

# VOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS IN MARRIAGE AND FAMILY TEXTBOOKS, 1950–2000

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*We perform a content analysis of twenty marriage and family textbooks published between 1950 and 2000 to study how the voluntarily childless are presented in undergraduate courses. Throughout the time period studied, independence, pursuit of a career, and romance were prominent themes in the representation of voluntary childlessness. Other themes emerged specific to each decade—the 1950s portrayed parenthood as a challenge, while the 1990s concentrated on alleviating negative stereotypes of the voluntarily childless.*

**Keywords:** *voluntary childlessness; family; content analysis; stereotypes; textbooks; undergraduates*

## INTRODUCTION

Advances in reproductive technology give individuals more control over their fertility with each passing year. Barring such problems as infertility and contraceptive failure, young adults have a realistic chance of achieving their goals related to family size. Even though most Americans desire children, voluntary childlessness is increasing in frequency, and educational level and occupational prestige are its main structural determinants.<sup>1</sup>

College students are transitioning into adulthood and, generally, are forming goals for their future. It is often the stated goal of undergraduate sociology courses to teach students to apply sociological principles to their own lives and to the lives of others.

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This is especially salient in courses on marriage and the family. Students are accustomed to receiving advice and information on the subjects covered in a marriage and family class from many other sources—references to sex, mate selection, and parenting are ubiquitous in popular culture. Despite this deluge of information, in many cases, the knowledge gained from a marriage and family class may be the most objective and research-based perspective on these subjects to which students are ever exposed. Depending on the importance students assign to a scientific perspective, a college textbook may be very influential in their personal choices and perceptions.

Voluntary childlessness is one subject for which a textbook has a chance to make a lasting impression. Recent media attention has made the phenomenon more known, but it remains largely misunderstood, and the voluntarily childless themselves suffer from the resulting misperceptions of the public. Therefore, college textbooks may be the primary materials from which students learn about the possibility of remaining childless and the perceptions that society holds for those who make this lifestyle choice. In this article, we study the presentation of voluntary childlessness in undergraduate textbooks for courses in the family and marriage and family published between 1950 and 2000. We show that the presence of the subject in textbooks actually predates the modern childfree movement and most social science research on voluntary childlessness, although the quality of treatment does change with these developments. In the next section, we will provide a current scholarly review of voluntary childlessness in the United States. This is followed by a brief review of past content analyses of textbooks.

## BACKGROUND

### Characteristics of the Voluntarily Childless in the United States

Sociodemographic characteristics that normally affect fertility rates also serve to distinguish the voluntarily childless, also called the “childfree,” from the rest of the population. The voluntarily childless tend to be older than the childless in general, for a variety of reasons outlined here. Most women do not have a child as soon as they become fertile, so many of their initial prime reproductive years are spent with no children. As women age, they are more likely to have children, so the age distribution of the childless in general is skewed toward the young. Most young women expect to have children eventually, and state such intentions in surveys. Women who state intentions to remain childless early are relatively rare—most arrive at voluntary childlessness through postponement of reproduction.<sup>2</sup>

Most studies have found education to be high among the voluntarily childless, although Ritchey and Stokes found that education has no effect when accounting for postponed childbearing.<sup>3</sup> Others found education to have significant positive effects.<sup>4</sup> Religion plays a role as well, as Catholics, people in religiously homogamous marriages, and those who attend worship services frequently have lower rates of voluntary childlessness.<sup>5</sup> The childless-by-choice are often characterized by no religious affiliation and/or low to no church attendance, with the latter consistently proven to be the strongest religious variable to predict voluntary childlessness.<sup>6</sup> Religious norms generally encourage high levels of fertility and traditional values, which can run counter to the values of a family with no children.

