Some Assumed Characteristics of Voluntarily Childfree Women and Men

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Two experiments were conducted to assess students’ perceptions from written descriptions of voluntarily childfree women and men. In Experiment 1, a sterilized, childfree wife was rated as less sensitive and loving, less typical an American woman, more likely to be active in women’s liberation (ps < .01), and as less happy, less well-adjusted, less likely to get along with her parents, and less likely to be happy and satisfied at age 65 (ps < .05), relative to an otherwise identically described mother of two. In Experiment 2, similar differential trait ascriptions appeared for both childfree men and women. In fact, ratings of the childfree man were less favorable than those for the childfree woman, suggesting possible greater bias against childfree men than women.

Pronatalism, a value which encourages reproduction and exalts the role of parenthood, has traditionally been a prevailing influence on newly married couples in American society. Advocates of a childfree lifestyle in the popular literature are suggesting that couples without children are at least as satisfied with their lives and marriages as similar couples who are parents, and that childless couples suffer from negative stereotyping (cf. Greene, 1963; Peck, 1971; Peck & Senderowitz, 1974; Tavris & Jayaratne, 1976).

The professional literature also tends to support the position that the childfree are generally perceived as less happy, more selfish, and more poorly adjusted than those who are parents (e.g., Pohlman,

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1970). Veevers (1973) notes the dearth of data supportive of this negative stereotype:

No empirical work has been done concerning the existence of a stereotype of childless couples. However, if, as many authors predict, such a stereotype does exist, it may be a significant factor in the motivation of people to have children. If the childless are believed to be unhappy, selfish, lonely, immature and emotionally unstable, then perhaps some people have children in order to avoid such negative traits and/or negative images. (p. 204)

EXPERIMENT 1

The purpose of Experiment 1 was to examine attitudes toward a hypothetical childfree woman who had chosen to be sterilized. Subjects judged descriptions of a woman who had either given birth or not given birth prior to choosing sterilization. Sterilization was included because it denotes a behavioral commitment to remaining childfree. Ratings were made on 15 attitude and personality variables.

Method

Subjects. The subjects were 156 undergraduates attending San Diego State University, and 29 high school and 32 adult school students in San Diego.

Materials. Each subject was given a typed description of a hypothetical woman, who is now sterilized, and her husband. Half the descriptions depicted the woman as childfree, while the other half described her as having two children. The two descriptions were identical in every detail save the number of their children. The description of the childless couple, their values, and lifestyle is reproduced here:

My name is Kathy, and I am 28 years old. My husband Jim and I have been married for 8 years now. We are both college grads—we met in an education class, as a matter of fact. Jim is teaching history at a high school now, and I am trying to find a full-time teaching job at an elementary school. In the meantime, I'm substitute teaching part-time.

Jim and I don't have any children. We decided quite a few years ago that we didn't want any.
We are living in an older home which we bought 2 years ago and are fixing up. Many of our weekends are spent painting some section of the house or landscaping the big back yard. We also like to go camping in the mountains near San Diego, and many a weekend will find us up there. Jim and I love to travel, and one of our big goals is a trip to Europe, but we haven't been able to afford it, so far.

We have two couples I guess you'd call our best friends. We usually get together with them once a week or so and play cards or go out to a movie. When we were in college, Jim and I used to go out to restaurants a lot. That's always been one of my favorite things, but it's hard to go out to eat much and still keep the budget balanced. I guess I'd have to admit I really miss the fun and excitement of our college days, but I would never give up our marriage to have it all back.

Jim and I are like most couples, I guess. We usually have a great time together, and only now and then do we sit down and have a really serious debate. One big decision that comes to mind involved my getting sterilized following our decision not to have children. We decided I should go ahead with the operation, and we both feel we made the right choice since we were positive we didn't want any children.

Attached to the description was a list of 15 questions designed to assess perceptions of Kathy. Several demographic questions concerning gender, age, marital and parenthood status, siblings, religious preference, education, income, occupational level, and political orientation were also completed by each subject.

