

WEBLOG DISCOURSES ON VOLUNTARY CHILDLISSNESS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of voluntarily childless individuals who write discourses on weblogs. This research addresses the bloggers' narratives on who the voluntarily childless bloggers are, what their perceptions are of the dominant reproductive culture, what common experiences are faced by these bloggers in their day to day lives, and how the bloggers express resistance to the normative culture of procreation. The method used is content analysis of eight weblogs. My analysis is an exploratory study of identifying themes of the weblog posts, as well as an examination of how the themes fall into the theoretical framework within the resistance literature. The bloggers bring visibility to voluntarily childless individuals, and show how they use various methods such as myth busting, stigma reversal and creating their own narratives to establish their resistance to the dominant reproductive culture. For a group that is marginalized, this autonomy to create their own narratives is empowering. This study gives a glimpse into how women are redefining femininity by changing the rules, and demonstrates how weblogs can be used in various ways to communicate and express resistance to dominant discourses.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

There is a hegemonic notion that adults, especially those who are married, want to and should have children. Reproduction after marriage is endorsed and encouraged by most religions, with many promoting childrearing practices (Veevers 1980). Russo (1976) invented the term “motherhood mandate” in 1976 to reflect the dominant view of how motherhood is enshrouded deeply in femininity. The perception is prevalent in society that women who fail to procreate are “defective” and not complete adults (Hird 2003).

Childless individuals are perceived with skepticism by society. The “Ideology of Marriage and Family” (DePaulo and Morris 2005) proclaims that cultures around the world puts elevated value on marriage and childbearing. This understated yet overvalued ideology forms how people perceive childlessness and creates social expectations around the cultural social clock (Rook, Catalano, and Dooley 1989). This ideology has directed society into a nation of “intensive coupling, intensive parenting and intensive nuclearity” (DePaulo and Morris 2005: 58). Therefore, being childless is seen as falling outside the cultural norm.

Due to the “Ideology of Marriage and Family,” individuals who choose not to have children are stigmatized (Veevers 1980). Couples who do not have children are often seen as individuals who have not been able to achieve an important milestone in life. Due to this stigma, voluntarily childless individuals show a deep and fundamental tone of resistance to the normative culture that pressures them to choose procreation. They show resistance in different ways to these social and cultural expectations.

Due to these cultural expectations, voluntarily childless individuals cannot usually speak openly about their decision in their everyday lives. This means that they must find

some safe space to express their choice that minimizes social and emotional consequences. Thus, some individuals who are voluntarily childless have taken to expressing their views on the internet. This sorts their worlds into an offline world (where these individuals are trying to minimize social costs due to their choice), and an online world (where they are allowed to express their thoughts on voluntary childlessness freely).

Weblogs are one such online medium. Blogging is a way for anyone with an internet connection to reach out to others through digital space by writing on topics of personal interest. Blogging is unique in that many people use it as an open online journal (Nardi et al. 2004) and it is thought to be a safe space to find like-minded people and connect through similar experiences (Kim and Chung 2007). Some individuals have blogged for many years, showing commitment to continuous writing on that platform and the extent to which their own identity is intricately tied to a cause.

My research explores an original way of understanding voluntary childlessness by examining weblogs as independently written discourses. Weblogs are especially rich sources of data, as voluntarily childless individuals have the freedom to communicate what is on their mind. Additionally, these weblog discourses are utilized to research resistance ideologies of the voluntarily childless. Therefore, I conducted content analysis of weblogs written by voluntarily childless individuals.

In this thesis, I begin with the literature review section (chapter 2) which addresses the demographic and personal characteristics of voluntary childless individuals, describes the social stigma experienced by them, discusses the resistance to the normative culture of procreation, and considers how weblogs are used as tools to allow voluntary childless individuals space for self-expression. Then I turn to my research methods (chapter 3) where

I explain my inclusion criteria for selecting the weblogs, my approach to data analysis, as well as any potential validity threats that may arise when I conduct my research.

I then delve into my findings that explore: first, who the voluntarily childless bloggers are and what their perceptions are of the dominant reproductive culture (chapter 4); second, what common experiences are faced by these bloggers in their day to day lives (chapter 5); and third, how the bloggers express resistance to the normative culture of procreation (Chapter 6). I conclude by analyzing the theoretical implications of my findings, stating the limitations of my study as well as suggesting some areas for further research (Chapter 7).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE CONCEPT OF VOLUNTRARY CHLDLESSNESS

Types of Childlessness

Childlessness is usually categorized in two main ways in the sociological literature: involuntary and voluntary. The distinction between the two categories pertains to the choice or the absence of choice in being childless. In the academic literature, the phenomenon of permanently not wanting children is labeled as “voluntarily childlessness” (Veevers 1980). However, in the community, the phenomenon is known as “childfreedom” and the individuals identify themselves as being “childfree.” The term “childfree” was legitimized by Paul (2001) who defined the dissimilarity between the words “childless” and “childfree” though the usage of both terms had been prevalent within the voluntary childless community since the 1970s. He suggested the term “childfree” to mean individuals who have consciously chosen not to have children permanently, whereas “childless” means to be deprived of parenthood as these individuals would like to have children but are unable to do so.

Voluntary childlessness individuals choose not to have children permanently and are committed to the decision (Houseknecht 1977). These individuals are not likely to change their minds about having children at a later point in time. However, researchers have observed that some individuals make this decision at an early age (“early articulators”), whereas others make this decision at a later stage in their life (“postponers”) (Houseknecht 1977; Veevers 1980). Early articulators seem to have a certainty about the decision from a much younger age, whereas postponers are thought to have been putting off the decision and

eventually having to make a conscious choice, perhaps due to nearing the end of their reproductive age and/or being able to finally analyze feelings on the matter.

Other researchers (such as McQuallian et al. 2012), however, suggest that there are more than two categories of childlessness. There are a range of explanations that women are childless, and situation also plays a large role in it (McQuillan et al. 2012). Some women state that they do not have children due to timing concerns of finding a partner or not being able to conceive for other circumstances. Therefore, childlessness cannot be classified into two neat categories of voluntary and involuntary. Furthermore, some individuals may also change their minds about childbearing along their life course due to life situation, as well as due to personal reflection.

Demographic Data on Voluntary Childlessness

Less women are having children today and the United States has seen the lowest percentage of births in recent times. The U.S. Census Bureau did a population survey (2014) where they recorded that women under the age of 44 who had never had children are at an all-time high, at 47.6 per cent. In 2012, this percentage was 46.5 per cent. The National Center for Health Statistics shows that in 2013, for every 1000 women (below the age of 45) there were 62.9 births. There is an overall shift in how many women are having children.

The rise in this trend can be seen through past national data. The National Center for Health Statistics (see Paul 2001) indicates that in 1982, 1990, and 1995, the growth in voluntary childless women was 2.4 percent, 4.3 percent and 6.6 percent respectively. Figures indicate that of women between the ages of 40 to 44, almost 20 percent were childless, whereas it was approximately 10 percent 30 years ago—showing that the rate of childlessness has doubled in the United States Census (see Jayson 2009).

Though this is an estimate number of women who are childless, these numbers show an increased rate of growth in voluntary childlessness compared to involuntary childlessness. In fact, involuntary childlessness has decreased over time due to better medical cures for infertility and sexually transmitted diseases as well as generally improved health in individuals (Heaton, Jacobson, and Holland 1999).

Voluntary childlessness is becoming more prevalent due to structural factors such as urbanization which has led to increased opportunities for education and work for women (Poston and Trent 1982). Other structural reasons such as improved availability of contraception, changing sexual norms as well as new patterns in women's work preference leads to later family formation in the life cycle (Poston and Gotard 1977), as well as foregoing having children altogether.

Moreover, these percentages only show the number of women who are voluntarily childless and does not account for the men. Currently, there is no national data available for men in the United States who are voluntarily childless as there is no mechanism in place to collect such data. Most studies on voluntary childlessness have focused on women, as having children is seen as a woman's role in the society—and also because birthing a child is directly related to women's bodies. Fewer studies have been done on voluntarily childless men to understand the gender differences on being voluntarily childless.

Most researchers (Durham 2008; Durham and Braithwaite 2009) have focused on studying choices of married women and not taken into account women and men who are not yet married. However, voluntary childlessness does not necessarily have to be linked to marital status (Houseknecht 1977). In fact, only 53 percent of individuals who are voluntarily childless have ever been married (Abma and Martinez 2006). Furthermore, child

bearing choices can be situation-based—and are not always made independently of life circumstances (Boddington and Didham 2009). Therefore, people might alter their choices with changing circumstances. This might lead to ambiguity while calculating postponed childbearing as it might be calculated as either voluntary or involuntary childlessness.

Characteristics of Voluntarily Childless Individuals

Along with these demographic patterns, it is imperative to understand the individuals themselves. Why these men and women want to be voluntarily childless is at the forefront of inquiry. Reasons observed for being voluntarily childless are autonomy, the prioritization of “quality” time with spouse, career advancement, concern over population growth, disinclination toward children, worries about appropriate parenting capability, fear of the child-birth process, and concerns about bringing up children in the existing environment (Houseknecht 1977).

Along with reasons for being voluntarily childless, researchers have found some repeating patterns in these individuals’ traits, behaviors, and lifestyle choices. Characteristics often found in voluntarily childless individuals include being more modern and open-minded in one’s gender role (Callan 1983; Bram 1984), having an advanced level of schooling (Chandra et al. 1997; Bachu 1999; Biddlecom and Martin 2006; Dykstra et al. 2008; Kneale and Joshi 2008), living mainly in cities (DeOllos and Kapinus 2002), being less religiously inclined (Mosher, Johnson et al. 1986; Heaton, Mosher, Williams et al. 1992; Jacobson et al. 1992), and being steady in their vocation and having greater monetary stability (Crispell 1993; Abma and Peterson 1995; Bachu 1999; Gramotnev et al. 2006). Voluntary childless duos have been seen to have autonomy, less anxiety, more monetary

rewards and higher job flexibility than couples with children (Connidis and McMullin 1999).

Moreover, voluntarily childless men and women have certain characteristic differences. Unlike what is stated in the “motherhood mandate” (Russo 1976), voluntarily childless women do not subscribe to the belief that having a child is fundamental to their identities (Gillespie 2000b). Most of them differentiate between liking and wanting children. Women who are voluntarily childless also speak of the value of marriage and how they did not need children to increase the quality of their marriages (Gillespie 2000a). In addition, most voluntary childless women say they lack the “maternal instinct” required to rear a child, are disinterested in children and the idea of parenting, and articulate that having children does not match with their lifestyle choices (Park 2005). In contrast, most men provide financial reasons for choosing to be childless (Park 2005). Men are more inclined than women to focus on their careers, to travel unconstrained, and also to attribute the choice to negative childhood experiences (e.g., poverty and abuse) (Lunneborg 1999).

A study done in Italy (Tanturri 2012) shows some major differences among voluntarily childless men and women; men who are voluntarily childless are in the lower rung of society due to low education, health, and ambition (“unsuccessful men”) while voluntarily childless women are more likely to be childless to attain higher educational degrees or positions at work (“power women”). However, in the same study, men and women choosing to be voluntarily childless were found to be similar based on breakdown in marriage or long-term relationship, modern attitudes, and geographical areas (in this case, Northern Italy versus Southern Italy).

Likewise, voluntarily childless women and women who had (or wanted) children had differences between them. The voluntarily childless women hold a more democratic view of how housework should be conducted, give greater emphasis on their career goals, and are more likely to mention the importance of closeness and companionship with their respective partners (Bram 1984). These women are also more likely to say they are not conventional in their thoughts and actions, are more independent and dominant natured, and more competitive in their careers. The study concluded that psychological aspects were more important than situational ones for this group of voluntarily childless women (Bram 1984).

Class and race also play an important role. In the case of social class, on average, voluntarily childless individuals have more disposable income than parents (Abma and Martinez 2006). However, researchers observe that some poor individuals are foregoing the option to have children due to financial constraints (Krishnan 1993; Heaton et al. 1999). In the case of race, European Americans have a higher probability of being voluntarily childless than women of color (Abma and Martinez 2006; Dye 2008). African American women and Latinas have more children on average than white women, as well as earlier on in their lives, and have a high percentage of having children out of wedlock (Dye 2008).

From a life course perspective, voluntary childless couples' life cycles usually consist of four distinct stages: first, the decision-making process; second, managing stigma individually and collectively; third, defining their identities; and fourth, seeking social support groups (Pelton and Herlein 2011). It has also been observed that voluntarily childless women in their midlife do not regret their decision (DeLyser 2012). This is because they usually revisit the decision at various points of their life and confirm that they are still attuned to being voluntarily childless.

