responsibilities and worries that motherhood involves and the freedom to use their emotional energy and time to pursue what is meaningful for them, whether that be career, creative endeavors, civic commitments or leisure activities. One participant in her study described this as “the freedom of male experience and possibility” and “having a male kind of time”. (p. 320)

Similarly, in my interviews with childfree women, nearly half of my respondents mentioned freedom as a specific reason for choosing to be childfree, or as a benefit of the lifestyle. Several commented on the importance of freedom in their lives. Caroline N., 32, comments:

I value my freedom. It seems that freedom is one of the major things that parents lack and one of the things they’d most like to have again. By not having children, I’ll hopefully enjoy at least 20 extra years of freedom and the opportunity to evolve as a woman, not just a mother. I can spend (or not spend) my money as I choose. I can be a social butterfly, or I can be a homebody. I can live where I want and move when I want, because I don’t have to worry about school districts or what’s best for the kid. I can take the time to really know and love my husband as a life partner and not a necessary evil. I can travel where I want, read a lot, take risks, indulge my interests, support charitable causes, have a neat and beautiful house; the list goes on and on.
Carol H., 37, appreciates the freedom she and her husband enjoy together, relaxing and having spontaneous fun together:

I remember one Monday morning where a co-worker came up and asked me what I did over the weekend. I just told her “oh, this and that.” She said, “no, really…give some details. I’d love to know.” So I told her: “we slept in on Saturday, then got up and made Belgium waffles, bacon and fresh-squeezed OJ. Then we took a long bike ride in the nearby national park. At the halfway point, we ate at one of our favorite restaurants, then browsed in nearby art galleries. After we biked home, we were tired so we laid out on the deck to listen to some music and read. Then we called up another [childfree] couple and went to dinner at a pricey restaurant. Then my husband and I came home and we lounged in the whirlpool and listened to a symphony. Sunday was similar.” So then I asked the co-worker to please tell me what she did, and this was it: “I would have loved to sleep in, but haven’t been able to do that for years.” The kids got her up no later than 6:30 a.m. They need breakfast right away. Then the driving around starts. They have soccer, track, baseball, dance, singing lessons, etc. This all lasts until about 4:00 p.m. They couldn’t afford to go out to eat for supper, so it’s Kraft Mac and Cheese and chicken fingers. Then she has to get the kids bathed and put to bed. Etc. Etc. Etc. I’m sorry, but I just do not want to live my life that way.

Brown, Lumley, Small and Astbury, who interviewed 880 new mothers to ascertain how happy they were with pregnancy care, prenatal classes and other services, also examined the wide range of changes and experiences related to motherhood. They found that 59% of the women reported not having time to pursue their own interests, 57% did not have an active social life and 55% needed a break from the demands of the child. Having children made it difficult for new mothers to enjoy things they previously took for granted as unremarkable parts of everyday life – for example, having uninterrupted time, space and privacy. Genevie and Margolies, authors of The Motherhood Report: How Women Feel About Being Mothers looked at 1,100 mothers of all ages to separate the myth from the reality regarding the experience of motherhood. They found that about one in four women reported having very positive feelings about motherhood, and about
one in five viewed motherhood in predominantly negative terms. While the majority described the good as outweighing the bad in the final tally, “their positive feelings about motherhood did not negate the tremendous difficulty, pain and heartache of the role”. (xxvi). Mothers were frazzled, frustrated and furious by the day-to-day grind of raising children.

In many ways, having children determines a way of life that not only includes more housework and childcare, but is compromised of, to a large extent, any child-centered activities that fill the day, from school sports and plays to lessons, homework, and driving the children to and fro. Life without children is much more undetermined and left open. How it’s filled is up to the women involved. (p. 210)