The racial and ethnic makeup of the voluntarily childless is difficult to ascertain. Several studies include only whites and the only study restricted to blacks included only doctorate holders.<sup>7</sup> Overall, it is known that childlessness in recent years is lower among blacks than whites because of higher levels of fertility among blacks.<sup>8</sup> Studies that do include blacks and whites find a higher proportion of voluntary childlessness among whites.<sup>9</sup>

### Recent Childlessness Trends

It is difficult to synthesize the existing literature on trends of voluntary childlessness since the Baby Boom because of the widely differing operational definitions and data sources. With data from the late 1960s, Ritchey and Stokes predicted that 4.1 percent of married women would never have children by the end of their fertility, regardless of the reason for their childlessness.<sup>10</sup> Just a few years later, Poston and Trent showed that the completed marital childlessness rate for Americans in 1970 was 11 percent.<sup>11</sup> In the 1970s, estimates of voluntary childlessness in women ranged between 1.6 to 4.5 percent of North American women, and in the 1980s, they ranged from 1.8 to 6.4 percent.<sup>12</sup> Seven percent of the American population was consistently voluntarily childless from 1988 to 1994.<sup>13</sup> In Canada in 2001, 9 percent of singles and 5 percent of the currently married population aged twenty to thirty-four stated that they wished to remain childless permanently.<sup>14</sup>

### Stereotyping Voluntary Childlessness

Stereotypes of the childfree held by the general population have been fairly consistent since the late 1970s, and they tend to be largely negative. Respondents do not like the childfree, and find them to have few positive attributes when compared to parents or infertile couples.<sup>15</sup> While positive characterizations of the childfree included that they had greater freedom and individualism and that they were more career-oriented and well-off financially, these traits can easily translate into selfishness, which was a trait ascribed to the childfree in all of these studies.<sup>16</sup>

When the perceptions of the voluntarily childless are compared to perceptions of the involuntarily childless, the infertile are viewed much more positively.<sup>17</sup> Polit also found that the infertile were viewed even more positively than parents, theorizing that the infertile are pitied with a "sympathy vote" for social desirability, but her findings were not reproduced in later studies.<sup>18</sup> These studies leave little doubt that it is not only the process of raising children that makes one socially desirable, but one's *orientation* toward the process of raising children.

Researchers have generally found that respondents' demographic characteristics affect their perceptions of the childfree, although these characteristics do not always have the same effects throughout the literature. The studies consisting entirely of college students had largely homogenous samples in terms of age and educational attainment.<sup>19</sup> These controls also seemed to eliminate differences in perception resulting from gender, but not the marital status or Catholicism of the respondent.<sup>20</sup> However, Blake found a *greater* sex difference between respondents after controlling for other variables, with men viewing the childfree more negatively.<sup>21</sup> In surveys of the general population, educational attainment plays a large role in respondents' perceptions of childfreedom, with the most educated having the most positive

views.<sup>22</sup> Blake found that a low level of education correlated with views of childbearing as giving meaning to life and status to women.<sup>23</sup>

Two studies conducted in the late 1970s found more negative views of childfree-ness in older respondents.<sup>24</sup> This cohort effect is likely because of varying perceptions of then-recent social movements, such as feminism and environmentalism, based on age. Ever-married subjects and parents with larger numbers of children tended to be more disapproving of the childfree than singles and parents with fewer children.<sup>25</sup>

The childfree are aware of the general social disapproval of their lifestyle. Research spanning three decades shows that the voluntarily childless realize that they are seen as selfish, poorly adjusted psychologically, and socially disadvantaged in general when compared to parents.<sup>26</sup> The childfree tend to be more concerned about relatives viewing them negatively than friends.<sup>27</sup>

Stereotypes of the childfree are consistently and pervasively negative, but the coping mechanisms employed by members of this deviant group allow them to live with relatively little stigma. Some voluntarily childless individuals minimize the difference between themselves and parents, saying that the childfree channel their nurturing activities through their careers, or even hinting that their childlessness is not voluntary. Others among the childfree find examples of bad or abusive parenting, to which they can consider themselves superior.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, these coping mechanisms often result in negative stereotypes of parents as well, which creates a barrier of hostility between the two groups. Undergraduate textbooks could play a positive role in fostering understanding between groups by presenting objective research on the childfree. This article examines whether and how textbooks effectively translate this research.

### **Previous Content Analyses of Textbooks**

To date, no published study has examined how sociology textbooks portray voluntary childlessness. Past studies have considered broad changes in the themes of marriage and family textbooks by examining their titles or theoretical orientations.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, past studies have analyzed textbooks for trends in alternative family forms, including adoption and stepfamilies; trends in the presentation of minority groups, such as African American families; and trends in presenting other issues, such as abortion and aging.<sup>30</sup> These past studies have examined the total number of pages devoted to the subject of interest, the sources that the textbooks cited when discussing the subject, and the general themes surrounding the subject.