THE SOCIAL STIGMA OF VOLUNTRAY CHLDLESSNESS

The decision to procreate is influenced by cultural and social narratives about femininity and motherhood. It is seen as a customary and common course of action for the female identity (Gillespie 2000b). Anything posing a threat to traditional family norms is seen as deviant behavior (Berger and Luckman 1966). Additionally, procreation is the predicted prescription for adult life course, suggesting childless women have a “deficit status” (Park 2002). The notion of motherhood is still fundamental for a woman (Ireland 1993; May 1995), though this notion is not as strong as it used to be (Ryder 1990). “Stigma theory” states that a certain stereotype is assigned to people who do not conform to what is “normal” in the context of the cultural society (Goffman 1963). As a result, childless individuals are stigmatized for threatening the pro-family and pronatalistic values of society.

There is condemnation of childless individuals, for both biological reasons (“stigmatized for their physical abnormalities”) and for choosing to be childless (“blemished characters”) due to the active choice of the lifestyle (Veveers 1980). However, not all types of childlessness are stigmatized in the same way or to the same extent. Voluntarily childlessness is viewed more undesirably than involuntarily childlessness (Ganong, Coleman, and Mapes 1990), with the latter usually receiving sympathy for their condition (Lampman and Dowling-Guyer 1995). In the past, people used to perceive childlessness as deviant behavior and think of voluntarily childless individuals as selfish and not fully matured as adults (Popenoe 1936). However, recent studies show that voluntary childless are not seen as deviant, even though they are still stigmatized widely due to the perceptions that society has of these individuals.

General perceptions of voluntary childless couples are that they do not have good marriages, are selfish, might be immature, are materially driven, are too career-oriented and are lonely (Blake 1979; Veevers 1980; Peterson 1983; Miall 1986). Voluntarily childless women are seen as independent thinkers, yet stigmatized as unambitious, self-centered, meaner and emotionally less healthy in general (LaMastro 2001). There is an underlying assumption that something is wrong with voluntarily childless women, because apparently the women want children but have not figured that out for themselves (Cambell 2003). As far as perceptions of men are concerned, they are seen as less compassionate as well as less ambitious than fathers (Lampman and Dowling-Guyer 1995). Even though both men and women are stigmatized, voluntarily childless women are seen more negatively than voluntarily childless men (Park 2002).

One key reason why the voluntarily childless women are ostracized more than their male counterparts is because women are expected to do care work in their daily roles as mothers, wives and daughters (Henderson and Allen 1991). It is confirming of the notion that women want to care for others while neglecting one's own upkeep as to not appear selfish. This phenomenon is named the "ethics of care" by Henderson and Allen (1991). According to this ethic, women are not supposed to feel entitled to leisure time—or any time to do things that they personally enjoy, as it would incite feelings of guilt. If this is the case, voluntarily childless women are seen as escaping the role of motherhood—a major caretaking role—which is socially expected with their feminine identity in the culture.

However, different groups hold different degrees of stigma toward voluntary childlessness. White women are more accepting of voluntary childlessness than men and the most negative judgment comes from people who have children, are older, and have less

education (Koropeckyj-Cox 1988; Seccombe 1991). Mothers' perceptions of voluntarily childless women are that voluntarily childless individuals are money and material oriented, as well as nonconformists (Callan 1983).

These perceptions in society adversely affect voluntarily childless individuals. There are five ways that the voluntary childless are discriminated against (Mollen 2006): first, by not being considered important when talking about children; second, by being expected to work longer; third, by being considered strange; fourth, by being pitied for not having children; and finally, by facing judgment.

When a group faces prejudice, there is usually a reaction to it. When looking at voluntary childlessness, one cannot ignore the profound and underlying tone of resistance that these individuals are showing to the normative view of the "Ideology of Marriage and Family" (DePaulo and Morris 2005).

VOLUNTRAY CHILDLISSNESS AND RESISTANCE

What is Resistance and What is its Relationship to Power?

Voluntarily childless individuals have made an unvalued decision with respect to normative culture through their sense of agency. Agency is the act of being able to think and act for oneself, even when there are more powerful cultural narratives that oppose those views (Davis and Gannon 2005). It is important to understand how these individuals resist the culture of the "Ideology of Marriage and Family" (DePaulo and Morris 2005), and attempt to free themselves of stigma from the perceptions that come with being voluntarily childless.

Before exploring how voluntarily childless individuals show resistance to stigma, it is important to define resistance. The term resistance is used broadly in the sociological

literature and there are various definitions of it. Some researchers explain resistance as inquiring and opposing (Modigliani and Rochart 1995); performing independently for one's own wants (Gregg 1993); and acting in a way even though there is opposition (Carr 1998). Simply put, it is largely agreed that it is an "oppositional act" (Vinthagen and Johansson 2013). For resistance to occur, not only must individuals disregard the lowered status they have, but they must also challenge it (Weitz 2001).

If there is a perceived relegated status, it is because there must also be a glorified one. A discussion of resistance comes hand in hand with a discussion of power. Resistance is usually designated as a reaction to power (Vinthagen and Johansson 2013). The changing nature of resistance to adapt to changing states of power implies that as resistance reacts to power, power also reacts to resistance. Traditionally, this action-reaction is usually seen as lead by power and followed by resistance (Vinthagen and Johansson 2013). However, others (Hardt and Negri 2004) have noticed that it is not always necessarily so.

Resistance can also be a proactive act by itself. This means that resistance can create new ways of acting, whereas, power can only assert and organize the position it is originally claiming (Hardt and Negri 2004). However, resistance does not have to oppose every aspect of power, but certain significant aspects of power that the individuals who are resisting feel are unwarranted (Vinthagen and Johansson 2013). Therefore, resistance can embrace certain aspects of power, while resisting other dimensions of it.

There are several different forms of power and several different forms of resistance that have been identified in the sociological literature. Resistance has a broad range of meanings as well as applicability (institutional, collective, and individual) to social phenomenon (Hollander and Einwohner 2004). Resistance can take many forms: political

(such as riots) (McAdam et al. 2001), physical (such as violence) (Carr 1998), through speech and symbolic conduct (Silva 1997), as well as through silence (Pickering 2000). To simplify, there are two main types of resistance: the public (or overt) and private (or covert resistance) (Scott 1985).

As mentioned, some forms of resistance are collective and visible and others are subtle and implicit. The former usually takes a more political form of resistance and the latter takes a more cultural one. Resistance is usually associated more readily with social movements, such as protests in political capacity (Jasper 1997). When the cultural form of resistance is practiced with high frequency — it is called “everyday resistance” (Scott 1985). As this study deals with individual resistance and not collective and organized resistance, the concept of “everyday resistance” (Scott 1985) is especially important.

Everyday Resistance

Scott (1985) discusses “everyday resistance” by poor peasants in Malaysia: “The goal, after all, of the great bulk of peasant resistance is not directly to overthrow or transform a system of domination but rather to survive—today, this week, this season—within it” (1985: 301). Resistance can be seen as acted on at every opportunity one gets in their daily lives to oppose imposed systems on the group (de Certeau 1984). Resistance can manifest itself into repetitive and nondramatic ways. Due to the implicitness of these acts, resistance might be difficult to recognize (de Certeau 1984).

These subtle acts of resistance in everyday are called “infrapolitics” (Scott 1985). “Infrapolitics” stresses specific practices that have political purpose or significances but are not treated or perceived as political in that culture by targets of the resistance. Such acts of resistance can be disguised and vague: “Instead of a clear message delivered by a disguised

messenger, an ambiguous message is delivered by clearly identified messengers” (Scott 1989: 54-55). Acts of resistance may be visible but these acts are mostly politically invisible as they are not in line with what we know as conventional politics (Kwan and Roth 2011; Vinthagen and Johansson 2013). These sorts of acts can be called “embedded resistance” that affect the hegemonic culture by working within the system and expanding the boundaries of culture (Mihelich and Storrs 2003).

Cultural boundaries alter due to the high frequency of everyday individual resistance. This type of resistance becomes a part of the individual’s culture. The individuals resisting may not even be conscious of their resistance anymore as it has become habitual (Bryant 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 2000). Some individuals act in certain ways out of indifference rather intended resistance (Kerkvliet 2009) and this indifference can also be seen as a passive form of resistance. This brings up an important question of how conscious the actors themselves are of resisting the dominant culture. Recognition of resistance needs to be there either by the individuals resisting, the target, or an observer for it to be labeled resistance (Hollander and Einwohner 2004). Recognition then becomes a matter of identifying intents and acts.

The intent to resist can be consciously known by the individual resisting or not be known to them and occur as a subconscious reaction. Some of these acts are visible to the target, and some of them are not (Hollander and Einwohner 2004). Thus, resistance can also be inundated through affect (Hynes 2013). Affect is the ability to influence and be influenced (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Affect is beyond emotion, but influences it. Experience is subjective to the individuals’ capacity and relates to their sense of power in an experiential capacity (Hynes 2013). Affect is what comes before the act of resistance, and is at the crux of enabling resistance to be conceptualized in the subconscious mind. It starts

from a point in an individual when their freedom is endangered in some way (Hynes 2013). Affect is difficult to measure, yet is an important aspect that cannot be ignored in the study of resistance.

A straightforward concept of resistance does not exist—it is a messy mix of different techniques by individuals using creative and contradictory actions and words (Vinthagen and Johansson 2013). Therefore, the unit of resistance measurement is different performances in a contextualized setting. Thus, it has been established that everyday resistance is a complex concept. There are several theories that establish resistance: as performance, as intertwined with everyday power, as contextual in nature and as something to be intersectionally understood (Vinthagen and Johansson 2013). Resistance, therefore, cannot be defined by certain specific performances, but it lies on a scale that ranges from public conflicts to concealed rebellion.

Resistance and Stigma Reversal

When one group sees another group as relegated, the relegated group in turn may also see the normative group as stigmatized (Goffman 1963). Little work has been done of how stigmatized individuals reject that stigma as well as levy their own stigma on the dominant group (Kusow 2004). This is an imperative idea to explore, as voluntary childless individuals may also look at the individuals who want or have children as stigmatized through their own lens. This reversal of stigma (Killian 1985) itself is an embedded act of everyday resistance for voluntarily childless individuals. Perhaps the voluntary childless individuals seek and create their own separate “system of honor” (Goffman 1963:7) in contrast to the hegemonic one when it comes to decisions of child bearing.

The relegated group may use allegations of ethics and responsibility against the dominant group to assert their advantage position (Killian 1985). They do this using the idea of “symbolic boundary” (Lamont and Molnar 2002) that is used to build the idea of how to emphasize advantage over conventional ideologies (Espiritu 2001). Voluntarily childless bloggers may be rejecting the stigma and, furthermore, disparaging the mainstream ideology of childbearing and the individuals who follow it.

Resistance Strategies

The knowledge of being voluntarily childless does not remain only with the individuals who have chosen it as a lifestyle. With time, it becomes visible to a certain extent. Eventually, it usually has to be disclosed to certain people in their social network, especially their immediate family (such as partners, parents, siblings, and in-laws), close friends, and co-workers. This creates a difficult situation as admission of the voluntary childless status brings about the onset of a stigmatized one. Individuals who choose to be childless must endure certain negative stereotypical depictions of themselves from other people (e.g., selfish, strange, materialistic) (Park 2002). Accordingly, the voluntarily childless use certain strategies to communicate to the social world their choices. This means that they disclose just enough and in the right way to achieve minimal amount of social discomfort for their choice.

There are different levels of unveiling of the decision to different individuals in their social network (Park 2002). This selective disclosure may range from revealing everything about the decision to be childless to not sharing the decision at all with the other. The timing between when the decision to be voluntarily childless was made and the decision of when to disclose to various individuals in their network depends on many different factors

and, in some cases, may span years. For example, telling a partner about the decision to be voluntarily childless usually happens at the earlier stages of the relationship and with high level of exposé, whereas sharing the choice with parents, friends, or co-workers may take years to disclose. Therefore, a critical factor about how much is revealed depends on the relationship with the target individual or group that the decision is being shared with.

There are three types of practices in resistance literature that are found most frequently regarding how voluntarily childless individuals communicate their decision (Vinthagen and Johansson 2013): confrontation, accommodation, or escape/avoidance. In confronting strategies, one would have to look at context and the accumulative consequences to identify it as resistance. For example, voluntary childless individuals may assert that they are entitled to do what makes them content or engage in counter-questioning on why it should be any different (Park 2002). In accommodation strategies, even though it might be seen as if conforming to power, it is not necessarily so—those individuals can both be socially accommodating and internally resisting in a simultaneously way. For example, they may claim that they could not have children due to biological deficiency such as having no maternal instinct (Park 2002). In avoidance strategies, individuals do not conform to power but nor do they affect power directly. For example, they may passively avoid answering the question or change the subject (Park 2002).

In summary, resistance does not take just one path, but might take several different strategies simultaneously. Individuals alter their performance on an on-going basis to show resistance (Weeks 1998). Thus, individuals may use different techniques mentioned above with different people and in different situations as mechanisms to protect their choice.