**Personal Growth**

Although our pronatalist culture defines a lifestyle without children as one of lack, childfree women define the absence of children as creative “space” (Ireland) and room for personal growth. Childfree women are free to pursue education, creative endeavors, career enhancement opportunities, personal hobbies and interests, community involvement, self-improvement courses, volunteer activities, political activities, alone time for reflection and meditation and other activities to enhance self-growth freely without being hindered by the time and financial constraints of parenthood. Childfree women unlink the necessity of motherhood from a viable female identity. “Because society has long associated the feminine with the maternal, it is sometimes difficult to view other developmental paths as anything other than substitutes for that which is ‘missing’. The redefinition of ‘absence’ as ‘potential space’ permits a nonmaternal interpretation of female identity development in which nonmaternal identities are equivalent alternatives to, and not substitutes for, maternal identities.” (Ireland, p.127)
Poet, Molly Peacock illuminates the redefinition of absence as creative space for personal growth beautifully:

When I said No to having children, I felt as if I went to some viscerally interior place, the place of recognition. I'd always thought that the positive, the embracing, the Yes that is so characteristic of women's assumed responses, would let me affirm who I am. But it was a refusal that led me to understand my own nature. It was the saying no. The saying no seemed to emerge from the ready emptiness that is required for all creativity, not just for the making of art. That No can't be confused with loss, or painful emptiness of not having what you need. Like a well-proportioned, unfurnished room with open windows, the affirming refusal invites life. It's a room, not a womb. Like a womb, it harbors life, but unlike a womb, it leaves room to create the rest of life. (p. 314)

**Happiness and Well-Being**

Although our pronatalist culture promotes the parenthood lifestyle as the “have-it-all” road to ultimate fulfillment and happiness for women, research has concluded that parenthood is not associated with higher levels of well-being, and in fact, the childfree life offers a higher likelihood of happiness and well-being, especially for women.

Evenson and Simon conducted a study in which they analyzed data from the first wave of the National Survey of Families and Households on a national probability sample of 13,017 adults. They found that parenthood is not associated with enhanced emotional well-being and no type of parent reports less depression than non-parents. As a group, parents report higher levels of depression when residing with minor children and report significantly more depression than childless peers. They also found that empty-nest parents do not significantly differ from persons who never had children, suggesting that even parents whose children have left the home are not at an emotional advantage over the childfree. Langlois (2004), who studied the impact of having offspring in the household during the retirement process, concluded that childless retirees had higher life
satisfaction than those with children (regardless of whether they resided in the home).
Keith (1983), who interviewed 103 childless persons and 438 parents, aged 72 years or
older, concluded that children did not assure older parents less loneliness, more positive
appraisals of life or greater acceptance of death and the presence or absence of children
did not seem to appreciably alter the lives of the very aged.

Glenn, Norval and Weaver conducted a study in which they reviewed data from
the General Social Surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center during
1972 – 1975 to examine psychological well-being and global happiness as it relates to
family situation. They concluded that the effects of having children have a negative
impact on psychological well-being and that “many people in the United States could
augment their happiness (at last during young adulthood and into middle age) as well as
help overpopulation, by remaining childless.”

McLanahan and Adams, who conducted a review of research done over the past
few decades on the impact of children on the psychological well-being of adults, found
that parenthood may have negative consequences for the psychological well-being of
adults. The presence of children is found to be associated with lower levels of happiness
and satisfaction and with higher levels of psychological distress for both women and men
(with the negative impact of children being more pronounced for women). The
differences between parents and nonparents are small, but have been growing. These
researchers attribute these differences “economic and time constraints, which in turn arise
from general social trends such as the increase in women’s labor force participation and
the increase in marital disruption and single parenthood.” (p. 237)
Brown and Lumley, who interviewed 880 new mothers, found that more than 25% of their respondents reported lack of satisfaction with several areas of their lives. 44% said they felt “run down”, 39% found that the trouble involved in arranging babysitters took away the pleasure of going out; 28% reported they had not enjoyed sex since the baby was born and 26% reported they did not like their lives.

Gove and Geerken, whose study examined the effect of children and employment on the mental health of married men and women by examining measures of psychiatric symptoms, concluded that in Western cultures, married women tend to be in poorer mental health than married men and attribute this to demands found in the home associated with the incessant demands of children.