These past content analyses of family and marriage and family textbooks show that they are slow to include new or minority family forms, and that the depiction of these family forms is often negative or incorrect. For example, Peters found that many marriage and family textbooks did not include African American families at all, addressed them only under the rubric of interracial marriages, or associated them with pathologies such as poverty or illegitimacy.<sup>31</sup> Textbooks in the 1980s were similar in their lack of coverage of African American families and in their portrayal of these families as culturally deviant.<sup>32</sup> In their analysis of seven multiple-edition textbooks published between 1960 and 1994, Mann and colleagues found that coverage of African American families shifted over time, with later editions including more critical literature; they also found this to be true for gender issues.<sup>33</sup> Outside of these two topics, however, the authors found that most textbooks continued to use traditional analyses and did not question underlying theoretical assumptions from the past. For example,

structural-functionalism appeared as a theoretical perspective in all of the textbooks studied, while conflict theory appeared in less than one-third of the textbooks.

Stepfamilies have also been neglected and/or portrayed negatively in marriage and family textbooks. Nolan and colleagues found that of twenty-six books published between 1977 and 1983, three did not contain any information on stepfamilies, and another seven included one page or less; nineteen of the textbooks mentioned sources of stress in stepfamilies, while only thirteen discussed which factors were related to successful family life.<sup>34</sup> A follow-up to this study found that textbooks published between 1990 and 1994 were much more likely to contain information on stepfamilies, but that they continued to focus on the stresses and deficits of stepfamilies, rather than the potential strengths.<sup>35</sup>

Based on these past textbook studies and previous research, we believe that early coverage of voluntary childlessness will be limited and that it will tend to focus heavily on the negative aspects of the lifestyle.

## METHODS

### Sample Selection

Using an availability sampling strategy, we selected twenty textbooks for courses in family and marriage and family published between 1950 and 2000 for our analyses. Our sample is the result of a systematic, exhaustive search through a variety of channels, described below. Our goal was to analyze textbooks that were widely used in courses during each of the decades studied, so that many undergraduate students would have been exposed to the material presented in the books.

We began by consulting previous textbook studies and compiling a list of all the textbooks that had been included in past samples.<sup>36</sup> We then went to our university library and pulled all books falling under the call numbers for marriage and family texts (generally under the "HQ" Library of Congress code). Additionally, we searched used-book Web sites for textbooks. Our underlying assumption was that if the book had been ordered by the library (the library of a large state flagship university), or if there were multiple copies available on the used-book Web sites, then these books may have been widely used in marriage and family courses.

We consulted with scholars who had conducted marriage and family textbook analyses, including Michael D. Grimes and David Klein. Each of these scholars has several decades of experience with marriage and family textbooks, and has published research analyzing marriage and family texts.<sup>37</sup> We relied on their expert opinions regarding which books were not popular during each time period, and which were widely used.

We limited our selection to first editions of textbooks that had at least another edition, with the exception of textbooks published in the 1990s; for the books published in the 1990s, it was too soon to tell whether second editions would be published. We chose textbooks with multiple editions because if a textbook had multiple editions, it most likely was successful on the market, and thus read by many undergraduates. Because we were unable to access textbook market share information, we used the multiple-editions criterion as a way of tapping into the marketing success of these particular textbooks.<sup>38</sup> Past textbook studies have found that multiple editions tend to be very similar, with updates in research rather than changes in the authors'

perspectives.<sup>39</sup> Finally, we limited our selection to textbooks that had a more academic than practical approach.

Ultimately, the books that appeared to be most popular (based on visibility in the library and used-book Web sites, and expert opinion—both from personal consultation and from the books used in past studies) were included in our sample. We also chose our sample, when possible, to include a spread of years throughout each decade and to include a balance of male and female authors. Four books were selected for each decade.<sup>40</sup> The resulting twenty textbooks are listed in the Appendix. While it was not possible to obtain a strictly representative sample of marriage and family books published in the 1950–2000 period, these books were widely used in undergraduate courses across the United States during that time. Therefore, our sample represents a majority of the textbooks to which students were exposed during the last half of the twentieth century.