Studies done by Riessman (2000) and Nahar and Geest (2014) demonstrate how voluntarily childless women use these strategies to exhibit everyday resistance.

In the first study, Riessman (2000) shows that childless women in South India practice resistance in a moral and symbolic way in their private conversations. They usually do this by talking confidentially to other childless women who are having similar life experiences to allow for expression of their experiences and garner empathy. This enables the women to reject stigma and protect their self-esteem and, thus, negotiate meaning in everyday life. This everyday resistance is similar to what voluntary childless individuals are doing; they are not fighting for basic survival like the peasants who are surviving day by day (as in Scott's (1985) example), but instead are in a constant socially stressful situation which they have to survive daily.

In the second study, Nahar and Geest (2014) state that childless women in Bangladesh use both resistance and resilience as a way to show agency in the face of stigmatization. They found that the stigmatized status affected the women emotionally as they felt that they were culturally punished for their state. However, the women in urban areas could develop alternate identities through work or other achievements. These women also usually avoided social gatherings to avoid questions of their childlessness.

These individual survival narratives show resistance as a common collective pattern. Using these ways to resist stigma and social sanctions, these women form a social front of opposition but they do so individually. From these examples it can be seen how everyday resistance manifests itself (Vinthagen and Johansson 2013): one, that it is done in a casual way which might be ingrained in the doer as a habitual act; two, that it is not dramatic in nature; and three, that it does not have formal governance or organization and is not political

in nature. Therefore, everyday resistance is stimulated by the individual's attitude collectively. These women adapt to lifestyles that can seem to be a casual way of existing, but they might be acts of resistance to dominant childbearing ideological discourses.

Because voluntary childless individuals selectively disclose their decisions in their day-to-day lives, they need a safe space to discuss and explore their experiences with other like-minded individuals. Voluntarily childless individuals may use weblogs as a medium for expression and exploration of their status and choice.

BLOGGING AND THE VOLUNTARY CHILDLESS

The Incentives for Blogging

A search on the internet for “childfree blogs” gives approximately 199,000,000 results on Google alone. However, not all of these are actually blogs, as many of these are articles, websites, forums, and other such pages. There are several Facebook groups on voluntary childlessness, as well as forums and message boards that allow conversation on their shared experiences (Basten 2009). One of the ways the voluntary childless individuals share their thoughts is through weblogs.

Weblogs may be used as a way of expressing oneself by voicing opinions, forming concepts or venting frustrations (Nardi, Schiano, and Gumbrecht 2004). Weblogs are places individuals can write posts akin to diary entries (Nardi, Schiano, and Gumbrecht 2004). A major way that blogging is different from diary writing is that a public blog might have readers from all around the world, thus the geographical distance is dissolved (Van Dijck 2004; Scheidt 2009). Additionally, blogging and internet interactions can be a beneficial way to garner support and create a social network (Kim and Chung 2007), even if the group is marginalized.

Researchers have framed most blogging activity of marginalized groups through the lens of political causes or issues (Pole 2010). However, most of the spaces for public discourses are taken by dominant groups (Steele 2012) and more value has been seen to be given to political resistance than to other types of resistance (Scott 1985; Vinthagen and Johansson 2013).

There are some recurring reasons bloggers may be encouraged to write weblogs. Most bloggers are motivated for intrinsic reasons (Laio, Liu, and Pi 2011). The top two intrinsic reasons were being able to express themselves on the platform and to stay connected to like-minded people. Women bloggers are motivated mostly due to self-expression whereas men bloggers were more focused on outcomes while blogging (Laio, Liu, and Pi 2011). Additionally, there is a weak correlation that exists between intention, motivation, and behavior. This sheds light on the fact that most bloggers do not prioritize receiving responses, making new friends, or eliciting other people's views or opinions in the comment section. This supports that blogging is primarily done for self-expression and putting one's own view forward.

There is another key aspect that makes blogging so appealing to stigmatized groups. In online communities, individuals can disclose facets of their identity (such as gender, physical features, geographical location, and ethnicity) in a controlled manner which is often not possible in a face-to-face setting (Markham 2005). Online interaction may enable more genuine communication as it may be difficult for some individuals to speak about them openly in-person. This is because the consequences related to outward expression in the offline world are much more than in the online world, as individuals can be anonymous when online (Foucault 1997).

The consequences of the digital discourses online rarely traverse into offline consequences as many bloggers are anonymous. The bloggers write posts that state their thoughts on a subject, without having to hold back for fear of judgment. This enables more focused and unified communication on their shared interest (such as the matter of voluntary childlessness) in online settings (Zaphiris et al. 2008) while filtering out the aspects that may contaminate or dilute these conversations. They engage in reaffirming and questioning issues tied to voluntary childlessness and how it affects them.

Moreover, writing could influence the way individuals think and feel about stressful situations (Pennebaker 2000). In a study about cancer patient relatives, Anderson et al. (2013) concluded that blogging has positive and negative effects on bloggers. The positive effects included that it brought like-minded people together, created a supportive digital community, helped in the exploration process, and aided in remembering. The negative effects included being misjudged, condemned, or being viewed as entertainment by readers of the blog. In spite of some negative consequences, these online spaces give individuals the liberty to communicate their beliefs and accounts from their life experiences.

Weblogs as Constructs of Digital Selves

Individuals can create and maintain their self-concept (or a certain aspect of it) through weblogs using digital spaces as fields of possibilities (Foucault 1997; Cambell and Howie 2014). Individuals can engage in evaluating social forces and testing reflexive limits, as a way of practicing freedom (Foucault 1997). The concept of self is a “work of art” and is always in progress (Foucault 1980). It is not only a discovery process but also one where the self is improvised to one’s highest potential (Nehamas 1998). This includes questioning

oneself critically through spontaneous thinking, which creates an evolving identity (Adams 2007).

Moreover, along with this questioning of oneself comes questioning the social norms (Cambell and Howie 2014). Weblogs can be a place where voluntary childless individuals practice freedom of their own self-concept. This occurs as the bloggers are able to compartmentalize themselves differently in different spaces (i.e., online and offline selves).

Personal narrative becomes a way for individuals to assert their ideological positions from their subjective experiences. To look at this from an empirical angle, there are facts that are verifiable, and verifying facts of similar narratives will allow a pattern that is created from the collective data (Bertaux 1996). However, from a social constructionist perspective, it is more important to understand the narrators' experiences than it is to fact check as narratives are discourses that show how meaning-making occurs (Reissman 2001).

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

It is important to understand how to approach the process of content analysis of weblogs. Online research must focus more on constructing new epistemologies than finding them (Baym 2009). With the advent of new media technology, researchers must study the association between the virtual and real life world. Researchers can use new media technology to study groups that have been marginalized – and, thus, have been excluded from the process of being heard (Steele 2012). It allows understanding of how creation of meaning occurs (as well as the production of knowledge) in a different way.

My research examines cultural discourses on voluntary childlessness that emerges in weblogs written by individuals who have chosen this lifestyle. The reason for choosing weblogs as a medium for analysis is due to their rich data, high visibility, and the accessibility of cultural artifacts that have the potential to shape cultural discourses.

I study eight weblogs from United States-based bloggers that are exclusively about voluntary childlessness. Out of the eight weblogs, there are six that are still active and two that are not. All these weblogs started in the 2000s, and some of these weblogs have been ongoing for up to eight years. I do not analyze any images or videos uploaded on the weblogs. I use latent and manifest coding to decipher the messages that arise and understand how resistance is being shown to normative childbearing notions.

Sample and Inclusion Criteria

I found over 70 weblogs that were related to voluntary childlessness on the internet, and developed my inclusion criteria to filter the weblogs I would be exploring. I outline my inclusion criteria and justify why these are important for my analysis.

First, I analyze only public weblogs that are exclusively dedicated to voluntarily childless topics. There are many weblogs that have a variety of topic areas that are written about including voluntarily childless topics, but I have excluded them from my study as I want to focus on weblogs written by individuals whose main purpose is to express personal views on voluntarily childlessness. Second, I study only weblogs that have one author or those weblogs that are written jointly by a couple. I include couples who blog about child freedom as well, as it would enable me to analyze any gender difference patterns that emerge. Third, the weblogs contain personal perceptions of the blogger(s). There are some weblogs that post research done by academics or the media exclusively, but the authors personal opinion writing is minimal or nonexistent. I have excluded such weblogs as I am interested in understanding the bloggers' personal notions of voluntary childlessness. Fourth, the bloggers did not receive any payment to write the weblog. It is important that the weblog is a self-motivated effort by the blogger. Payment from a source may influence who the writer is writing for and might take away creative freedom to write their own perceptions and experiences. Fifth, the bloggers were all residing in the United States. This is to keep the geographical and cultural aspect of social expectations of childbearing as uniform as possible. Sixth, the bloggers have written for at least three years for analysis. This is to ensure that there is rich material to analyze over a period of time to show emerging patterns in the content.

More than 70 weblogs that I found about voluntary childlessness were narrowed down to eight due to my inclusion criteria. This is because many of the voluntarily childless weblogs were written by groups of people, were written by people who lived outside the

Unites States, were not exclusively about voluntarily childless, or were written by individuals who were not voluntarily childless, but involuntarily childless.

Data Analysis

My research question pertains to the thematic aspects of the weblog posts. For this analysis, I read all posts from the eight weblogs and use a combination of methods to sculpt out the major topic categories. I reviewed weblogs from their start period until December 2015. The earliest weblog started in June 2005. All the weblogs I reviewed had started sometime in the 2000s.

The weblog content is available online and accessible as they are in the public sphere. The average number of posts per weblog is around 200. So in total, for 8 weblogs, I analyzed 1602 weblog posts. The average posts size is 400 to 700 words. A large variation exists between weblogs as far as the number and length of posts are concerned. Since the weblogs are personal projects, there are usually no externally set rules on frequency or length of posts.

There were three parts to how I carried out my analysis, referred to below as Phase I, Phase II, and Phase III.

Phase I: I started by reading the first year of posts for each of the eight weblogs and use the method of open-coding from grounded theory (Glaser and Staruss 1967) to identify themes. This step was to get a general idea of post content. I created my first thematic categories to help organize data for the next two phases.

Phase II: This was my first full readings of all the 1602 weblogs. I reviewed one weblog at a time and read through all posts. I used the techniques proposed by Ryan and Bernard (2003): (1) identify repetitions of categories; (2) find indigenous categories; (3)

identify metaphors and analogies; and (4) categorize information in theory-related material that had been found from my literature review. For this process, I used an excel document while coding the posts from bloggers according to major thematic categories.

Phase III: The second time I read the posts, again using techniques proposed by Ryan and Bernard (2003), I analyzed data to (1) distinguish the similarities and differences within the different emerging themes; (2) investigate what is not written using the ‘missing data’ technique; and (3) collect unique and co-occurring words that are repeated by the bloggers with respect to voluntary childlessness in the weblog discourses.

As I did my analysis I included comments, noting thoughts and questions that arise as I examined the data in several word documents. This provided me with all the additional information I needed before starting to do the write up portion of the thesis.

I expected to find communication on issues that include reasons for being voluntarily childless, motivations of writing the weblog, stigma experienced due to being voluntarily childless, resistance to normative culture, coping mechanisms, expressed frustrations, acceptance of choice as well as messages related to gender and age.

This study provides exploration of a space which exists external of the traditional boundaries appropriate for administrative discourse. Digital communities are important spaces where individuals navigate identity and culture.

Validity

Validity is about the accuracy of research findings. Since this is a qualitative study, I was mindful that the interpretations of the findings should be valid and not a misrepresentation of what voluntarily childless individuals are communicating. There are several ways in which I attempted to ensure a high level of validity in my study.

First, I acknowledged biases that might exist in my own mind. As a researcher, I must state my own stance so that there is transparency about my own predisposition. I have always been a strong believer in allowing for individual choice, as long as that choice does not harm others in any substantial way. I support individual agency that comes from deep awareness of personal desires and realizations. Therefore, in reference to childbearing, I support individuals who want to have children, as well as individuals who do not. Since I have been trained in graduate school to be aware of my own biases and to follow the data with curiosity and open-mindedness, I hope to have translated that practice to my thesis research.

Second, I did my record keeping as meticulously as possible. I read all the weblog posts at least twice, to eradicate any ambiguities that may have arisen during the first evaluation. Also, the interpretation is reasonably transparent as I present my findings in light of evidence found in the weblogs. Since the weblogs' content is fairly straightforward and not written in cryptic style, vagueness in data interpretation is unlikely.

Third, while doing my research, I used number identifies for each blogger (such as Blogger 1, Blogger 2, etc). This permitted me to distance myself from over-identifying with the bloggers and allowed me a certain level of emotional detachment. My intention has been to record and analyze the data as justly as possible.

