

Theorizing Reproductive Diversity: Women and Childless "Choice"

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Statement of the research problem/Background questions

One distinctive feature of feminist inquiry is an insistence that the researcher appear "not as an invisible, anonymous voice of authority, but as a real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests."² I come to the subject of this paper with my own history as a Euro-American woman, married twenty-eight years, and intentionally childless. At the same time that I embarked upon my graduate education, I was seeking answers to personal questions about the meaning and impact of voluntary childlessness in mid- and later life. While a doctoral student in social work I took courses in psychoanalytic and developmental theory. Given the fact that I am an adult woman and not a mother, I could not find myself within the psychological theories I studied without being labeled abnormal or at least negatively deviant. The literature I was reading presumed and/or justified mothering as women's central meaningful act. (I remember feeling deflated when David Gutmann, a well-respected psychologist referred to the childless elderly women in a psychiatric institution as "developmental casualties.") I had no literature to draw on to help me construct my experiences that did not feel like a personal violation.

As I was aging, I had many questions and few answers. Many of the predictable patterns that may describe the experiences of mothers did not "fit" me. For example, the common notion of an "empty nest" has no application to my life. Had I never or always experienced this problem? In fact the characteristics and impact of my "nest" are different but there was no social work knowledge to characterize that difference. The experiences of not-mothering women have yet to be named. Our lives remain untheorized.

Or more accurately, our lives are under- and wrongly theorized. What I continually confronted in the scholarly theories upon which social workers depend was one of three assumptions: First, that adult women are mothers, an assumption that renders reproductive difference invisible; or second, that childless women do exist but their reproductive status is symptomatic of psychological or moral deficits; or third, the notion that childlessness is simply a free "lifestyle choice." This last assumption, although the most friendly to not-mothers, remained problematic for me since the focus on "lifestyle" gave no evidence of a pervasive pronatalism which I experienced. Such a construction keeps the political safely personal, the social, individual. In this highly personal fashion I discovered my dissertation topic. As a social work student in a graduate program I had identified a gap in social science knowledge based on my own "felt experience" as an older not-mothering woman. I decided I had to write the text I needed to read. I wanted to hear the voices of other women without children and I needed a political analysis of those voices. As a social worker and as a childless woman I required social work research that acknowledged and promoted reproductive diversity.

Theoretical background

The intent of my project was to complete a study of a marginalized group of women which did not at the same time extend their marginization. This required an approach which

replaced universal characterizations about gender with an emphasis on differences. A feminist poststructural orientation met this requirement since conceptualizing, preserving or rescuing difference is one of the central preoccupations of poststructuralists.³ Feminist poststructuralist scholarship becomes an "archeological endeavor, observing, describing, naming and generating concepts that reconceptualize dominant understanding."⁴

I decided to study childless women's lives with an uncommon set of assumptions. Whether childlessness is assumed to be abnormal or a healthy choice, pronatalism and the politics of reproductive difference remain hidden. In contrast, I assumed that childlessness is not simply a personal act but is rather a social practice which takes place in a highly politicized arena. In this view, childless women are nonconformists who exist in a contradictory relationship to dominant ideology and social organization.

A second assumption underlying my work is that "social domination is based equally on material structures which create unequal material options for dominant and oppressed groups and on symbolic codes which regulate what is considered normal and deviant."⁵ Domination is exercised through language and the manipulation of consciousness as well as through institutional practices and external force. Language therefore is an important site for political struggle.

Methodology

My analysis is based on intensive interviews with thirty-four married, intentionally childless women ranging in age from forty to seventy-eight. Participants were recruited nationwide through a strategy which combined network sampling⁶ and advertising through professional newsletters and women's periodicals, with outreach to community groups serving middle-aged and later life women. I conducted, taped, and transcribed eight telephone interviews and twenty-six in-person interviews, all lasting at least two hours.

