

A study of childlessness in Britain

The views and experiences of those who choose not to have children have remained largely hidden. The public face of childlessness is that of involuntary childlessness. This small-scale intensive study is the first to look at voluntary childlessness in Britain for over a decade, and the first to examine experiences outside marriage as well as within it. The study, by Fiona McAllister with Lynda Clarke at the Family Policy Studies Centre, provides evidence that challenges much of the received wisdom about people who choose childlessness.

- f* Growing childlessness is a Europe-wide phenomenon and the UK has one of the highest levels.
- f* Few people had made an early irrevocable decision not to have children. Deciding not to have children was a process that took place in the context of other life events, particularly partnerships.
- f* Highly qualified women are more likely to remain childless but career identity did not emerge as central to personal identity or personal fulfilment for the majority of voluntarily childless people. On the contrary, early retirement proved a popular goal.
- f* Childfree people were not self-centred individuals. The absence of children did not necessarily mean the absence of other caring responsibilities.
- f* Contrary to the popular view that childlessness is part of an 'alternative' lifestyle, people choosing lives without children held conventional views about partnerships and parenting - but were averse to taking risks. For women living alone, single parenthood was not considered a viable option. Most people emphasised the individual responsibility that choosing parenthood entails.
- f* Parenthood was clearly identified with disruption, change, poverty and dependency. Comparing the advantages and disadvantages of not having children and parenthood, the picture was one of independence contrasted with constraint; material security in contrast with financial risk.
- f* A rejection of parenthood was not matched by a rejection of children's place in society. Most childless people were in favour of supporting children through taxes.
- f* The pressure to have children was different for women and men. For women, the process of letting go of the possibility of having children was often more attenuated. Men tended to make a more cut-and-dried decision - or felt more secure in expressing it as such.

Background

This study arose from suggestions in national statistics that increasing numbers of women are remaining childless. While it is difficult to assess the exact extent of voluntary childlessness, the projection that one in five women of childbearing age may remain childless has become common knowledge. This study reviewed the demographic trends and carried out in-depth, qualitative work with 34 women (and some of their partners), investigating why they had decided not to have children.

The complexity of decision-making over time

Private experiences of decision-making in childbearing show considerable variation in the pathways and patterns of intention which people have followed. Deciding not to have children is a process which takes place in the context of work, life experiences, personal health and relationships. In order to analyse this process, this study devised a continuum of categories of childless people, by separating respondents' accounts into those who: are certain that they do not want children

- are *certain* that they do not want children - they had made a firm decision at an early stage that they did not want to have children, and had never wavered in this resolve.
- are *certain now* that they do not want children - those people who had experienced some doubts in the past but have now made a clear decision.
- *accept* childlessness - mainly women in their forties who had either anticipated having children or had gone through a phase of wanting them, and then had reassessed their decision.
- are *ambivalent* and have never taken a decision about not having or having children - in this group there was a distinction between those who were postponing the decision and those who had never seriously addressed the matter.
- feel that the decision not to have children was '*taken for me*' - these included people who had experienced problems conceiving but had not taken the option to pursue fertility treatment; or whose life experiences or choice of partner precluded the possibility of having children.

The variety of experience represented in the continuum indicates that a range of positive, childless adult identities is possible.

Living to work or working to live?

Voluntarily childless women have often been portrayed as the 'ultimate feminists', choosing to live free from patriarchal influences and centring their

lives on achievement in the workplace. Choosing not to have children has been viewed as further evidence of the dissociation of women from their 'traditional' roles as homemakers and mothers. This study shows that commitment to work, like commitment to childlessness, changed over time and the two are best viewed as an interactive process. While work histories included episodes of devotion to work for some women, careers were not a particular priority. More important to both men and women was the general quality of life, which meant a basic level of economic security, good housing and a preference for egalitarian relationships for those with partners.

Childfree but not family-free

Childfree people often played an integral part in family networks and some were very active in supporting siblings with children or caring for older parents. Since childfree people had relatively stable lives they could be important to their families in times of crisis. In several instances, this had involved considerable commitment, including extended periods of co-residence with kin.

Radical alternative or conservative choice?

There was little evidence to support the idea that a childfree lifestyle is the outcome of 'alternative' values. Conventional views about parenthood were expressed by those who had chosen childlessness. The voluntarily childless people in this study emerged as thoughtful and responsible about what parenting might mean. They find it variously undesirable, difficult or impossible to incorporate it into their lives.

Perceptions of parenthood

What voluntarily childless people say about parenthood gives an insight into some of the difficulties of deciding to become parents today.

One in five respondents felt there were no disadvantages to remaining childless and saw no advantages to parenthood. They were particularly sceptical of what they perceived as the traditional advantage of children: care in old age.

Parenthood was viewed as:

- total responsibility
- total commitment
- sacrifice - social, emotional and financial

Parental responsibility was variously described as 'huge' and 'imperative' and its permanence stressed through phrases like 'they never ever stop being responsible for them'. Childlessness represented freedom to be independent adults who pursued their own interests.

If individuals and couples take time to acquire the stable and independent circumstances they feel children need, then it becomes more difficult to make a responsible decision to have children early. Adults who value equality in relationships, a stable and adequate domestic environment, a reasonable job and economic security may find it increasingly hard to become parents. Far from being a generation who can 'have it all', respondents saw themselves as making considerable effort to maintain a reasonable quality of life without children.

Rejecting parenthood, not children

Parenthood was sometimes ruled out because of the difficulties of creating the appropriate conditions for family life, as much as for any negative perception of children.

Most were broadly favourable to supporting children through taxes, particularly for education. Respondents were rather more ambivalent about support for poor families, but these views are not unusual, reflecting the climate of debate in recent years which has emphasised the need to address 'welfare dependency'.