Fourth, I turn to peer validation. As I went through iterations of different drafts for the findings, a professor examined my findings to assess their validity in light of their understandings of social reality, the relevant literature and the evidence I provided.

Ethics

I have thought deeply about what the implications to these bloggers might be due to my research. All the weblogs are available in the public domain. The benefits and the risk lie in the same arena — which are most likely to be psychological and social. However, it does not pose any reasonable amount of negative ethical impact that I am able to perceive at this time. My research is important to understand the nature and intellectual connotations of the digital discourses and add to the body of study on voluntary childlessness.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS — WHO THE BLOGGERS' ARE AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS ON THE DOMINANT REPRODUCTIVE CULTURE

Several themes are repeated in the weblogs. These themes are categorized into three parts in the findings section: first, the perceptions of voluntarily childless bloggers (chapter 4), second, the experiences of voluntarily childless bloggers (chapter 5), and third, how the voluntarily childless bloggers use their digital identities to resist the dominant reproductive culture (chapter 6).

The two major queries I undertake in this chapter are; first, who these bloggers are, and second, what their views are on the American culture when it comes to reproductive choices, including discussions on their perceptions of various subjects that are related to it such as parents, children, gender disparities, pregnancy, infertility, adoptions, media, policy and religion. First, it is important to understand who the bloggers are. Table 1 summarizes some key information about them.

From Table 1, it can be seen that there are eight weblogs and nine bloggers. One is written by a couple and is also the only blog that is partially written by a man. All blogs are written by women who are married to their voluntarily childless husbands. The bloggers' ages fall between their late 20s up to 40s, with one exception. Blogger 4 is in her 70s. Out of the nine bloggers, five of them are anonymous. The four bloggers who are not anonymous have publicly worked on voluntarily childless subject matters (e.g., conducted research, written books, and given talks on panels). These bloggers are all working professionals and live in the United States.

Table 1. Information about the Bloggers

Blog-ger	Sex	Years and Age while Blogging ¹	Anon-ymous	Profession	Early Articulator/ Postponer ²	Blog Type ³	Number of Posts
1	F	2009-2013 Age 35-40	Yes	Not disclosed, works in education industry	Early Articulator Age 15	Open Journal	87
2	F	2007-2014 Age 27-34	Yes	Former attorney, changed to social work	Unknown.	Open Journal	67
3	F	2012-2014 Age 28-30	Yes	Entrepreneur (digital media)	Postponer After marriage	Open Journal	182
4	F	2009-2013 Age 70s	No	Teacher, writer	Unknown	Informational	90
5	F	2008-2015 Age 40-47	No	Research (academia) and owns consulting business	Unknown	Informational	119
6	F	2005-2014 Age 30-38	Yes	Marketing	Unknown	Open Journal	193
7	F, M	2009-2013 Age 40s, (both)	No	Sociology professor (female), Business consultant (male)	Unknown	Informational	74
8	F	2006-2015 Age Unknown	Yes	Attorney (Foreign relations and administrative law)	Early articulator Age 18	Informational	790

¹ The year weblog started and ended, as well as the ages of the bloggers during that period.

² Early articulator indicates that these bloggers decided at a much earlier age that they were voluntarily childless, while postponers decided later in their life.

³ As I would elaborate in Chapter 6, “Open journal” bloggers uses the weblogs as a personal place to express and reflect on their feelings of being voluntarily childless, while “Informational” bloggers use the weblogs as a place to comment on the more cultural aspect of voluntarily childless concerns. N.b., Some of the information in the table was unknown due to the bloggers not disclosing them within their weblogs.

The different bloggers have different personalities and styles of writing. Four bloggers write about their personal experiences as a voluntarily childless individual, and 5 of them give commentary on voluntarily childless life and culture — though there are overlaps sometimes. Interestingly, four out of five informational weblogs involve bloggers who are not anonymous, whereas, all the open journal type bloggers are anonymous.

Who the Voluntary Childless Bloggers Say They Are

Definitions of being voluntarily childless. The voluntarily childless bloggers have some key elements in how they define themselves, though as a blogging community the definitions of what being voluntarily childless means can vary. All the bloggers agree that being voluntarily childless means to make a permanent decision to not have or raise children, and emphasize the notion that they do not *want* to be parents. These individuals are unwavering in their decision. For example, in response to an article that suggested that all the individuals who do not have children should call themselves childless so as to not offend parents, Blogger 8 disagrees and states, “...*less* means lack, *free* is the right suffix.” For them, anyone who wants children but cannot have them for biological or circumstantial reasons are not “childfree”.

However, bloggers note that individuals who were once voluntarily childless but change their minds and become parents are not voluntarily childless anymore and that people who have lost children, are non-custodial parents or are empty-nesters are not voluntarily childless either, as they have had children already. Blogger 8 states, “Even those who lose children to illness or accident will never be childfree, since being a parent is a major life decision that changes you forever. Noncustodial parents and empty nesters have

likewise been specifically excluded from our ranks.” None of the bloggers feel that the terms “childless” and “childfree” are interchangeable, as they have very different connotations.

These bloggers feel that being voluntarily childless means that the couple is a family by itself. Blogger 5 discusses “Though I do not describe the Project as an advocacy group, nor do I advocate remaining childfree, I do advocate expanding our definition of family to include functioning, committed, and supportive family units of two or more regardless of gender, sexual orientation, marital status, or the number of offspring produced or adopted.” Most bloggers feel that the word family is used in a traditional way where it is meant to be used for a couple with kids, and in many instances our culture does not view married couples who are voluntarily childless as a family unit.

However, some of the bloggers express some differences within the definition. The concept of being voluntarily childless ranges from being strictly defined to more loose ones.

Blogger 1 writes:

As I navigate the childfree community online, I have found a variety of definitions for being childfree. Some of them are extremely strict — you cannot call yourself childfree if you have or are even *willing to have* stepchildren, godchildren, or foster children, or even if you would be willing to take in someone’s children (nieces/nephews, for example) in an emergency. And you must be committed to having an abortion if you were to get pregnant. Some definitions are looser — stepchildren are OK and godchildren are fine, as long as you don’t actually *want* to be a parent. And others don’t seem to worry too much about the details; you haven’t borne a child and don’t want to? You’re childfree.

Some bloggers talk about the authenticity of being voluntarily childless and how early articulators are more authentic voluntarily childless than postponers (such as Blogger 1). Others state that even infertile or divorced women who have later decided not to have children belong to the voluntarily childless community (Blogger 8) and that women who did

not find the right time to have children are “semi-childfree” as it might not have been an important goal for them to have children anyway (Blogger 8). The bloggers find it difficult to have a single “right” definition of what it means to be voluntarily childless, as different voluntarily childless individuals have different boundaries for their definitions. Whatever the voluntarily childless individual’s own definition might be, they find comfort in knowing that others like them exist. For example, Blogger 6 writes, “Putting a label to it made me realize that I’m not alone, that this is not such a freakish condition.”

Reasons for being voluntarily childless. Many of the bloggers note that there were multiple reasons for them choosing the voluntarily childless lifestyle, and that there was no one reason for this complex choice. Blogger 8 explains:

Childfree women are not shelving a desire to have kids because we’re mindless slaves to our careers. We just don’t want them. It is this that a lot of pushy parents and journalists can’t wrap their minds around. It’s not a linear decision-making process. It’s messy and complicated and causes and motivations are all wrapped in together in the human consciousness.

One of the main reasons cited, however, was the lack of internal desire to have and raise children, though some other salient reasons were to focus on their marriage and have work-life balance.

Almost all the bloggers cited that they wanted to focus on marriage and that having children would divert that focus. They feel that having a child would put distance between the couple by becoming a big responsibility as well as take away the couple’s privacy and intimacy. The bloggers also talk about how they have high standards for whatever they do, and their activities take time and focus. Many of the bloggers claim that they are perfectionists and their priorities revolve around their marriages, career, home, and taking

care of themselves. Blogger 6 discusses these sentiments, “But the fact is, we don’t want kids. We love the children in our lives and feel that we have plenty. We want our careers, we want to travel, we want freedom, and we don’t want the responsibility of raising children.” For these bloggers, having work-life balance is very important, and they feel that having children would disrupt that balance.

Some of the bloggers’ express that their personalities are not suitable for having children. Some bloggers need their quiet time as they are introverts. Other bloggers also admit to thinking they will not be good parents due to having less patience and interest in children. For example, Blogger 1 states, “I am certain I would not be one of the few excellent parents I admire. In fact, I would probably be a lot like my mother was: impatient, frustrated, angry, yelling a lot.” The bloggers are aware of their own personalities and discuss in the weblogs how it might be incompatible for rearing children.

Voluntarily childless decision making. All the bloggers agree that having children should be a choice. This goes against the common cultural knowledge of how women’s role may have been perceived for many generations before this, with womanhood being intimately tied to motherhood. The bloggers write about how they have given the idea of not having children a lot of thought before actually deciding to be voluntarily childless. Blogger 6 states, “But it was a deal-breaker. I wouldn’t get engaged until I knew he understood that this would be a childless marriage. I needed to know he could live with that.” The decision to be voluntarily childless is not taken lightly, as the cultural norms do not allow for that.

However, as with most social groups, one cannot put voluntarily childless individuals in a single category or stereotype them as they have diverse identities. Most of

the bloggers view themselves as unconventional thinkers and feel that they are somehow different. Blogger 3 writes, “And there it is. The two words that define me as a childfree adult. Why. Not.” They see themselves as more open-minded than the general population.

Though early-articulators may have known since they were very young that they did not want children, some of the bloggers had thought that they might want children later in their lives but have experienced that the desire never did occur to them. Blogger 2 made the decision to be voluntarily childless after she had a chance to consider it due to her life circumstances, such as being married and approaching the age of 30. Interestingly, the some of the voluntarily childless husbands are postponers, only having decided to be voluntarily childless after meeting their voluntarily childless wives.

The bloggers express how powerful the decision is once it has been made, as it changes the way they approach life as a whole. Blogger 2 writes, “Once I stopped thinking ‘someday’ and started thinking ‘This is my decision’, everything suddenly looked very different. And it never looked the same again.” Throughout their personal blogs, they realize and confirm their choice several times in different instances. These happen in a variety of occasions such as during a family vacation, spending the weekend with their niece/nephew, or seeing children in public places. Blogger 1 explains one such incident, “I never doubt my choice to not have children, but if I had any doubts, this weekend would have affirmed my decision. In fact, if I hadn’t already had a tubal ligation, I think my tubes would have tied themselves!”

The Voluntarily Childless Bloggers and Their Perceptions of the Reproductive Culture

The bloggers observe that most people have or want children. Having children is the default in society. The bloggers feel that the notion of parenthood and parenting are idealized and parents, irrespective of who they are, are given high value in society. There are various views on different reproductive cultural matters that these bloggers discuss.

Views on parents and children. The bloggers feel that the value of parents is seen as more than the value of those who do not have children. Because parenting is given such high value in our culture, their visibility is both far-reaching and culturally celebrated. Blogger 4 explains:

Sadly, in my opinion, the Mother's Day celebration in America is another example of the dangers of pronatalism. It exalts the status of being a mother to something short of being a saint. Just the mere mention of the revered word 'mother' makes many swoon with love and joy. It discounts the many hearts hurting from abuse or indifference. It forgets those children who suffer from their mothers who were never parent material in the first place. It encourages more to get that title to become a part of societal or religious expectations so they can get the same attention.

The bloggers understand that they are outsiders in the culture of pronatalism. Bloggers point out that parents have support for their reasons in having children that do not need justifying. In contrast, voluntarily childless individuals do not have that social support and need to justify of their choice.

The contrasting life choices seem to have divided the voluntarily childless individuals and parents into very different (and perhaps opposing) sides due to their life trajectories. The bloggers mention that parents' priorities lie in a different place than their own. The bloggers feel that most parents' highest priority is their children, and therefore, other facets of the parents' lives are compromised.

This dedication towards children perplex the bloggers, nor do they understand how parents manage to balance out all the other aspects of their lives such as work, marriage, friends, and hobbies. For example, the bloggers perceive that parents' weekends are devoted mainly toward children, having a lot of children's activities to cater to along with other household emergencies. Such uncertainties include sickness of children and as well as trying to get care for children when they have other commitments. Most bloggers feel that mothers "let themselves go" and do not take care of the way they look. Blogger 2 calls it the "Harried soccer mom" look. Some bloggers feel that women who have become parents may have given up their talents to give priority to become parents.

There is undisputed view that parenting is hard work. In fact, the bloggers seem to be more focused on how difficult it is — and this difficulty seems to surpass the joys of parenting for these bloggers. Many parents seem to idolize and obsess over their offspring, and have an associated feelings of pride, perhaps even an arrogance, in having procreated. The bloggers feel that parents have a sense of superiority over people who do not have children. Blogger 1 states, "...sense of entitlement, grandiose self-importance, single-mindedness, and self-centeredness that I witness in many parents."