### Coding

The coding approach for this project was inductive. Both authors conducted a pre-test with several textbooks to build a coding scheme, which was expanded as additional items were found during coding.<sup>41</sup> The authors searched the indices and tables of contents of all the textbooks, and also skimmed through all chapters, to find any content on voluntary childlessness. We noted the subsections that were included about voluntary childlessness in these textbooks, and generated coding categories based on themes that appeared in more than one textbook. Both authors coded all textbooks, and met regularly to make sure that there was agreement in coding. When there was a discrepancy in coding, we discussed the issue until a consensus was reached.

To illustrate an example of how a theme emerged: we noticed that textbooks in our pre-test contained career-themed discussions. Textbook passages mentioning that parenthood interfered somehow with careers, ambition, status, achievement, competition, wealth, power, and so on were coded as belonging to the “career/ambition” theme.

We examined the textbooks for their individual content and for recurring themes. Some themes, such as independence as a reason for voluntary childlessness, appeared throughout the sample. Others appeared only in one time period—fear of the physical process of childbirth appeared only in the 1950s. In addition to coding the content about voluntary childlessness, we also gathered other information about each textbook, such as the number of pages and number of sources devoted to the voluntarily childless. The next section presents the results. We will summarize our findings of the amount of coverage, show themes that appear continuously throughout the sample, and then discuss dominant themes grouped by decade.

### RESULTS

A total of fourteen textbooks out of twenty contained content on voluntary childlessness. All of the books from the 1950s and all of the books from the 1980s included some discussion of voluntary childlessness; only two books from the 1960s, one book from the 1970s, and three books from the 1990s discussed the topic. The text devoted to the topic ranged from one-half of a page up to six pages total. The textbooks themselves were all several hundred pages long, so in no case did the coverage of voluntary childlessness take up more than 2 or 3 percent of the textbook’s total.

The trend, then, was coverage in textbooks from the 1950s, followed by a lack of coverage in the 1960s and 1970s. In other words, college students taking marriage and family courses during the 1960s and 1970s, if using the textbooks analyzed here, would not be exposed to information about choosing to be childless (unless the course's instructor included this material in lectures). This finding is surprising if one would expect the cultural changes of the 1960s and 1970s to be reflected in textbooks, with acknowledgment and acceptance of alternative family forms. However, because of lags in research publication time, broader social trends may not be reflected in the textbooks until later years. Authors' gender (shown in Table 1) does not appear to be related to the coverage of voluntary childlessness, although our sample is too small to test this hypothesis rigorously.

### Continuous Themes: Ambition, Freedom, and Romance

"Continuous" themes were those that appeared in all decades studied. At the top of this list is career/ambition. The angle varied quite a bit, as seen in the excerpts below, but it was always advanced that career aspirations, especially on the part of the woman, figured heavily into the decision to remain childless. We show the transition in the treatment of the conflict between children and career in the next three textbook excerpts. A quote from the 1950s warns that a cultural focus on individualism causes people to value ambition over children:

The pursuit of status achievement is strongly encouraged by one component of our self-contradictory culture, and this motivation may be unfavorable to parenthood. . . . Competitive individualism with respect to money, power, knowledge, and creativity outside the home makes for a general self-love which is hostile to love of children.<sup>42</sup>

A quote from the 1980s emphasizes the individual-level rational decision-making process by which someone might choose to remain childless, with a focus on devaluing children over career:

The apparent reason [for deciding that one does not want children] is that children are less appealing than the careers, and child-care responsibilities are a burden to be avoided.<sup>43</sup>

A quote from the following decade also discusses the dilemma of children versus career, but this time with a focus on valuing career instead of *devaluing* children.