My planned small sample size required a population as homogenous as possible.⁷ All participants were Euro-American with one exception, a woman who had assumed her husband's Anglo name. She is Mexican-American. Women's ethnic backgrounds turned out to be an important source of identification. A significant number of participants were from first or second generation immigrant families, mostly from Eastern Europe.

A full three-quarters of the women identified themselves as coming from either poor or working-class backgrounds. This statistic lends support to writer Carolyn Kay Steedman who, reflecting upon her own working-class childhood, asserts that it is to the marginal and secret stories of working-class women that we must look for a "disturbance of that huge and bland assumption that the wish for a child largely structures femininity."⁸

I decided to fully transcribe each interview and this turned out to be a key decision. Having complete transcripts available expanded my research opportunities; not only was the substance of women's accounts available for analysis, the accounts themselves became "data" to be analyzed. It was in the long hours pouring over the interviews, sentence by sentence, that the contests over meaning and the political importance of the discourse became starkly evident. I read women's accounts "not as reflections of truth or lie with respect to a pre-given real, but as instruments for the exercise of power, as paradigmatic enactments of struggles over...meaning."⁹

Several broad questions helped to focus my reading of the data: What empowered

(enabled) women to go against a major cultural norm? What are the psychological and social consequences of their reproductive refusal? Since motherhood remains a powerful signifier of women's normality and maturity, how do women negotiate the prevalent negative representations of childlessness? In what ways does the existence of this minority group of women destabilize essentialist notions about women?

Results

My study suggests that childless status is problematic for some women, but not for the reasons or in the ways suggested by common expectations. Dominant ways of understanding women's experiences must be deconstructed and reconceptualized. Here is one example of social reconstruction. "Regret" is an emotion assigned to the childless, an assignment impossible to escape. Yet, the texts of childless women provide little, if any, evidence that women suffer from ongoing or serious feelings of regret. Such a construction is too fixed and monolithic to describe their experiences. Instead, the more fluid concept of "rumblings" accurately describes women's experiences. Many women spoke of moments or periods of internal questioning related to their reproductive status, wistful feelings, or twinges of doubt, or passing thoughts about the road not taken. But such rumblings are not limited to childless women, as social science scholarship on mothering makes clear. Many mothers also have their moments when they wonder, "what if..." As Claire Armon-Jones points out, emotion vocabularies serve social functions. Emotions "are constituted and prescribed in such a way as to sustain and endorse cultural systems of belief and value."¹⁰

Other examples of new concepts which shed light on the experiences of not-mothers include: "explanatory work," the work women must do to explain their decision to others; "friendship wedges," the tensions that some childless women describe in their relationships with mothering women; "the couple nest," which offers unique pleasures and dangers; "solidarity and distance," a phrase which captures women's identifications with and disconnections from children; "chronological discontinuities," the common experience of feeling out-of-sync with one's own age cohort; and "contradictory freedom," an expression that characterizes the paradox for women who went after "the freedom of male experience and possibility" and "the male-kind of time," who ended up with not much freedom and no time, given the male-kind of institutions in which they competed to succeed. What time women gained from limited responsibilities in the domestic arena was quickly lost to the public sphere.

Utility for Social Work Practice

Social work practitioners need understanding and information concerning the lives of childless women. Women today are required to make "hard choices" about embracing or forgoing motherhood. Social workers in clinical practice will see more women struggling with reproductive and parenting decisions and also more women living out the life course without children. These women can learn from the experiences of others who have already made and lived with their choices. Clinicians and clients alike benefit from research which breaks the silences surrounding the childless path.

Further, social workers engaged in program development and policy making benefit from

a strong reminder that not all women are mothers. Children provide substantial amounts of direct health and social service assistance to their aging parents, accounting for nearly 75% of such assistance to the community-dwelling elderly. Much of the policy in gerontology assumes this contribution of adult children to their parents' needs, an expectation reinforced by cutbacks and attacks on social services. However, older not-mothering women lack this primary resource. Policies and services which assume the availability of adult children incorrectly anticipate the future needs of women.