Though most parents' focus is their children, the bloggers do not feel that it automatically make them good parents. Blogger 1 discusses, "Most of the ones I know are overly permissive, indulgent, or weak-willed, raising narcissistic children who have too few manners and little self-control." The bloggers discuss how parents may impose their own desires and aspirations on their children. They believe that in several cases the decision to become a parent may be not thought through very well.

The bloggers notice that parents may express that parenthood is the best thing that has happened to them, and they are able to manage all aspects of their lives. The bloggers feel that due to parents romanticizing their experiences, a lot of people who are planning to have children move into parenthood with unrealistic expectations. This may push others toward thinking that parenting is not that difficult.

Parents may say contradictory things such as how “it is all worth it,” but then, in the next breath start complaining about how hard it is observed some bloggers. The bloggers do not advocate that others must also choose the same voluntarily childless path, but instead they advocate that people should make the right choice for themselves and respect other people’s choices too. However, the bloggers stress that whether one chooses to be a parent or not should be a very conscious decision as, in their view, having and raising a child is a lot of responsibility.

When it comes to marriage, the bloggers sense that parents’ marriages are different than voluntarily childless ones. Most bloggers feel that once individuals become parents, they give less attention to other important roles in their lives. Blogger 6 writes, “However, something undeniable has happened to their relationships: They are no longer a couple – they are parents. I watch them give up time with each other (when it’s often so needed) because they feel guilty leaving their children with family or a sitter.” They feel that parents’ marriages take a back seat when the children arrive, and that it may lead to less fulfilling marriages. The bloggers do not subscribe to the notion that children make marriages stronger in all instances as the children seem to make their parents exhausted and discordant and that strains marriages.

Mostly, these bloggers do not feel excited about other people's pregnancy. This sense comes from the perception that with a new baby, the new mother will "trade in her running shorts for mom jeans and her Facebook updates will become about baby pictures" (Blogger 6). The bloggers attribute the change that happens after children as a negative change in parents, as the parents may lose their real selves while raising children. Also, some bloggers feel that the news of pregnancy means that it lessens the chance of adoption of children who already exist in this world.

They feel that parents are unable to give their full attention to other adults in social situations. Blogger 3 writes, "Even when the kid has gone to bed, instead of having adult conversations, the parents many times are more interested in showing photos of their kids to the others. So, basically, they are always parenting." Bloggers observe that many parents not only converse about their children, but also use social media to carry the conversation forward. Bloggers complain that too many children's pictures are uploaded on social media. "It gets a bit too much," says Blogger 4, which seems to resonate with the sentiments of the other bloggers. Still, there are a few parents who understand and accept the voluntarily childless choice. Most bloggers are pleasantly surprised when this happens. This shows how far and in between these experiences are in the culture.

On the work front, some bloggers have also had to take on more work when they have colleagues with children. Blogger 6 states, "I'm tired of the inequity, of parents getting preferential treatment." This is because many times parent colleagues have to leave early and need more flexibility at work for their children. They also feel that this makes parent colleagues less available during work hours and generally less productive. Employees without children may be expected to work while their colleagues who are parents are

allowed to take the time off (e.g., during the holidays). The bloggers feel this is unfair treatment at their work places.

However, the bloggers have varying sentiments for children, in general. Most bloggers say that they do not love or hate children and find that they have difficulty in relating with them. These bloggers do not enjoy spending copious amounts of time with children in general, and do not find them “cute.” A few bloggers say that children can be annoying, especially in public places such as restaurants, airplanes, or libraries. If the children are not disciplined, the bloggers hold the parents responsible, and not the children. They feel that it is the parents’ responsibility to discipline their children.

However, many of them enjoy being aunts and uncles to the children in their lives, and may develop close relationships with their nieces, nephews, or friends’ children. Most bloggers feel that they do not lack children in their lives. For example, blogger 1 says that she feels awkward when she is around children in general, but she dotes on her niece and her best friend’s toddler son. She feels a connection with a child she knows, but not one she does not. She writes that children make her anxious because of “...the noise, the drama, the tantrums, the interruptions, the demands.” Blogger 6 gives a similar example of her niece, “I just have no patience for her after a while, and while I love this child more than any other, I was so glad to have grownup time after we left.” The bloggers do not want the 24/7 responsibility that comes with parenting.

Views on gender disparities. The bloggers notice that voluntarily childless men do not have the same social pressure to procreate as voluntarily childless women. They feel that women are judged for not having or wanting children, while men remain invisible in the

conversation. The bloggers seem very aware of this expectation and feel frustrated as a result. Women are expected to be full time professionals and full time mothers, while men are expected to be full time professionals and part-time fathers.

The blame for being voluntarily childless usually falls by default on the woman, even when the couple announces to another person of their choice. Blogger 2 vents, “I can see the whole family growing to resent A’s selfish wife who won’t have kids. He won’t get blamed, it’ll all be on me, I just know it. I don’t know how to prepare myself for that.” Along with these gender expectations, some bloggers also note that a man’s life after becoming a father does not change as drastically as a woman’s life does after having children.

The gender divide not only appears on the home front, but also at work. Some bloggers feel that men get better opportunities in their careers as fathers, because of the culture, and the roles expected from parents based on gender. Blogger 8 asks the provocative question, “Why do we never hear the term *career men*?” Women are expected to take care of the children and are more likely to be disrupted from their careers due to parenthood, as they many times remove themselves from the workforce and have no time to hone or improve the skills they already have. Most men, however, do not seem to have similar issues at work. Blogger 5 notices, “The last three men nominated to the Supreme Court have all been married and, among them, have seven children. The last three women — Elena Kagan, Sonia Sotomayor and Harriet Miers (who withdrew) — have all been single and without children.” This implies that having children usually holds women back from competing with the same chances provided to for men by our culture.

It also seems that voluntarily childless men are not as forthcoming as voluntarily childless women about the voluntarily childless issue. Blogger 7 writes, “As a sociologist of gender who has interviewed dozens of childfree men and women, I’ve too wondered about the absence of men from public discussion of the childfree.” This can be seen in this study itself, where all the bloggers are women, except one — who jointly writes the blog with their spouse. No men write a weblog exclusively about voluntarily childless. Blogger 2 makes the point further when she discusses that even though both her and her husband are “fully” voluntarily childless, she is really interested in voluntarily childless community and, therefore, she blogs and participates in online platforms, but her husband does not. Perhaps this inconspicuousness of men in these discussions alludes to the notion that they are not as affected as the voluntarily childless women are. Interestingly, the invisibility of voluntarily childless men makes these men visible through the questions of the bloggers.

Views on pregnancy, infertility, and adoption. The bloggers discuss pregnancy, infertility and adoption in their weblogs. Most of these bloggers do not enjoy the concept of pregnancy and do not want to go through the experience. In fact, some bloggers have negative feelings toward pregnancy due to what women have to go through those nine months and during the birth process. Blogger 6 writes, “I’m creeped out by pregnancy, I dislike babies and their excretions... it sounds foul to speak of it that way, but I don’t like it.” Most bloggers are terrified of becoming accidentally pregnant. Even though they are very sure of their choice, they do not want to have to choose to abort. This is why most of the bloggers take extra precautions not to get pregnant.

When the bloggers write about infertility, they see the similarities between childless individuals and voluntarily childless individuals outwardly look alike but in actuality are

worlds apart. The bloggers seem to understand that infertility is a difficult life situation to face but they also stress that having children is a choice. Blogger 4 writes, “Infertility is an agonizing physical, financial and emotional challenge.” Some bloggers state how infertility treatments may be too much of a risk for the woman to take, all in the name of pronatalism. Blogger 6 states, “My lack of maternal instinct hits me especially hard during situations like this. I can’t empathize at all. I just think “Why not adopt? Why go through all this hell?”

Some bloggers talk about how they could just say they are infertile, but how that would be disrespectful to do so while taking in account the feelings of infertile individuals. Blogger 4 writes, “When people suggest to me that I should just pretend we are infertile, I can’t think of anything more insensitive. I can’t possibly mock the pain these people in my life are going through, and I certainly don’t want to end up in the position of talking about my *infertility*.” Another reason could be that the bloggers want to claim their truth of being voluntarily childless and not have to apologize for their stance.

The bloggers also see some different routes the childless could take. One is that of adoption and the other one being that of becoming voluntarily childless. Some bloggers realize that although adoption is a well-known option for the infertile (other than treatment), voluntarily childless as an option is not discussed most of the time. Blogger 4 expresses:

Never are infertile people told about the sheer joy and freedom to live a childfree (not “less”) lifestyle. Never are they told how much they can give to themselves and humanity having more time to “mother” in other ways. It seems the only way is through a baby or child.

They understand that others may want children, but also discuss other ways to have children in their lives other than giving birth.

Even though they are very sure about being voluntarily childless, the bloggers discuss that if they ever change their minds, they would be open to adoption. Almost all the bloggers believe that it is a better choice than having biological children, as it gives existing children homes. Blogger 5 writes, “Why are we so intent on making new humans when so many of us already exist and so many have basic needs that aren’t being met?” Some bloggers also mention that adoption can be a very expensive and complicated journey and should be made simpler and more affordable for it to be a more reasonable option for those who wish to adopt.

Views on media and celebrities. Media influence cultures to a great degree. The bloggers look at different sorts of media to expose voluntarily childless material and use it to comment on the voluntarily childless life. These materials are used by the bloggers in two major ways. First, the media is used to understand voluntarily childless life and, second, it is used to show how “pronatalist” the culture is. These media include books, magazines, internet, advertisements, movies, shows and news.

There are various ways media supports visibility of voluntary childless individuals. Authors share voluntarily childless books they have read and write reviews, as well as discuss components of it that they feel is important on their weblog. These include non-fiction books: *The great Divide*, *Selfish, Shallow, and Self-Absorbed: Sixteen Writers on the Decision Not to Have Kids*, *The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women* and *Why Don’t You Have Kids?: Living a Full Life Without Parenthood*. These bloggers also read voluntarily childless fiction such as *Baby Proof* and *The Barrenness*. Sometimes, the bloggers who write books also promote their own books. Magazines are another media where the bloggers discuss voluntarily childless articles. One that is written

about a lot is the *Times* magazine covering the issue on “The Childfree Life” that came out in 2013.

Another popular media discussed by the bloggers are shows. The bloggers are thrilled when they see characters that are voluntarily childless, but they also realize that such depictions are far and in-between. Examples include Carrie and Mr. Big in the *Sex and the City 2* movie, where the main couple is shown to make the decision not to have children. Another character is Robin, from *How I met Your Mother*, who is depicted as a someone who does not like children and will probably not have them herself. Blogger 5 explains, “Though Robin’s conflicted feelings about baby-rearing were treated in a much more enlightened way, it’s telling that on both shows, the characters who don’t want babies are women who like shooting guns and talking dirty, but who are grossed out by feelings. These shows are implicitly saying: Of course only a woman who’s not really feminine wouldn’t want to be a mom.”

The bloggers delve deep into media and the culture of pronatalism with respect to how the voluntarily childless individuals are depicted. The bloggers also discuss how celebrities increase the visibility of voluntarily childless choice and life. They note that there are several celebrities who are voluntarily childless, including Oprah, Helen Mirren, George Clooney, Margaret Cho, and Kim Cattrall. Blogger 5 writes, “In the midst of the Hollywood baby boom and the tiresome tabloid “Bump alerts” this is so refreshing!” This discussion of popular culture in movies, shows and celebrity life is an important exercise in gauging the visibility and acceptance of the voluntarily childless life, as well as showing active attempts to alter the negative stereotypes to portray voluntarily childless individuals in a more authentic light. The voluntarily childless bloggers pay close attention to and discuss how the

voluntarily childless are portrayed, as well as how voluntarily childless individuals are using it produce material that brings more visibility to themselves.

However, the mainstream media is influenced a great deal by pronatalism, bloggers notice. Blogger 6 writes, “I think when I watch daytime TV and start feeling this way it’s because I’m looking at my situation and seeing it through the Mommy filter.” The bloggers notice advertisements in the media and specifically how it pushes parenthood on its consumers. For example, Blogger 8 discusses the Planned Parenthood advertisement and it is framed as such that the women getting abortions are not ready *yet*, but will be in the future. This undermines the voluntarily childless choice. The bloggers note that television and magazine advertisements about products or services that have nothing to do with children depict children in them. Blogger 4 writes, “Only recently did a song speak of abuse (Crystal Bowersox, “Farmer’s Daughter”) or parents needing a drink raising teenage daughters (Martina McBride, “Teenage Daughters”). Weddings are seen as the start of a family of more than two when people don’t even know if the couple want, should have or can have children!” The bloggers feel that with the rising visibility in media about the voluntarily childless, the media depictions should be more balanced and not be geared toward pronatalist inclinations.