Those who choose to remain childfree may believe that having children would interfere with their ability to achieve in their careers or in other types of activities. They may feel that caring for children would drain time and energy that could be devoted to other highly valued pursuits.<sup>44</sup>

This language reminiscent of exchange theory carries into the second theme: independence/freedom. Couples (or women) had a trade-off to make—they could not have both their freedom and children at the same time. If they valued freedom (to spend their money or pursue their dreams) more, they chose it over children. This sentiment

Table 1  
Descriptive Information on Textbooks in Sample

Author and Year	Gender of Author(s)	Pages on Voluntary		Sources	Total Pages	Title of Chapter		Context
		Childlessness	with Voluntary			Childlessness Content	Content	
Winch (1952)	Male	6	8	522	"Parenthood or Childlessness"	Parenting Choices	Parenting Choices	
Cavan (1953)	Female	5.5	3	658	"Parents of Children"	Demography	Demography	
Koos (1953)	Male	3	0	441	"Children & Marriage"	Parenting Choices	Parenting Choices	
Kirkpatrick (1955)	Male	1.5	7	651	"Having Children"	Parenting Choices	Parenting Choices	
Kephart (1961)	Male	0	—	690	—	—	—	
Bell (1963)	Male	0	—	465	—	—	—	
Udry (1966)	Male	1	2	580	"Marriage and Parenthood"	Parenting Choices	Parenting Choices	
Leslie (1967)	Male	0.5	1	709	"Sex Adjustment, Child-bearing, and Child-rearing"	Contraception	Contraception	
Adams (1971)	Male	0	—	382	—	—	—	
Skolnick (1973)	Female	0	—	401	—	—	—	
Eshelman (1974)	Male	0	—	698	—	—	—	
Scanzoni and Scanzoni (1976)	Male, Female	6	12	504	"Reproduction"	Parenting Choices	Parenting Choices	
Lamanna and Riedmann (1981)	Female, Female	2	5	624	"To Parent or Not to Parent"	Parenting Choices	Parenting Choices	
Collins (1985)	Male	1	4	509	"Childbearing"	Parenting Choices	Parenting Choices	
Baca Zinn and Eitzen (1987)	Female, Male	2	6	474	"Parents and Children"	Demography	Demography	
Nock (1987)	Male	1.5	3	401	"Parenthood: Family Expansion"	Demography	Demography	
Benokraitis (1993)	Female	1	11	632	"Becoming a Parent: Planning and Having Children"	Parenting Choices	Parenting Choices	
Cherlin (1996)	Male	0	—	530	—	—	—	
Shehan and Kammeyer (1997)	Female, Male	2	4	484	"Childbearing"	Parenting Choices	Parenting Choices	
Newman (1999)	Male	2	6	540	"Parenthood and Parenting"	Parenting Choices	Parenting Choices	

Note: Total number of books in which topic appears: 14 of 20.

was often translated into a negative perception of the voluntarily childless as selfish in earlier textbooks, but was portrayed as neutral or positive in later textbooks. Consider the following quotes, from 1955 and 1987, respectively.

The claim, "We cannot afford to have a baby," must always be interpreted in terms of relative values. A couple cannot afford a baby because they can afford a new car.<sup>45</sup>

[The voluntarily childless] may value the freedom that a childless relationship enhances.<sup>46</sup>

The final continuous theme was romance evident in these quotes from 1953 and 1985. Voluntarily childless couples were known to give primacy to their partnerships, believing that children would interfere with, rather than enhance, their relationships.

Some couples adjust well to each other in marriage, but have personalities and values that are not compatible with the demands of child-rearing.<sup>47</sup>

The most common reason [childless couples] gave for not wanting to have children was *to give more time to their spouse*. In other words, their motivation might be broadly called *erotic* reasons. They wanted to spend their love on their adult partner, not on their children.<sup>48</sup>

The universality of the romantic relationships theme implies that the voluntarily childless were always considered capable of interpersonal love, though perhaps not of nurturing love. This might have the effect of painting the childfree in a more flattering light than that to which students had been exposed through popular culture.

### 1950s: Parenthood as a Challenge

The voluntarily childless were given from one and one-half to six pages of coverage in the earliest textbooks studied, even though empirical research specifically on this group was virtually nonexistent at that time. Content was generally scattered throughout a chapter on parenting as a whole, or in a subsection on childlessness that mainly discussed infertility. Sources for this content mainly consisted of U.S. Census reports on the number of children born to families, research on marital adjustment, and general theories of the family. Textbook authors extrapolated from these sources to discuss childlessness, except for Koos, who cited no sources but discussed one case (more later in this section).<sup>49</sup>

The unique theme in this decade was that parenthood as a challenge to be feared; those who were not strong or virtuous enough would reject parenthood, lest they fail at it, causing harm to themselves or their children.