A respondent to my survey, Jasmin S., 42 explains her view of the happiness and the childfree life:

As for how I came to consciously make the choice [to be childfree]...I think I just looked around me and never saw any parents who were happier than me and so I asked myself why anyone would want to take on all that extra burden and responsibility if they could live a happy life without it? In fact, it seemed to me that people with kids were usually less happy than me – tired, stressed and broke – most of the time struggling to keep it all together.

Mel H., 42, has a similar assessment:

I know of no one with children who seems to be a very happy person, individually. I know of families where the family seems somewhat happy, but the individual parents are always complaining about the kids and how much they cost and how they keep them awake and how they have no time to spend doing what they want because of the kids, and on and on and on... My childfree friends are happier overall, better handle their finances, and seem more at peace with themselves and the world.

In *Motherhood: What it Does to your Mind*, Price discusses how for many women, motherhood represents a great loss:
For many, the good side of mothering makes up for the losses, at least some of the time, and for mothers who have never had emotional or financial independence, nor gained any sort of self-knowledge prior to the birth, the losses may be insignificant when compared to the gains. However, an increasing number of women have begun to make adult lives for themselves, independent and enjoying it, prior to their first child and for this group motherhood represents a great loss, both of external parameters such as income and adult company, but also of inner space, time to do what you want, and ways of valuing self. One woman described her experience to me, ‘I felt as if I was falling into a hole much like Alice in Wonderland. Nothing made sense any more. I was not the boss, had no control, could make no decisions, and every second seemed full of something or somebody else apart from me. Within two weeks I had lost any sense of who or what I had ever been and I began to feel as if I had died. My tears were a form of grief at losing the me that I was familiar with.” (130-31)

**Financial Advantages**

It goes without saying that the childfree lifestyle offers distinct financial advantages over the lifestyle of parenthood. According to the United States Department of Agriculture’s 2006 Annual Report, “Expenditures on Children by Families”, a child born in 2007 to a two-parent family earning $38,000 - $64,000 a year, living in the northeastern United States and attending a public college, will cost $266,698 to raise. Since most married couples have at least two children, the decision by a couple meeting the demographic categories above to have two children requires a financial commitment of over a half million dollars.

Not surprisingly, the financial benefits of childfreedom were frequently mentioned by the respondents to my survey, and by the participants in the studies of other researchers as a significant benefit to the childfree lifestyle. Not only are childfree individuals and couples able to utilize more of their income for travel, dining out and other enjoyable recreational activities, not having children also results in fewer bills to pay, more available money to invest for retirement or in other savings and investments.
and fewer marital conflicts over money. Additionally, the childfree suffer fewer financial constraints generally and have more financial freedom allowing them to pursue education and other interests and activities that require the expenditure of significant sums of money.

**Career Advantages**

Childfree women have the distinct advantage of being available to invest themselves fully in their careers and education without interruption, thereby increasing their earning capacity and opportunities for upward mobility and advancement. Because they are not pulled in multiple directions like mothers, childfree workers are able to work overtime, evenings and weekends and take on special projects when needed. They are not pulled away from their jobs by pregnancy, maternity leave or competing child care demands.

**Ease in Life**

Choosing the childfree life affords women many advantages, one of the most important being the enjoyment of ease in life. This ease of life is described by the participants in my survey, as well as in studies by other researchers, as a host of life advantages which make life more enjoyable and easy, including: less housework, more solitude and alone time, more flexibility and being able to come and go at will, more personal privacy, more sleep, relaxation and energy and more personal space. Other areas of ease in life include fewer worries, a less harried life (not having to “do it all”), fewer responsibilities, burdens, pressures and demands, less stress, not having to disrupt an already fulfilling and active life, more freedom to escape a bad marriage, ability to enjoy an adult-centered lifestyle and not having to limit activities to those suitable for
children. Childfree respondents also report enjoying being able to live where they want and being able to move easily, having fewer sacrifices, less monotony in life, more of a sense of ownership and control over their lives, a stronger sense of personal identity, greater ability to invest in personal care (food, exercise, appearance) and more peace and quiet. A number commented on enjoying being able to live in a neat and beautiful home free of “kiddie clutter” and childproofing, and appointing their homes with furnishings of their choice.