For magazines, bloggers pay attention to articles that discuss anything related to society that pertains to parenthood — to see if there is any awareness of voluntary childlessness in it, and the articles are not only assuming that everyone wants and should be parents. Some bloggers look to advice columns in magazines as clues to the dominant cultural discourses. Blogger 5 points out a columnist (Prudence) who writes to someone who asks if she should have children even though she has no desire for them:

I will join the chorus of people who are driving you crazy. You are about to get married, and as life's circumstances change, it is worth re-examining your goals, especially this one (and yes, I know, I am offending all happy childless people). You're only in your 30s—if you have children now, they'll be grown by the time you reach your late 50s! You say you love children, but as close as you may be to your nieces and nephews, that's no substitute for having your own.

The bloggers also note that movies do not portray voluntarily childless people accurately. Blogger 8 writes, “Overall it's not a terrible portrayal of a childfree person (Mary Jane is played by Megan Fox, so at least she makes the childfree look smokin' hot), but in a movie in which almost everyone is presented sympathetically, M.J. gets the shaft.” Blogger 5 also discusses how movies like “Four Christmases” are stereotypical, and the depiction of the young couple is one-dimensional, where they feel they are voluntarily childless but then finally become parents because they realize that it is what they really want. This indicates that people who might feel they do not want children just do not know that they actually do — and they just need some convincing.

As shows have become popular, the bloggers comment on who is being depicted as voluntarily childless and how they are being portrayed. Blogger 5 writes, “This article merits a full read as it highlights so much of what is wrong about the portrayal of childfree characters in our most popular media. If these characters bore an actual resemblance to the childfree women and men I know I might not be concerned but the reality gap between the sitcom childfree and the childfree that I see and know is so wide and troubling that it can't be ignored or condoned.” The bloggers are aware that media upholds pronatalism and are frustrated about it.

The bloggers read many internet articles and blog posts pertaining to the subject of voluntarily childlessness. The bloggers sometimes mock articles that are very pronatalist in

nature. Blogger 8 writes, “I can’t fault them for the method (offering free childcare) but the message is ridiculous. People should have more babies because the nursery industry is suffering?” The bloggers also note the open-letters to voluntarily childless individuals and how there is a debate going on in the comments section. The bloggers feel this is a necessary step for cultural change and finally acceptance of the voluntarily childless life as “normal.” Some bloggers also read articles on parenthood to understand what life is like for parents. Blogger 6 voices, “I’m moved and captivated by the stories of these women because I think it helps me learn about “the other side,” what they’re thinking and feeling, especially since so many of my friends seem to be crossing that threshold.”

Celebrities can also be the proponent of pronatalism. The bloggers talk about how, when celebrities get pregnant, there is a lot of paparazzi on them. Bloggers feel that celebrities glorify being parents and make it sound like it is only positive without any negatives. For example, when media shows one of the most influential Hollywood couples, Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt both adopting and having several biological children of their own, having children is hyped. Ultimately, how the media portrays celebrities with and without children is a measure of current cultural attitudes. Overall, the bloggers feel that the media reinforces the culture of pronatalism.

Views on policy. The bloggers express views on a range of policy topics such as unawareness of voluntarily childlessness in policy discussions, the unfairness of taxes, there not being a shortage in population, and wanting “childfree zones.” Some bloggers express concern about how unawareness of voluntarily childlessness affects policy-making in general. The bloggers mention that the census data does not count the voluntarily childless. Blogger 8 asks whether the voluntarily childless should be classified legally as “politically

overlooked minority.” She says that the voluntarily childless individuals have low lobbying power because of this. Some bloggers feel the culture in United States is becoming more child-focused, and that since the demographics are changing, so should the culture.

Another macro issue that bloggers discuss is taxes. The bloggers feel that they pay taxes for children they will never have. Blogger 6 writes, “I have accepted that when we buy a house, we’ll be paying for services like schools and health care for children we don’t have.” The fairness issue comes up often. Blogger 4 writes:

There’s a recent discussion as to whether or not people choosing a childfree lifestyle should be taxed for the education of other people’s children. I think back to living on Long Island. I had no children. The family across the street from me had 8. We both paid the same amount in taxes. Is that fair?

The bloggers do not feel that there is shortage of population, but that there is over-population. Blogger 5 writes, “But until every child can be cared for and cared for well, I will continue to believe that there are already far too many children for this little planet to handle, and it would be wholly irresponsible for me to add to that burden.” For the people who are concerned about lower birth rates, the bloggers discuss how the government promotes procreation over immigration. Blogger 8 discusses that there are countries that have less children being born and countries that have more. She attributes ethnocentrism as the cause for politicians advocating for the plea to procreate more and give less attention to immigration, “I often grow suspicious of pleas to help increase the ‘native’ race; it is hard to tell when latent issues of racism or other prejudices underlie the opposition to immigration as an alternate solution.” Blogger 5 also writes in response to an economist saying that women should have more children to save capitalism:

If women don't want to have more children, then instead of abandoning women's equality as a goal, we should rework our economic system so it doesn't rely on a steadily growing population to function. After all, the point of society is to serve the people in it, not to reduce us to cogs in a machine that serves no one at all.

Apart from legal and social recognition, about half the bloggers stressed that they wanted "Childfree zones" in public places for public services such as restaurants and parks as well as sections for flights. The bloggers claim that their lifestyle is so different than that of parents that these spaces should be thought about. Blogger 8 writes, "Judging by the comments, the war over the common space is symbolic of a clash in lifestyles between those who choose to have children and the growing number of people who choose not to." There seems to be debate about businesses being able to create voluntarily childless timings or sections, as it may be seen as discrimination toward children and their parents. Blogger 8 writes, "The key here is that prohibiting minors is not invidious discrimination. It is not targeting a disfavored group because of race, gender, or other impermissible reasons, but rather because of very real differences. We discriminate when we ban children from voting, drinking, smoking, and driving because they are less mature and less able to make adult decisions. Likewise, they are less able to control their behavior, and less aware of what appropriate behavior is." This push to create such zones may show not only their need to not deal with children, but may have something to do with claiming their own territory as need for recognition and acceptance. However, such demarcation of "voluntarily childless privileged spaces" may serve to exaggerate feelings of separation between voluntarily childless individuals and parents, thereby creating more polarization instead of bridging the gap.

Blogger 5 sums up how policy needs to address requirements of voluntarily childless individuals, “Our economies and our social safety nets were not designed for this shift and our leaders and politicians have been very slow to respond to what demographers have been predicting for many years. Our politicians, law makers, and policy and opinion leaders have behaved like the ostrich putting his head in the sand.”

Views on religion. Four bloggers mention that they are not religious, while four bloggers do not mention religion at all in their weblogs. Blogger 8 writes, “As an aside, I first learned about hermeneutics (the study of texts, not the blog) when doing a research paper on the Bible in college. Not coincidentally, that was also the last time I called myself a Christian.” Only Blogger 1 is religious and tries to navigate what it means to be “religious and childfree”. However, Blogger 1 interprets the bible in her own way to make sense of her identity as both a voluntarily childless and religious person.

Blogger 1 responds to disparaging comments with her creative interpretation of the bible rather than conforming to the conventionally interpreted meaning of the bible. For example, she references Genesis 2 and says that marriage is not solely for children, but mainly for companionship. The blogger feels that if people were to go deeper into the bible and self-reflect, only then would they become more open-minded and tolerant of diversity — not just taking in everything literally, without thought. Blogger 1 explains that the bible is sometimes used too simplistically and there is a difference between one who sins and one who is different. Blogger also interprets that Jesus was voluntarily childless — “And of course, let’s not forget that Jesus, the center of our faith and the one who we are to emulate, was also childfree.”

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS – BLOGGERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR EXPERIENCES: PRIORITIES, RELATIONSHIPS AND RESPONDING WITH THEIR OUTSIDER STATUS

In this chapter, I discuss common experiences the bloggers face with respect to their voluntarily childless identities. Specifically, I examine regarding their priorities in life, how they experience relationships with different sets of people (who support them and those who do not), and their strategies of coping with their voluntarily childless identities when people do not fully support them. I conclude with discussing the advantages and disadvantages of being voluntarily childless as experienced by the bloggers.

Voluntarily Childless Priorities

Lifestyle. There are some common threads in how the voluntarily childless prioritize their time on a short-term basis. Most bloggers have busy lives. When they have leisure time, it is uninterrupted by the responsibility of children. The bloggers’ lives are filled with spending time with their spouses, work, socializing, pursuing their interests, traveling, and volunteering. Many of the bloggers say that they do not have any room for raising a child with their schedules. Pursuing what is important to these individuals with the time they would have otherwise been raising children is an important distinction. In fact, one of the reasons they do not want to have children is to preserve this autonomy, something they do not feel parents have the luxury of. These sentiments are well-articulated by Blogger 6:

Break your day into 16 waking hours—after all, 8 hours of sleep is recommended to maintain overall health and well-being. On a typical weekday, consider that a full-time career averages about 11 hours. This

includes getting ready for work in the morning and door-to-door commuting time each day. That leaves 5 hours. Figure an hour (conservatively!) for healthy dinner preparation and clean-up, and at least half-an-hour to eat at the dinner table or at the very least together in front of the TV—let's work those personal relationships. That leaves 3.5 hours 'til bedtime. What are we doing with that? A trip to the gym or a nice solid workout at home? Connecting with friends and family in person, via phone or internet? Personal entertainment? Hobbies? Romantic activities? 3.5 hours can fly by. We've covered Career and Personal Relationships. Where on earth is there time for children, especially a young child who needs us to be at our best?

All the bloggers have full-time careers, and give importance to their careers and are all ambitious about their careers. For example, blogger 8 started as a paralegal and would like to make partner in a law firm one day and Blogger 2 transitioned to having her own media business that she is working on growing. Most of these bloggers have clear future goals for their careers. They feel that having a child would mean sacrificing their high career goals as raising a child would take up a lot of their time and energy.

Some bloggers need to work longer hours than 40 hour weeks, like Blogger 2, who has her own media business to run. The bloggers share that being voluntarily childless has created much more options available to them, than it would have been if they were parents. They enjoy having freedom to choose how to live their lives. Blogger 3 condenses it down to the 6 Fs, "More room for the big F's: freedom, finances, flexibility, free time, (fill in the blank: at my house, we winkingly call it "foxtrotting") and... Fun." The bloggers perceive that a child would tie them down and they would not be able to pursue what is important to them. The trade-off is not a difficult one as these bloggers do not have any desire in raising children.

All the bloggers are in dual-income households, where both spouses work fulltime. The bloggers discuss that having children is expensive, and they might not be able to afford

the lifestyle they have now, or the lifestyle they aspire to have. Blogger 6 asks, “Why why WHY don’t people think about the cost of having children before they actually do?! I look at our life and I wonder how we would ever manage to put anything at all in savings if we had children to raise, and we’re comfortably in the middle class.” They feel that there will be disparity between people who do not have children and those who do when it comes to money, with voluntarily childless individuals being able to save more and have a higher standard of living.

The bloggers talk about the city and space they live in, and how it matters to their voluntarily childless identity. Most of the bloggers prefer living in the city, as compared to suburban spaces, as it compliments their lifestyle better. City life is closer to restaurants, shopping places, entertainment and many times may be closer to work. Blogger 5 summarizes this sentiment, “The childfree typically look for neighborhoods that are vibrant, stimulating, with easy access to restaurants, entertainment, workplaces, and services designed to support active and healthy lifestyles. They are not looking for the best school district, playgrounds (unless it’s an off-leash dog park), or access to other families.” During their blogging period, two of the bloggers sold their suburban homes to live in the city.

Another reason that suburban places may not suit the voluntarily childless lifestyle is due to the houses being too large for just two people to live in and most neighbors have children who go to the neighborhood schools. The bloggers talk about the convenience of moving from one place to another within the city, and also to change cities, as they do not have to worry about uprooting children’s lives in the process. Therefore, the voluntarily childless and people with children have different needs when thinking about accommodation.

The bloggers perceive major differences between the way voluntarily childless individuals and parents travel. The bloggers state they have more flexibility in how they plan their trips, and can afford to go on longer trips and stay in more expensive places due to having more resources. Blogger 7 recounts, “On this, our 5 week island hiatus, we’ve built in 3 weeks’ worth of visits from different groups of friends sandwiched between a week on our own on each end. And we don’t exclude our parent friends – though they generally don’t stay longer than a week (they’ve got to get back home to the kids, after all).” They also comment on the quality of vacation time, where the bloggers feel that they can relax, while parents are still in parenting mode when on vacation and do not have the time to unwind. Blogger 2 demonstrates, “My husband and I read by the water, went running and waterskiing and tubing, went out for lunches together, played mini-golf, swam in the lake, and built fires outside every night which we sat around drinking beer.”