Assuming contraceptive control, it is probably true that the less adventurous married couples have lower inclination to parenthood. . . . Parenthood is a more definite, irrevocable gamble than marriage. While many persons want to play for high stakes, they do not want to take the corresponding risk in the procreation of children, sight unseen.<sup>50</sup>

This characterization of parenting as a risky venture included the idea that childbearing could bring bodily harm. Women who did not want children were described as afraid of physical disfigurement or transformation, pain, and death in pregnancy and childbirth.

Fear of the pregnancy and birth experience with respect to the health of mother and normality of child plays no small part in motivation against parenthood.<sup>51</sup>

A woman may feel that such loss in her physical attractiveness as might be the consequence of bearing children would make her relationship with her husband less secure.<sup>52</sup>

Surprisingly, the 1950s textbooks offer a considerable amount of reluctant support for a couple who chooses to remain childless. The general sentiment is that if parenthood is fraught with physical and psychological danger, some people will want to opt out. However, they are still judged for their deviation from social norms.

The following quote shows a 1950s textbook perspective of the difference between couples who want children and couples who do not. The classification is based on the “desire” for children, not their presence, which is in line with studies reviewed earlier that show the infertile being viewed more positively than the childless-by-choice.<sup>53</sup>

It is probable that people who desire children have a conception of the family as a stable interacting group, whereas those who do not desire children may be highly individualistic or too immature to desire parenthood—both characteristics that would make good marital adjustment difficult.<sup>54</sup>

Notably, Koos, who cited no outside sources at all, presented and discussed a block quote from a voluntarily childless woman explaining her decision.<sup>55</sup> In the quote, the woman mentions that neither she nor her husband like children, and that parenthood would be a “sacrifice.”<sup>56</sup> Koos is relatively sympathetic to the couple, seeming to respect that they recognize themselves to be unfit for parenthood.

Were more people to weigh carefully their potentialities as parents, and to abide by their honest feelings, fewer children would probably be born, but more of those born would be born into adequate homes.<sup>57</sup>

### 1960s: Marital Satisfaction

Coverage was sparse in our selected textbooks from the 1960s, but all four books presented voluntary childlessness exclusively in the context of marital satisfaction, even those books that we coded as having no “substantive content.” These two books, by Kephart (*The Family, Society, and the Individual*)<sup>58</sup> and Bell (*Marriage and Family Interaction*),<sup>59</sup> included only very brief references to the childless-by-choice in a discussion of another topic.

It is estimated that about 10 percent of all married couples will be childless, and 1 to 3 percent are personally satisfied with their childlessness. . . . The high positive values about having children are accepted by the vast majority of Americans and the majority of childless couples are not that way by choice.<sup>60</sup>

This quotation by Bell was taken from a section on infertility. He acknowledged that some couples are childless by choice, but engaged in no further discussion of them, so his textbook was coded as having no content on the topic of interest. A reading of Kephart<sup>61</sup> yields only the following quote, mentioning that children do not necessarily correlate with marital happiness:

The presence of children has also been held as a criterion of successful marriage. Possibly originating in the Biblical injunction to be fruitful and multiply, the belief that children signify marital success has by no means disappeared. Childless couples, certainly, are commonly thought to be less happy than those with children. Interestingly, insofar as the various research studies are concerned, neither the presence nor absence of children, nor the number of children, has been shown to correlate with marital happiness.<sup>62</sup>

The other two books, by Udry (*The Social Context of Marriage*)<sup>63</sup> and Leslie (*The Family in Social Context*),<sup>64</sup> reported findings from studies on divorce and marital happiness by number of children born to a couple. Leslie showed several studies finding that couples with no children were the most satisfied with their relationships. He found one study explaining that these scores came from young couples who wanted children but had not yet had them. Udry, after reviewing literature showing that children did not “solidify weak marriages,”<sup>65</sup> closed the section with:

It is proposed that the myth that children hold marriages together and prevent divorce be relegated to the dustbin where other efforts to support morality (whether traditional or revolutionary) by the careless interpretation of social science research are collected.<sup>66</sup>

Although the 1960s textbooks are largely silent on voluntary childlessness, their perspective is more tolerant than the 1950s perspective of parenting as a challenge that the childless-by-choice failed to meet. Emerging research showing the effect of children on marital satisfaction is relayed by the 1960s authors, but explanations for the social causes of childlessness are absent. In contrast to the 1950s, when authors expounded on voluntary childlessness based on personal viewpoint or anecdotal evidence, authors of the 1960s seemed reluctant to write anything not based on empirical research. Udry’s quote above exemplifies the new value-free, positivistic perspective of this decade. In larger historical context, increased funding of social science research by the U.S. government after World War II naturally led to more reliance on empirical findings rather than theoretically informed musings, which came to be reflected in these textbooks by the 1960s.

### **1970s: Absence and Activism**

Voluntary childlessness was absent in three of the textbooks of this decade. A thorough search of Adams (*The Family: A Sociological Interpretation*),<sup>67</sup> Skolnick (*The Intimate Environment: Exploring Marriage and the Family*),<sup>68</sup> and Eshleman (*The Family: An Introduction*)<sup>69</sup> yielded no content, not even tangential references as found in two of the books from the 1960s. A bit later in the decade, Scanzoni and Scanzoni (*Men, Women, and Change: A Sociology of Marriage and Family*)<sup>70</sup> presented a positive and extensive view of the subject, giving the first use of the term “childfree” found in our sample. They took advantage of newly published research specifically on voluntary childlessness to explain the process of making the choice for childlessness, living a childfree life, and managing the resulting stigma.

[W]ith growing concern about population pressures, food and energy shortages, crowding, and all the related problems of too many people on too small a planet, the accusation of selfishness has been aimed toward a different target. Couples who want

the rewards of children in great abundance are the ones who are now likely to be labeled self-indulgent and unconcerned about the good of humanity. Couples who forgo the experience of parenthood may be considered by others to be altruistic.<sup>71</sup>

The pro-childfree tone of Scanzoni and Scanzoni was not replicated in any other book in the sample. This quote exemplifies the activist stance that resulted from the intersection of the then-recent women's rights and environmental movements. Scanzoni and Scanzoni's defense of childfreedom is a prototype for the voluntarily childless looking to justify their decision to others by shifting the focus to the environment, a strategy outlined by Veevers and Park.<sup>72</sup> Future research should examine additional textbooks from this time period to determine whether this tone was present in other books, or if Scanzoni and Scanzoni were exceptional in their progressive viewpoints.

### 1980s: Growing Scholarly Focus

Our texts from the 1980s showed an increasingly nuanced, diverse, and scholarly view of voluntary childlessness, aided by a growing body of research in this area. Readers in this time period learned of the decision-making processes surrounding different types of voluntary childlessness, and that there was often a disparity in commitment to being childless between members of a couple.

The [early articulator] type explicitly rejects childbearing while the [postponer type] accepts it in the abstract but never finds it convenient, resulting finally in a permanent postponement.<sup>73</sup>

Also reported were findings that the childfree had more independent personalities, lived farther from their own parents, and married later, as well as many other aspects covered in the "Continuous Themes" section, such as career and freedom.

Child-free wives tend to be extremely attached to a career that brings both satisfaction and increased income. Childless couples value their relative freedom to change jobs or careers, move around the country, and pursue any endeavor they might find interesting.<sup>74</sup>

Two out of three of the books that included voluntary childlessness in the context of demography were found in this decade (the other is in 1955), lending to an explanation of the phenomenon by cohort and in relation to the Baby Boom.

Since the 1960s more and more couples are postponing having children. . . . These data may only reflect delayed childbearing or they may indeed signal an increase in the incidence of childlessness.<sup>75</sup>

The 1980s textbook authors began to incorporate turns of phrase that present students with a tolerant, or more balanced, understanding of the voluntarily childless. Paragraphs began with the following:

Despite many people's beliefs, couples who choose to remain childless are usually neither frustrated nor unhappy.<sup>76</sup>

[That careers are prioritized and childcare is a burden] sounds like a masculine motivation, but it isn't necessarily so.<sup>77</sup>

These transitional phrases foreshadowed the overarching theme of the 1990s—eradication of stereotypes.