This ease of life also expresses itself in freedom from dealing with the difficulties in raising children, particularly difficult or handicapped children, the difficulties in raising a child in a world that is growing more dangerous and complex by the day, freedom from having to be a good example to someone or be responsible for another life, not having to live (as one respondent put it) “the life of a hand servant” and generally, freedom from an occupation which is often painful and thankless.

Cain summarizes this ease of life as “the latitude to develop their careers fully; the intimacy they share with their mates; the lack of financial, emotional and time pressures; the freedom from fear of being a bad mother or having a difficult child; the spiritual growth that takes place thanks to the availability of unfettered time; the relief of not having to raise a loved one in a world some view as too violent and too selfish. How ironic that we support the notion that retired people should travel and enjoy themselves, yet we reject the idea of a younger couple doing so.” (p. 141)

Relational Advantages

Because childfree women are free from the time constraints, demands and emotional drain of motherhood, they are able to invest themselves more fully and
intimately in their personal relationships. Childfree women are able to enjoy more active adult social lives than mothers and their social activities are not required to revolve around children. They are able to devote emotional energy and time to their friendships and have the flexibility to be truly available and present for their friends. The childfree are also able to devote themselves more attentively and enthusiastically to their relationships with the children in their lives, for example nieces and nephews, since they do not have to deal with the competing demands of their own children and are not jaded by the 365-days-a-year child-centered life of a parent.

The relational advantages of childfreedom are most pronounced in the area of marital satisfaction. Several studies have concluded that childfree marriages are happier than the marriages of parents. Crohan explored how styles of conflict resolution change for spouses after they become parents using data from the first and third waves of the First Years of Marriage Study conducted at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research. Results showed that spouses who became parents report lower marital happiness and more frequent conflicts after the transition than before having children. White parents also reported higher marital tension.

Feldman studied intentional parents and childfree couples and found that while levels of marital satisfaction were similar, childfree couples have significantly more positive marital interactions for example, “having fun away from home”, “having a stimulating exchange of ideas”, “working together on a project” and “having sexual relations” more often. He found that childfree marriages are more interactive, with more conversations in the areas of “work”, “health”, “feelings”, “cultural” topics, “mutual friends”, “politics” and “sexual relations”. As would be expected, parents talked more
frequently than nonparents about rearing children. Similarly, Somers, who conducted a study comparing childfree and parents, found the childfree groups scored higher on marital satisfaction and showed significantly higher levels of cohesion (working together, discussing and exchanging ideas) than parents. Additionally, the childfree showed higher levels of dyadic satisfaction (measured by the frequency of quarrels, threats of divorce) and scored higher on the life satisfaction scale than parents. Callan, who interviewed 60 mothers, 36 voluntarily childless wives and 53 infertile women noted that the childfree women reported more time with their husbands including higher levels of consensus and more exchanges of ideas.

Twenge, Campbell and Foster, who conducted a meta-analytic review on 97 articles containing 148 data points on parenthood and marital satisfaction, concluded that parents report lower marital satisfaction than non-parents and that there is a significant negative correlation between marital satisfaction and the number of children. The effect of parenthood on marital satisfaction is more negative among high socioeconomic groups, younger birth cohorts and in more recent years. The data suggest that role conflicts and restriction of freedom are responsible for this decrease in marital satisfaction.

Renke, who conducted a study on 4,452 married couples (including childless couples, couples rearing children, and couples with children no longer living at home), found that parenthood detracts from the morale and health of married persons, particularly among younger couples. Childless marriages were found to be happier, even among older couples and while childless marriages appeared to improve with time, the
marriages of parent couples tended to deteriorate. Renne concluded that childless marriages are happier, regardless of the length of marriage or age of the couple.

Cowan and Cowan, authors of _When Partners Become Parents: The Big Life Change for Couples_, describe what happens to parents when they become parents. Upon having a child, the household tasks become more specialized and the division of labor with respect to child care falls more to the mother than the father. Their study, as well as a study by Pleck, indicate that husbands whose wives are employed do little more housework and caring for the children than husbands whose wives do not work outside the home.