Procedure. An adult female experimenter introduced herself and announced a research project on measuring how perceptive one can be about a person, given a very limited amount of information. Half the subjects, chosen randomly, were given the description of a childfree Kathy, while the other half received a description of Kathy depicting her as the mother of two.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A discriminant analysis and a series of univariate F tests revealed a significant difference between groups. The childfree woman was perceived as being significantly less sensitive and loving, less typical an American woman, and more likely to be an active member of a woman's liberation group (all \( ps < .01 \)). The childfree Kathy was also rated as less happy, less well adjusted, less likely to get along
with her parents, and less likely to be happy and satisfied at age 65 \((ps < .05)\) than the parent Kathy. There were no significant differences between groups based on the demographic characteristics of the respondents. The cell means and the \(F\) values for each question are summarized in Table 1.

Since the dependent variables were highly correlated, it was important to focus upon analyses which take these correlations into consideration. Discriminant function analysis was used for this purpose. The discriminant analysis revealed highly significant differences between groups \((\text{Bartlett's } \chi^2 = 58.36, \ p < .001)\).

The results of this experiment demonstrate that students do perceive a sterilized childfree woman as significantly different in several important ways from an otherwise identically described parent. The pronatalist arguments that childfree women are viewed as less happy, less sensitive and loving, and less well-adjusted were supported by these data. The fact that the subjects were students seems to lend strength to the results, since students are becoming more liberal about childlessness than the general population (Blake, 1974).

Only one student perception (that a childfree woman is less typical than other American women) is demonstrably accurate. Childfree women are indeed statistically atypical in American society (Gustavus & Henley, 1971; Veevers, 1973). The student perception that a childfree woman is more likely to be an active feminist appears to be a reasonable one as well, but the existing data refute that position (Veevers, 1973).

This study does not, however, support all of the pronatalist charges. Students did not perceive the two women as being significantly different in the areas of selfishness, maturity, and level of fulfillment.

Experiment 1 raised both an important procedural issue and also an interesting substantive question. We had decided to describe Kathy as sterilized because the decision to become sterilized reflects a strong behavioral commitment to remaining childfree. Unfortunately the use of the description "sterilized" may have evoked other emotional responses which could have interacted with her childfree status.

\(^{1}\)Employing Rao's (1952) generalized distance measure, we entered variables into the equation in a specific order. This method selects the variable which contributes most to group separation and enters it first. The sequence in which other variables are entered into the analysis depends on the degree to which they contribute to group differences. Variables which do not significantly contribute to group differences do not become included in the analysis. Thus, there are several variables for which discriminant function coefficients were not obtained. The meaning of the discriminant function is defined by the loading of variables upon them.
Table 1
Summary of Group Comparisons for Experiment 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean no child</th>
<th>Mean 2 children</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>P</th>
<th>SDFC^a</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How generally happy does Kathy seem to you?</td>
<td>3.4528</td>
<td>3.7315</td>
<td>4.3707</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How well-adjusted emotionally would you say Kathy is?</td>
<td>3.5094</td>
<td>3.7870</td>
<td>3.8914</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How selfish would you call Kathy?</td>
<td>2.3019</td>
<td>2.1296</td>
<td>1.3326</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. How intelligent does Kathy seem to you?</td>
<td>3.7170</td>
<td>3.6111</td>
<td>0.7986</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How strong does it sound like Kathy and Jim's marriage is?</td>
<td>3.8302</td>
<td>3.8611</td>
<td>0.093</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. How typical an American woman does Kathy seem to be?</td>
<td>2.9811</td>
<td>3.6204</td>
<td>16.3524</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. How likely would you say it is that Kathy will someday seek the help of a mental health professional?</td>
<td>2.9245</td>
<td>2.8611</td>
<td>0.1245</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. How fulfilling does Kathy's life seem to be to her?</td>
<td>3.0849</td>
<td>3.3148</td>
<td>2.1293</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. How mature does Kathy seem to you?</td>
<td>3.4623</td>
<td>3.4074</td>
<td>0.1253</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. How well would you guess Kathy gets along with her parents?</td>
<td>3.2925</td>
<td>3.6574</td>
<td>5.6732</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. How well would you guess Kathy gets along with Jim's parents?</td>
<td>3.2925</td>
<td>3.5093</td>
<td>2.1145</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. How happy and satisfied would you guess Kathy will be at age 65?</td>
<td>2.5849</td>
<td>2.9444</td>
<td>4.5331</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. How much would you like to have Kathy for a friend?</td>
<td>3.1792</td>
<td>3.0648</td>
<td>0.4418</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. How likely would you say it is that Kathy is an active member of a women's liberation group?</td>
<td>2.9151</td>
<td>2.2963</td>
<td>12.6697</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. ^aSDFC = Standardized Discriminant Function Coefficients
and caused the obtained pattern of results. Therefore, it was necessary to repeat the experiment without describing the woman as sterilized.