### 1990s: Stereotypes

Coverage in the latest textbooks in our sample showed a plateau, if not a reduction, in the quality and amount of space given to voluntary childlessness. Not until Newman (*Sociology of Families*)<sup>78</sup> did an author even cite a study published in the 1990s. The topic was absent altogether in Cherlin (*Public and Private Families: An Introduction*).<sup>79</sup> But if any one theme can characterize the three remaining textbooks in our sample, it is the specific concentration on dispelling stereotypes about the voluntarily childless. Perhaps this theme is a response to research on stigma management. More subtle than the activist tone of Scanzoni and Scanzoni and more explicit than the gentle rhetoric of the 1980s, these texts presented a scholarly case regarding society's negative perceptions of the childfree.

Even though voluntarily child-free couples report being significantly more satisfied with all aspects of their marriage than couples with children, they still perceive that they are viewed negatively by others. . . . Often these couples are maligned for “selfishly” putting their personal needs ahead of the social obligations of parenthood.<sup>80</sup>

Why should these stereotypes exist? Perhaps couples with children resent the childless because they feel their own decision to raise children is rejected or viewed with contempt . . . It could also be that parents are sometimes envious because childless couples have (or seem to have) more freedom, time, money, and fun. Because there are many problems in raising children, and parents often feel unappreciated, a childless lifestyle can look very attractive.<sup>81</sup>

Textbooks concentrating on abating stereotypes support the voluntarily childless, characterizing their choice as brave because it is against societal norms. In the 1950s texts, parents were the brave ones for accepting the challenge of parenthood. The theme of this decade, when contrasted with the theme of the fifties, shows that there has been a polar shift in portrayals of parents versus nonparents.

## DISCUSSION

The state of sociological research on voluntary childlessness as it was presented to undergraduates through textbooks varied substantially over the last half of the twentieth century. Dominant themes emerged: the voluntarily childless choose their career, independence, and romantic relationships over children. Apart from these, each decade seemed to have a theme that set it apart from the other decades. The textbooks sampled are characterized by many shifts in perspective, including a change from treating parents as tough, hardy individuals (50s) to hinting that parents are jealous of those who have freedom from children (90s).

In the 1950s, there was a certain attitude about people who choose not to have children. They were faint of heart; not up to the challenge of child rearing. From concerns about pain in childbirth to worries about whether one had what it takes to be a parent, adding children to a family in the 1950s was perceived to be a definite risk. The tone of these books did not seem to have the goal of dissuading people from child rearing, rather, it seemed to reward the intestinal fortitude of parents. Students

pondering their future as parents or nonparents could find support for either side during this decade, although those who chose the latter route would find the textbooks' characterizations to include substantial hits to their ego.

Undergraduates in the 1960s and 1970s likely missed a discussion of voluntary childlessness altogether in their textbooks, except those whose instructors assigned Scanzoni and Scanzoni's *Men, Women, and Change*. Wedged into discussions of marital satisfaction and divorce in the 1960s and absent almost altogether in the 1970s, voluntary childlessness was a nonissue. This is not surprising given the high fertility of the then-recent Baby Boom and the lack of scholarly research on voluntary childlessness at the time. The 1980s saw those factors change and textbooks presented the most scholarly views of voluntary childlessness of all the decades, reporting research findings fresh from academic journals.

In the 1990s, textbooks summarized many of the same studies from the 1980s, showing a reduction in research on voluntary childlessness during that decade. However, these most recent textbooks concentrated more on reporting balanced information about the childfree. Much of the language seemed targeted specifically to changing the perceptions of undergraduates, or of informing them about the child-free in as neutral a way as possible.

Nevertheless, the latest research on stereotypes of the voluntarily childless shows that stigma is still heavy.<sup>82</sup> Since most of the samples in these studies are composed entirely of college students, perhaps education does not have the liberalizing effect that recent textbook authors may hope it does. Of course, not all undergraduates take a course in sociology of marriage and family, or even any courses in sociology. Future research should specifically target the effect of taking such a course on the views of undergraduates.

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