It is important to note here that most of the bloggers are pet owners, typically owning more than one pet, usually cats. The bloggers adore their pets and indulge them. All the bloggers admit that their pets are not replacements for children, which they are accused of. Blogger 5 writes, “Cats and children really do not compare. Cats are way easier.”

For long term planning, the bloggers feel that they have more options to choose from as they have more flexibility, such as which city to live in, whether to go back to graduate school, or to pursue a new career path. The bloggers often discuss how much flexibility there is in their lives with travel, money, work and other major choices. They also mention that they can better plan for these as their mental bandwidth and resources are not tied up in taking care of children.

However, the bloggers are aware that they need to prepare for their old age differently than parents. Blogger 5 writes that lots of aging voluntarily childless individuals are choosing a communal way of living their end of life experience. She writes:

As a coach, I am constantly reminding my clients the importance of staying connected and building tribes, especially as we age. It's so important to our quality of life. I am thrilled to know there are role models for a happy, fulfilled, and worry free life into our seventies, eighties and beyond.

The bloggers do not seem weary about having to think about old age, as they seem to be proactively working to make sure they have a secure aging process by planning ahead. They start saving for retirement and long-term care earlier so that when they are senior citizens, they will be able to stay independent. Blogger 6 explains, "My husband and I are taking precautions for this, starting our retirement savings early, and we plan to get long-term care insurance and whatnot." However, this planning process is not extensively shared in the weblogs.

Contraceptives. Contraceptives is a significant topic that repeats on weblogs. The bloggers usually try to take extra measures with contraceptives so that they do not get pregnant. This is a fear that the bloggers seem to have. Most of the bloggers spoke about how important long-term contraceptives are to them due to being voluntarily childless and married. One of the bloggers has an IUD that will have to be changed in the next 5 years, and others chose either to have a tubal ligation or their husbands have undergone vasectomies. For example, Blogger 1 and Blogger 8 had tubal ligation done and husbands of Bloggers 3, Blogger 6 and Blogger 8 got vasectomies. Blogger 3 states, "I guess the snip is one more step in this adventure, a formal lifting of one more weight and a stamp of knowing who we are and what we want out of life. The hubs and I have decided together, we are

moving forward together, and we are giddy over the adventures to come.” Many of the voluntarily childless bloggers and their husbands use sterilization as contraception.

Interestingly, amongst the bloggers that spoke about their lives explicitly, some of the voluntarily childless husbands underwent vasectomies as long-term contraception. Many bloggers explained that a vasectomy was a less evasive procedure than a tubal ligation, and therefore, it made more logical sense. These bloggers also spoke about how the men in their lives took “one for the team,” and how it is important to collectively work towards contraception, rather than letting only the women handle it. Blogger 8 underwent tubal ligation even though her husband had a vasectomy, so that they would be certain that pregnancy would not occur.

The decision making about contraceptives is usually reached together by the bloggers and their spouses. Blogger 6 writes, “So the hubby and I talked about it, and we decided that when I turn 30, either I’ll get a tubal ligation or he’ll get snipped, depending on what our research turns up to be the safest and least offensive.” The decision making process usually consists of mulling over the idea of permanent contraceptives for months before making the decision.

After the decision is made, the blogger sets up an appointment with the doctor. The bloggers also experienced doctors being gatekeepers of long-term contraception — and how until certain criteria are met, such as a woman being at least 30, the doctors dissuade the women to get sterilized. Blogger 1 was denied sterilization when she was in her 20s, but when she went back after she turned 30, she was allowed to have the procedure. It is not just about age either, as the doctors had to be convinced that the women will not change their

minds, for which the bloggers had to do their homework on which doctors are more open to sterilizing voluntarily childless women as well as having a “pitch” ready for the doctors.

Different doctors had different ways of deciding if the woman is ready for sterilization. One doctor set appointment months later, just so that the women have more time to think about their decision. Blogger 5 discusses how the doctors require the person who wants to get sterilized a year of counselling, including writing letters to the children they will never have. In the bloggers’ experience, the doctors usually ask invasive questions to gauge the intentions of getting sterilization. Blogger 1 even took her husband along, in case the doctor would like to speak to him and see how he feels about his wife getting sterilized.

Interestingly, men who want vasectomies mostly have an easier time setting up an appointment for their procedure. None of the bloggers wrote about men having to undergo such scrutiny. The bloggers note this difference in gender treatment from doctors. Blogger 7 shares studies that show that “17 percent of women undergo tubal ligation while a mere 6 percent of men undergo vasectomy.” She also shows through research which partner gets sterilized, “This fascinating study reveals there are socioeconomic factors that predict which partner gets sterilized. The researchers found that “white and socioeconomically privileged women are more likely to have vasectomized partners than disadvantaged women.”

The bloggers get alarmed when they hear of stories of failure in contraception and do not want a situation to arise where they have to choose abortion. Blogger 6 writes:

I’ve long said that I believe in a woman’s right to an abortion, but I wouldn’t be able to go through it myself. Surprisingly, however, the older I get and the surer I am about remaining childfree, the more I look at abortion as an escape route from a bad situation.

All the bloggers mention that if pregnancy were to occur, they would opt for abortion. Becoming pregnant is something that the bloggers are usually distressed about, which is why they opt for long-term contraception. To be voluntarily childless means that if pregnancy were to occur, having the child is an almost unthinkable option. For this reason, even though the individual might not want to opt for an abortion, it seems to be the only option available for them.

The bloggers feel more settled after one or both partners are sterilized as the threat of pregnancy is eradicated. Blogger 6 discusses how her husband undergoing a vasectomy will affect them, “I’m 95% sure I think the procedure would be a good idea. Imagine, no more stressing about it.” The bloggers are usually grateful and relieved after the procedure, as they do not have to worry about becoming pregnant. Blogger 3 mentions, “After V[alentine’s]-Day, I will no longer have to worry about being childfree. I will just *be* childfree.” Many bloggers equate sterilization with becoming officially voluntarily childless, as the threat of pregnancy is eliminated.

The bloggers believe that contraception should be available to everyone without exception. Blogger 8 writes, “I worry every time a group tries to block access to birth control, no matter the reason. We have too few choices, and too little access as it is. Women should not have to choose between abortion and pregnancy.” For this reason, some bloggers recommend certain contraceptives to their readers, such LoSeasonique, Essure and NovaSure. For example, Blogger 5 advises, “I’m not a medical expert by any stretch but I was very pleased to learn we girls had another tool in our arsenal to combat the Monster Period. If you want to find out more go to the FAQ section of the NovaSure website or ask your OB/GYN about NovaSure.” This act of recommendation can be seen as a way the

bloggers are attempting to help others with information about contraceptives, and doing their part to allow for contraceptive awareness and choice.

Navigating Different Social Networks and Situations as Voluntarily Childless Individuals

A critical aspect in bloggers' lives are their relationships with various sets of people. The bloggers usually see a lot of change in their social network due to the life stage they are in. In this section, I discuss how the bloggers feel about and navigate the different relationships which are accepting (such as spouses) and unaccepting (such as family, friends, and strangers) of their voluntarily childless choice, as well as their experiences in social events. However, it must be noted that these categorizations of different sets of people into these two "accepting" and "unaccepting groups" is a crude way of generalizing the experiences and sentiments of these bloggers, as exceptions exist.

People who support their voluntarily childless choice. For the bloggers, their spouses are their largest support with respect to being voluntarily childless, as the spouses are voluntarily childless themselves. All the bloggers accept that the purpose of marriage is love and companionship. They believe in having an egalitarian relationship, enjoy being married and spend quality time with their spouses. "We love our life together. I don't think of us lacking anything now, and I can see our closeness and intimacy suffering if kids were in the mix," expresses Blogger 6. In the weblogs, they often discuss the importance of the quality of marriage they are in.

Most of these couples had the voluntarily childless conversation before getting married, or right after — and were in agreement. Most bloggers agree that if the man they married wanted children, it would be a deal breaker for them. An interesting observation is

that the person to introduce the voluntarily childless concept to their partners are usually the women. Most of the voluntarily childless husbands changed their minds presumably after dating their current spouses. For example, Blogger 6 writes about her experience before getting married:

We've talked exhaustively about his motivations to change his mind, from seeing friends and family change after having kids, to the admission that he never realized before me that it could be a CHOICE. Love + Marriage = Children in his very religious upbringing. His motivations are sound — I made sure before I agreed to even get engaged because I didn't want him to be motivated by getting back at his dad, or if he was just saying it to make me happy.

Other than their spouses, the bloggers find it difficult to find acceptance of their choice. For support, they look to their marriage partners and perhaps to some other people they know accept their choice. Any support is very important for the voluntarily childless individuals, as they have so few supporters. This support group may contain other voluntarily childless friends and/or family members who accepts and the online voluntarily childless community. These are the people they can be open about their voluntarily childless status without putting on a guard. Blogger 6 says, “Luckily I have the support of a wonderful, like-minded man, many like-minded friends and a handful of respectful disagreeers to help me through.” Many of the bloggers have role models from the media such as Julia Child (for Blogger 3) and Ellen Peck (for Blogger 4). However, offline support can be difficult to come by for voluntarily childless individuals, which is why many of them look online for supportive communities.

People who do not support the voluntarily childless choice. The bloggers find, however, that people who are accepting of their voluntarily childless choice are rare. These

bloggers discuss how they have experienced unacceptance from people at work, their families, and their friends as well as from strangers.

Many bloggers express that they have experienced discrimination at work. The discrimination plays out in different ways, such as being judged for their childless status as early as the interview process itself. Some bloggers have faced questions from others they work with about them not having children. Blogger 6 describes, “Complete strangers delve into my personal life. Workplace harassment on this issue — THAT I AM NEVER THE ONE TO BRING UP — is a big part of the reason I went into business for myself.” This blogger’s decision to have her own business is partly driven by the constant questions about children by others at the workplace. This is an example of how the individuals in the dominant culture make spaces uncomfortable for voluntarily childless individuals. Blogger 4 in particular was even discriminated against by the people in her organization she was working for. She not only lost her job as a teacher in the 1970s for disclosing she was voluntarily childless on her interview on *60 minutes* talk show, but also lost her pension. This example is important in showing that not only did some people judge her for not wanting to have children, but judgement also came from individuals who had decision making power within the organization and media. This had harrowing consequences for her career.

However, most of the bloggers felt the judgement even more strongly outside the work environment. The majority of the bloggers agreed that the main pressure for them to procreate come from their immediate families, especially their parents and in-laws. Blogger 6 writes, “We feel it at every family gathering, every other phone call, you name it. It’s intimidating, frustrating and heartbreaking.” Sometimes, the pressure is indirect. Blogger 6

writes, “There were no direct questions about when we were having children, just insistence and pressure to have many and start NOW, to stop wasting our time with traveling and building my business.” Even though it is unsaid, the cultural rules are clear. Most of the bloggers feel distress at the pressure, especially from their families and feel helpless knowing that they will disappoint people for the choice they have made.

The bloggers have felt like they have shocked and disappointed their parents/in-laws when they have disclosed their decision not to have children. Blogger 3 writes, “For Milly and Phil, grandchildren are *everything*. I’d felt a lot of awkwardness around them after I made the enormous gaffe of gently explaining several incredibly valid reasons I never wanted children, and felt a permafrost settle immediately thereafter.” There are cases where the bloggers’ relationships with other family members have been strained due to their voluntarily childless lifestyle. This disapproval of remaining voluntarily childless from key members of the family creates tension. The bloggers feel “second class,” compared to their siblings who had children.

Getting along with family after disclosure has proved to be tough for some bloggers, as family members have heard them out but do not feel that the decision is “real”, and keep pushing them so that they change their minds. Blogger 6 writes of her mother in-law, “MiL won’t be happy until I’m pregnant with my second child and staying at home. Until then, we’re still a couple of spoiled children who need someone to teach us how to act our age.” Some family members have distanced themselves from the bloggers, as they feel that they are bad influence on their children.

Some bloggers feel guilt for the choice as it would deprive their parents and in-laws from grandparenthood — and disappoint them. Blogger 6 says, “We’ll be breaking their hearts when we announce our plans to remain childfree.” Some bloggers struggle to stand up for themselves, especially when family asks about when they will have children. Blogger 6 vents, “Why is it so hard for this to just be a decision between my future husband and me? Why can’t I make people back off without saying “I might change my mind”? Why is that the only way they garner satisfaction?” Even though the bloggers do not feel guilty about the choice itself, they feel guilty because of other people’s (mainly parents/in-laws) reaction to their decision and how it would hurt them.

Apart from unacceptance from families, the bloggers experience it from friends as well. The bloggers usually come face to face with changing social networks as most of the people their age seem to be having children, and they feel even more out of sync during this period. Blogger 6 explains:

The centerpiece couples, the ones who do all the work organizing, are having babies; one is pregnant, the other trying foster care after infertility. I suspect a third couple will be trying soon if they aren’t already, and a fourth already has to miss out on most outings because they don’t like to leave their boys for an entire weekend. The face of our friends, at least that group of friends, is changing. And while we’re lucky it’s changing while we and our friends are all in our 30s (at 29 I’m the baby of that group, it would seem), it’s still odd to see it changing.