If the results of Experiment 1 are reliable, another issue presents itself. Do these differential trait ascriptions occur only for women, or are voluntarily childfree men also judged differently than men with children?

**EXPERIMENT 2**

**Method**

*Subjects.* The subjects were 116 undergraduate students attending San Diego State University.

*Materials and Procedure.* Subjects made ratings from a booklet containing brief descriptions of four hypothetical persons, two women and two men. One of the people described in each booklet had two children, one was depicted as childfree, and the other two were “dummies” with no mention made of children. In half the cases, the childfree person was a woman (Susan) and the parent was a man (Mark). In the other half, Susan was depicted as the mother of two, while Mark was childfree. The descriptions of Mark and Susan (while otherwise quite different from each other) were identical across conditions except for the “two children” versus “no children” variable.

**RESULTS**

A discriminant analysis and a series of univariate t tests revealed several significant differences between groups. The means, standard deviations, and results of one-tailed t comparisons are given in Table 2. The woman (Susan) depicted as having no children was perceived as being considerably more selfish and more atypical than the Susan depicted as the mother of two \((p < .01)\).\(^2\) When depicted as a mother, Susan was seen as happier and better adjusted than the childfree Susan \((p < .05)\).

Even more striking were students' perceptions of males. Mark,

\(^2\)In making one-tailed t comparisons we construed the difference in typicalness to be negative. However, it should be recognized that atypicalness might well be regarded as a positive attribute.
when described as a childfree husband, was also perceived as significantly more selfish, and less typical, than the Mark who was depicted as the father of two (all ps < .01). Mark, the childfree husband, was also perceived as significantly less well-adjusted emotionally, less sensitive and loving, and as having a less fulfilling life than the otherwise identical father of two (ps < .05).

The discriminant analysis, using Rao's (1952) method, revealed that the differences between groups could be described by a single discriminant function. The first root of \( W^{-1} A \) (where \( W^{-1} \) is the inverse of the sum of squares and cross-products matrix, and \( A \) is the within-groups dispersion matrix) was statistically significant, \( \chi^2 = 26.76, p < .001 \).

**DISCUSSION**

This experiment tends to replicate and to extend the findings of Experiment 1 in which less desirable traits were ascribed to a
sterilized childfree woman. The present data show that both nonsterilized men and women are perceived differently when depicted as childfree and desiring to remain so.

Pronatalist writers state their strong belief that childfree couples are seen as selfish for choosing to remain childfree (Peck, 1971; Peck & Senderowitz, 1974; Pohlman, 1970). In this experiment subjects did indeed perceive both the childfree wife (Susan) and the childfree husband (Mark) to be more selfish than Susan the mother or Mark the father. This difference on the selfishness dimension was not apparent in Experiment 1.

It was somewhat surprising to note that there are more significant differences in perceptions for the childfree husband than for the childfree wife. While the two cannot be directly compared (since there were many differences between Mark and Susan besides gender), it is interesting to note how many undesirable characteristics were attributed to Mark, when he was seen as a childfree husband. Childfree Mark was viewed as more selfish, atypical, unfulfilled, less well-adjusted, and less sensitive and loving than an identically described father. Pronatalist writers have concentrated on the societal pressure aimed at women to have children. It appears from the findings in Experiment 2 that married men who do not wish to have children may at least equally be the victims of negative stereotyping.

REFERENCES