Gender and choosing childlessness

People feel more entitled to ask a woman why she has not had children because having a child continues to be more central to a woman's social identity. For men, the construction is somewhat different - fatherhood is relatively low on the public agenda of manhood (although this shows some signs of changing).

Parenthood requires decisions to be made about the division of labour within a relationship, decisions which usually result in women bearing the primary responsibility for home and children, while men continue to work outside the home. This study indicates that a wish for a joint parenting approach is frequently an issue for voluntarily childless women: if they feel their partner will not readily share the domestic responsibilities of parenthood, it is an additional disincentive to having children. Men in the study also highlighted the benefits of egalitarian partnerships and viewed parenthood as incompatible with these values.

There were few positive perceptions of parents balancing work and family life, which reflects the lack of coherent policies to facilitate workable combinations of employment and childcare at the time of the study, and the low status of parenthood as an activity in its own right.

Implications for further research

Research into fertility behaviour and expectations of childbearing is bedevilled by several important gaps. Firstly, there is the issue that national statistics rarely

provide any means of differentiating voluntary and involuntary childlessness. This makes it difficult to monitor time trends effectively. Secondly, there is a need for more information about men as partners and non-parents. Relatively little is known about childless marriages and partnerships, and it would be interesting to see if the larger age gaps between partners noted in this study are reflected in the wider population. Men's fertility could be better recorded in surveys, and researchers could examine the implications for fertility measures of including men's reports as well as women's.

The spectrum of decision-making in voluntary childlessness in this study is only part of the wider picture of fertility behaviour and decision-making in the population at large. There has been little recent research looking at the decision to become parents. *Planned* parenthood is an accepted ideal, and yet it is self-evident that many parents do not make an active decision to have children.

The voluntarily childless people in this study connected parenthood with a range of personal and social sacrifices. To what extent do parents identify with this view, and what do they see as the benefits of raising children? At the other end of the fertility spectrum, it is important that attention is paid to the ambiguities in infertility. Some accounts in the study are an important reminder that subfertility and pursuit of treatment do not always go hand in hand.

Research questions could, therefore, be more sensitive to the ambivalence many people feel concerning their fertility intentions. It would be valuable to know more about the relationships between housing and fertility choices by collecting housing histories at the same time as data related to fertility expectations.

Implications for future policy

Since voluntary childlessness is relatively under-researched and requires more data and better monitoring of trends, any implications for policy arising from this small-scale study can only be suggestive.

Most policy measures in this area are implicit and related to supporting parents and children in diverse and often diffuse ways - via the tax and benefits system and through provision of public services. Infertility services represent the other end of the spectrum, where explicit regulations govern the circumstances of assisted reproduction. At what point might voluntary childlessness warrant policy interventions?

The evidence presented here suggests that now is not the time for direct intervention in Britain - fertility rates may be low, but in fact the UK has one of the higher fertility rates in the European Community. Any policy 'encouraging childbearing'

may be seen as affecting voluntary childlessness by making it a less attractive option - economically or socially. However, the relationship between policy support for additional children and national fertility behaviour is by no means clear, as experience in other countries demonstrates.

Three areas to monitor for future fertility policy

The reasons that people are choosing not to become parents suggest three areas of policy concern:

- **More choice for young people in parenting and childlessness**
For people in the key years of decision-making concerning parenthood, the difficulties of integrating secure employment and any desire for children are important issues. These have private dimensions in terms of men and women negotiating reasonable balances between work and childcare, and public dimensions in that policy could respond to the desire for greater equity in parenthood through more flexible employment.
- **Access to affordable housing**
Housing conditions can influence the priority that people place on parenthood. Respondents in this study expressed the view that a stable and desirable home was a prerequisite for having children - not something they had all achieved.
- **Information about fertility levels**
There is an argument for policy intervention in terms of information and health education about fertility levels. A continuing trend of delaying parenthood means that women (and men) need to be well-informed about the declining chances of conception in their thirties, just as they are regularly reminded of the costs and implications of teenage pregnancies and unplanned childbearing.

All these areas are concerned with creating a climate of informed choice, rather than one where constraints are experienced by default.

About the study

The report includes one chapter that explores the demographic background of childlessness, including new evidence about expectations of childlessness using the General Household Survey.

The research project itself was a qualitative study,

using a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 34 voluntarily childless women aged 35-49. The fieldwork was carried out in 1996. Eleven of the interviewees had partners (either cohabiting or married) who also took part. The sampling methodology covered people in all socio-economic groupings and included unmarried women who had opted to remain childless as well as those currently in couple relationships. Respondents were selected from a nationally representative survey sample which gives the study wider scope than previous work in this area.

How to get further information

Further information can be obtained from Ceridwen Roberts, The Family Policy Studies Centre, 9 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9SN, Tel: 0171 388 5900, Fax 0171 388 5600, e-mail: fpsc@mailbox.ulcc.ac.uk.

The full report, *Choosing childlessness* by Fiona McAllister with Lynda Clarke, is available from the Family Policy Studies Centre (address above) price £11.95 plus £1.50 p&p (ISBN 1 901455 12 2).

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- Exploring variations in men's family roles, Jun 96 (*SP99*)
- Parenting in the 1990s, Oct 96 (*SP106*)
- Family obligations in Europe, Nov 96 (*SP107*)
- Expenditure on children in Great Britain, Jul 97 (*SP118*)
- Fathers and fatherhood in Britain, Jul 97 (*SP120*)
- Changing mortality ratios in local areas of Britain 1950s-1990s, Aug 97 (*SP126*)
- Combining work and care: working parents of disabled children, May 98 (*F538*)
- Young parents' contact with their relatives, May 98 (*F578*)
- Step-parenting in the 1990s, Jun 98 (*F658*)

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