The most problematic issue for men and women in the early family years is who cares for the children. Neither the traditional male/female division nor the new egalitarian sharing arrangements stand out as ideal: Modern couples get penalized either way. When one parent brings home the bacon while the other stays home to look after the child, both can feel underappreciated and strapped economically, which burdens the marriage and the children. When both parents work outside the family, they tend to feel better about themselves and about their contributions to the family economy, but parents and children are breathless, often missing the opportunity for intimate moments.” (Cowan and Cowan, p. 203)

In addition to having higher levels of marital satisfaction, childfree marriages tend to be more egalitarian with more freedom to modify conventional sex roles. Vevevers explains that in ordinary families, “the coming of children tends to accentuate biological sex differences and to buttress conventional sex role expectations. The birth of a baby signals the beginning of a traditional division of labor with the woman taking on more of the childbearing chores, regardless of her employment status outside the home.” (p. 104). By comparison, childfree couples maintain roles which are interchangeable and more equal.
Without the constraints of child care, childfree couples are better able to negotiate an equal partnership, especially since both partners are likely to work outside the home and are therefore likely to see themselves as equal contributors to the marriage.

**Disadvantages of the Childfree Life**

While the childfree view the advantages of their lifestyle as far outweighing the disadvantages, no lifestyle is perfect, and the childfree lifestyle certainly has its share of disadvantages. This discussion has already touched on many of them — the social marginalization a childfree woman must endure in a child-centered world, being a member of a virtually invisible and misunderstood minority, being held to account for the decision to be childfree, being subject to a host of negative judgments, attitudes and assumptions, having few visible role models, receiving unfair treatment and discrimination in a society that encourages and rewards parenthood.

There are other disadvantages to the childfree lifestyle. Many childfree individuals face isolation or disjuncture with their families who don’t understand their decision and/or are not supportive of it. Some feel guilty about disappointing their families. Childfree women, especially those living in rural or suburban areas, can find it difficult to maintain meaningful friendships with other women, since most women’s lives revolve around (and are often consumed by) childrearing. Some childfree women worry about regret in later life or worry about elder care if they become infirm in old age, although many of my survey
respondents noted their awareness that having children is no guarantee of being
cared for in old age.

The most common disadvantage listed by the respondents to my survey
was having to endure the negative judgments of others. Interestingly, a
significant number of respondents responded that there are no disadvantages to
the childfree lifestyle at all.

CONCLUSION

The conception of woman as mother continues to endure, despite the
advances gained for women by the feminist movement and the increasing
diversity of options available to them. Ideals of American self-determinism,
while alive and strong in the encouragement of a woman to do anything she
chooses in life, hit a stone wall when motherhood is expected to be among the
things she chooses. The forces of pronatalism in society, in medicine, in
psychological theories about women, in our religions, in the media, in the rewards
and incentives for childbearing and in the minutia of day-to-day interactions
between people, continue to link woman's identity to reproductive function and
define motherhood as woman's destiny and purpose for being, making invisible or
marginalizing those who choose a different path. Despite the transformation of
our culture over recent decades into one of frank openness where everything and
anything is discussed with abandon, silence remains on the downside of being a
mother, the losses incurred in the selection of that lifestyle and the viability and
attractiveness of the alternative childfree lifestyle. Motherhood continues to be
glorified as the sole path to ultimate fulfillment for women, despite the growing numbers of women leading happy and fulfilling lives free its constraints.

For many women, motherhood is an experience whose rewards and advantages are deemed to outweigh the costs and sacrifices involved in being a mother. Similarly, for a growing number of women, the childfree lifestyle is rewarding with its own set of advantages which are deemed to outweigh any costs incurred in selecting this lifestyle. As women continue to make advances and expand avenues of growth, opportunity and freedom, our ideas of womanhood must also expand beyond the current limiting gender constructions which bind women so tightly to reproduction. Only when motherhood becomes an option instead of a mandate, and when a woman’s choice to reproduce is made freely in an environment where alternative paths are equally encouraged and nurtured and where the costs and benefits of each lifestyle path are presented openly, will all women enjoy the full spectrum of womanhood - and more importantly, of personhood.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