Research on childless women has importance for social work education. As Karen Tice points out, "In their struggle to educate students for practice in a multicultural, multiracial, and gender-stratified world, social work educators must be critical of the universalizing and essentializing tendencies implicit in social work education."¹¹ Feminists are calling for attention to the differences that exist among women, and reproductive status is one important variable. "A gender-inclusive curriculum does not collapse the multiplicity of women's expressions, preoccupations and experiences into the universal women. Such a curriculum explores differences as well as commonalities, and is kaleidoscopic in its point of view."¹²

Finally, all research has social and political as well as scholarly implications. Absence of attention to women who do not mother reinforces the notion that motherhood is the critical experience which both actualizes and symbolizes normality and maturity for women. Women who do not mother then become abherant at best, developmental casualties at worst. Not-mother's deviation from a statistical norm is stereotyped as misfortune or failure. "Mothering" becomes an ideology which thus places constraints on the reproductive freedom of all women. The intention of my research is to legitimate reproductive choice (both to have and not to have children), to produce knowledge about the consequences of the childless choice and thus to support the alternative path already chosen by many women.

NOTES

1. A variety of terms are used to define women without children; "childless," "childfree," "nonmothers." Each term is politically and analytically problematic. "Childless" and "nonmother" reinforce the mother standard, emphasize absence, something missing. The defining characteristic is a lack, with an implication that the persons identified are less than those without the lack. The term "nonwhite" comes to mind as a comparable word.

"Childfree" is a word some feminists use who wish to contradict patriarchal meaning. Yet for me, this term has a presumptuous ring to it. It suggests that women who do not want to be mothers want to be rid of children, as in those who promote a "union-free" or "smoke-free" environment. The notion that not-mothers may be hostile to children does not offer an accurate or politically useful countercultural construction. Each term reinforces the dominant ideology which views mother as superior.

My preference would be for the creation of a new word, as we use the term "single" (not marriedless or marriage-free) or "lesbian" (not manless or male-free). But the creation of new terms is difficult and often causes confusion among readers. For

lack of a better option, I adopt the term childless but with the recognition of the political risks of such a choice. I use the term "not-mother" since it seems more descriptive and specific and less evaluative than "nonmother."

2. Sandra Harding, "Introduction: Is There a Feminist Method?" In her Feminism and Methodology (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987), p. 9.

3. See Jane Flax, Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p 188.

4. These are the words of Barbara Dubois in "Passionate Scholarship: Notes on Values, Knowing and Method in Feminist Social Science." In Gloria Bowles and Renate D. Klein, Theories of Women's Studies (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 109.

5. See Ann Ferguson, Blood At the Root: Motherhood, Sexuality and Male Dominance (London: Pandora, 1989), p. 245.

6. See Pamela Daniels and Kathy Weingarten, Sooner or Later: The Timing of Parenthood in Adult Lives (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1983) and Lillian Rubin, Women of a Certain Age: The Midlife Search for Self (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), for further information about network sampling.

7. Demographic studies of intentionally childless women present an image of the "typical" case: White, middle-class, highly educated, employed, urban, from a small family-of-origin, and not religious. Yet such a portrait reflects the racial bias of researchers as a 1989 review article on black-white differences in childlessness by Robert Boyd demonstrates. Boyd reports that approximately one-third of African-American women in the birth cohorts 1900-1919 were permanently childless, exceeding the childless rates of white women. Boyd suggests that voluntary childlessness was partly responsible for this fall in fertility rates contradicting the notion that the increase in black childlessness was the result of poor health.

8. See Carolyn Kay Steedman, Landscape for a Good Woman (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), p.84.

9. See Biddy Martin, "Feminism, Criticism, and Foucault," in Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance, ed. Irene Diamond and L. Quinby (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), p.18.

10. Claire Armon-Jones, "The Social Functions of Emotion." In Rom Harré, ed. The social Construction of Emotions (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1986), p. 57-82.

11. See Karen Tice, "Gender and social Work Education: Directions for the 1990's." In Journal of Social Work Education, Spring/Summer 1990, p.136.

12. Tice, p. 136.