Many friendships are lost, when friends of voluntarily childless become parents — mainly because the parent friends become busy with the children and also because their lifestyles seem to have less in common. As Blogger 6 puts it, “And there is a bit of a rift there, the unspoken awkwardness that I usually feel with friends who are new moms who haven’t really seen me interact with kids. It’s subtle, possibly imagined, but it’s there.”

The reason many parent friends and the bloggers stop spending time begins with how different the topics of conversation become. As new parents, most of the parent friends discuss parenting and their children, whereas, the bloggers talk about their priorities and interests. Also, new parents usually become busy in taking care of child(ren), and there are larger gaps between meeting. Blogger 3 writes, “Once they become moms, you lose them as “real” friends — because they become really busy being mommy.” Some bloggers see that they are no longer in touch with people they used to know because they have become parents.

Usually, the bloggers do not know how people will react and prefer not to disclose their voluntarily childless status. The bloggers are, thus, usually subject to conversation about their having children. Since majority of people do not understand the voluntarily childless choice, social events (such as family vacations, weddings, baby showers, and children’s birthday parties) can be stressful for voluntarily childless individuals. Blogger 6 writes, “At Amy’s shower yesterday I told her that she really cleaned up. “If you choose to do this,” she said, “you’ll get to enjoy all this too!” I smiled and said nothing, impressed that she realized this was a choice. Sister-in-law Joy piped in “of COURSE she has to do this! It’s so rewarding/fulfilling/enriching/etc.” This went on for a while, the other mothers (nearly all the women in the room) chiming in, and I just said nothing.” Even though many bloggers would want to stop going to these social occasions, the bloggers feel obligated to participate. The pressure is not just in form of casual conversation. During her wedding, Blogger 6 tried to not break any ribbons on the present, as ritually, breaking one ribbon means you will have one child. However, all her family and friends were cheering for her to break a lot of ribbons to symbolize having lots of children.

For family members and friends who know the bloggers' decision, even if they do not ask any more about when the bloggers will have children, the bloggers feel like there is unsaid tension among them. Blogger 6 writes, "They interpreted my choice as a rejection of them, of their children, and very quickly there was no room for me in their lives." She goes on to say, "To see it in black and white... I don't know, I see myself fading more and more out of the loop. I haven't decided how I feel about this yet, but it's unsettling." There is a sense of alienation some bloggers feel as their social network changes, and feel left out. The separation between the voluntarily childless individuals and parents play out in subtle, unsaid (but palatable) ways. There is a sense of subtle marginalization for their lifestyle. Voluntarily childless individuals might feel they are invisible in the sea of other people who are becoming parents. Few friendships with parent friends survive and the bloggers have friendships with mostly other people who do not have children. There is also struggle to find newer friends, mainly due to age and also because of their marginalized predicament.

Family and friends are not the only ones that are concerned with the bloggers not wanting children. Sometimes if conversation is overheard, strangers approach the bloggers to ask why they do not want children. Blogger 6 writes, "A woman, in her late 30s I would later find out, two tables over came over and interrupted our conversation, giving me the third degree about why I wouldn't want children." Blogger 8 also discusses, "I find it incredible a stranger thinks its fine to probe my ability or desire to procreate. For I'm certain the same people would never dream of asking me to reveal my salary, how often I have sex, or who I voted for." This personal decision is public debate.

The bloggers seem to have a refinement of their social network as the years go by and spend more time with people who accept them. Blogger 6 echoes other blogger sentiments:

Challenging these ideas is, well, challenging. Over the years I've been able to surround myself with people who understand me, letting those who refuse to try linger on the fringe except for an awkward "hello" every couple years at the club or a friend's party. It is better this way and I'm happier for it.

She goes on to say in a later post, "This time, I do have support. I have many childfree friends, and my parents support us even if my in-laws don't understand. The parents who DO remain in my life are amazing, and their kids give us plenty of moments to experience the good stuff we're missing out on. My life is full of love and support." The people who remain in their lives seem to be voluntarily childless themselves or do not have children. So we see yet another way the trajectory differs and creates separate outcomes for voluntarily childless individuals and parents.

Typical negative reactions from others. The voluntarily childless get lots of inappropriate questions and comments when they tell others they do not want children. The voluntarily childless internet communities call these responses "Bingos," which are clichéd responses that voluntarily childless individuals get when they tell others they do not want children. Bingos include "but you were a kid once," "Why did you get married then?" "You are not a real adult until you have kids," "You won't know what love is," "It's just a phase..," and "You may not want kids now, but it's different when they're your own," among others. The bloggers have experienced people saying that they still have time, and that they know of people who have been able to conceive even in their 40s. The bloggers are apprehensive to answer probing questions about their choice to be voluntarily childless, as

the questions and comments mainly comes from a place of shock and disapproval than it comes from a place of genuine curiosity and care. Blogger 6 writes what most of the bloggers have mentioned about:

I've been told I'll never know what love is, that I'll never fully appreciate my own mother, that I'm wasting a perfectly good uterus, and that I'm doing a disservice to my family and the world. These are not paraphrased statements. People have said these things to me. They've also implied that I shouldn't have gotten married, that I'm childish and immature, that my husband isn't a real man because he hasn't managed to knock me up for whatever reason, that I'm a bad person and incapable of loving the children in my life, that my life lacks meaning because I don't want kids of my own.

These individuals have to hear a barrage of continuing criticism for their choice by others. This usually happens following a conversation with other people who are shocked or disapprove of their lifestyle choice. Blogger 3 says, talking to the doctor she realizes that she is now seen as “different” and not in a good way, like most other such conversations. The bloggers feel that other people will never forget (or forgive) that they have said that they do not want children. This is a familiar situation the bloggers usually face.

The unacceptance that many bloggers feel translates into frustration for them. Blogger 6 writes, “I'm just tired of living what I feel is like a double-life — my politically correct discussions with her, and the way I feel when I write here, when I live in *this* world.” They feel like they live split lives, as most people do not know or understand their voluntarily childless choice and identity which leads to misunderstandings and judgement. The bloggers feel that they have to justify and explain their choices to others and this distresses them as the chance of misunderstanding is high as the choice does not fall under the norm.

One of the major sources of frustration is that they have to justify their stance for choosing to be voluntarily childless, while parents do not. Blogger 1 writes, “I am so tired of the childfree constantly having to justify our reasons to the world, while those with children are never called out on their reasons for having children, however selfish they may be.” Another similarly distressing question is, “when are you having kids?” The bloggers fear that such questions may never stop. Blogger 3 writes:

As a childfree lady, I get *a lot* of uncomfortable comments from people about my lack of children. I blog about those comments here to vent sometimes, but today a new notion hit me like a freight train: I realized that the comments are never going to stop coming at me. Never, ever, ever.

These questions are culturally acceptable which is why others ask such questions. Three bloggers talk about going to the therapist, one of the main reasons being their voluntarily childless status and the frustration they feel.

The cultural expectation plays out over different stages of adulthood. The voluntarily childless deal with different types of comments at different ages. After the bloggers are married, the question seems to shift from, “when will you have children?” to “You still have time” in their 30s and in their 40s, along with suggestions for adopting a child while in their 50s the voluntarily childless will get asked if they regret not having children. Blogger 6 writes, “I’m really starting to wonder at what age I’ll have to be when people start believing we’re serious about this...” These questions keep showing that being voluntarily childless is not “normal” and distresses the bloggers, even when they have made the permanent decision and are at peace with it themselves.

The aspect of not fitting in keeps coming up as a theme. Blogger 6 mentions, “That is the answer then: too much time spent in a world where I don’t belong, among the clucky,

the childLESS, the parents. It's not my world, and that's why I was feeling so empty." There is a sense that the voluntarily childless do not fit in with the married people nor do they fit in with single people. Most of the bloggers do not know too many other voluntarily childless couples in their own network.

Bloggers' Response Strategies

Selective disclosure of the voluntarily childless identity. Since there are so many people who do not understand, and therefore, do not accept the voluntarily childless lifestyle, who the bloggers disclose their voluntarily childless status to becomes very important. The voluntarily childless are always balancing the act of who, when and how to disclose their voluntarily childless or not. With it comes an amount of stress and a sense that they are being manipulative. Blogger 2 expresses:

But unlike parents, I don't announce my status immediately. If I get to know someone, a coworker for instance, and they seem like they'll be open to the idea, I will enter a dialogue about it — because it's never as simple as saying "I'm childfree by choice." If it comes up naturally, that's great. When I'm asked directly, I will answer truthfully, but it inevitably opens a can of worms.

Blogger 6 gives an example of when she disclosed to her sister in law about not wanting to have children; "Immediately followed by "I didn't think I could do it either" was a flashing and shrieking alarm that said "this is not a safe place." That's a really unpleasant thing to feel when you're with someone you care about deeply. And that's why we clam up, why we don't speak up." The bloggers realize that most people do not understand the voluntarily childless choice and become culturally defensive.

However, there are some instances when the couple has had to disclose it to their parents and in laws, and even though things were strained for a while, the bloggers felt much

more relieved to not have communicated their decision. For example, Blogger 6 writes, “We’ll never have a good enough explanation for some people. But it’s time to stop hiding and at least give it a shot, even if it means upsetting people we care about.” The disclosure can have some very negative impact on relationships, as Blogger 6 explains:

But the only place I can talk about the consequences, the mixed emotions, is this private blog. I’ve swapped several posts to “private” on my public blog after friends took horrible offense to everything I said. I tried reaching out again, to see if it would be different this time. It hasn’t been.

For this reason, many of the bloggers do not talk about being voluntarily childless in the offline world at all.

The few people that the voluntarily childless willingly disclose to are people who will not judge them negatively for their choice. These include other voluntarily childless individuals, some family members, and mainly online voluntarily childless groups. But to know if others can handle it, sometimes the bloggers test the waters, as Blogger 1 shows:

At one point in a conversation, my husband said something about us being “done” having children after zero kids. It’s no secret, but I sank a little as I held my breath for the fallout. NO ONE in the room even batted an eye. The conversation just carried on as if he had said the most *normal* thing in the world.

With disclosure being such an ambiguous space, these individuals are always alert not to mention anything suspicious. Sometimes, as time goes on, some bloggers get more confidence in their choice, and decide to be open and honest about their choice to everyone. The bloggers who were early articulators find it easier to disclose as most of the people in their social network might already know their voluntarily childless status as they might have disclosed it much earlier.

A logical conclusion then would be that others who have made the same choice would understand. However, the reason voluntarily childless people do not meet other voluntarily childless people easily in the offline world is that voluntarily childless people usually do not talk about this choice, as it is an unpopular one and gets a lot of negative attention from people around. So it is hard to identify who are voluntarily childless and who are not, especially as voluntarily childless individuals are in the minority. However, with the advent of internet, the voluntarily childless are making different digital outlets to communicate with each other.

Response strategies in the offline world. Since the voluntarily childless experience is so fraught with unacceptance and people not understanding their choice, the voluntarily childless usually have to figure out ways to respond to others with the constant outsider status. Responding involves what they say and how they react when the subject of parenthood is directed at them. Each blogger has their own response strategies which depends on factors such as personality, situation and who they are speaking to.

Since parenthood is the default, there are certain things that are culturally acceptable and even expected from others as code of conduct, such as being excited about the news of other people's pregnancy as well as doting over children. Due to this code of conduct, many bloggers feign interest in something that does not interest them just to be polite. Blogger 1 writes, "Well, in a sense, this does resemble the death of one personality and the emergence of a new person who could be just a disfigured shadow of what she had been before — the kind of person I would not have befriended if I had first met her in this state. How can I not mourn that loss?" Even though the inward feeling might be of loss, the outward reaction in these situations is that of politeness and feigned interest since it is the custom.

When being asked questions about why they do not have children or want them, even though these questions are frustrating to the bloggers, the answer is in a polite way. This could include the bloggers saying, “It’s not on the roadmap right now” or saying that they might change their mind. The bloggers do this to end the conversation as soon as possible. Even though their aspirational responses would be short, crisp, humorous, and confident, they usually do not use them as it might upset the person they are responding to. Politeness is the most used response to others.

There are times when the bloggers confront the person who asks the question, especially if the person keeps bringing up the topic. Blogger 6 writes, “If pressed on the subject I retort: “Did you ‘just know’ you wanted to be a mother? Well I ‘just know’ I don’t.” I’m sure there are other women who feel the same way as me but don’t speak up.” Another approach is suggested by Blogger 8, “I am happily married, but when my husband and I are asked about it, one of the first things we say is: It isn’t for everyone.” There are times that the bloggers just ignore the questions from others. However, most of the time, even though the bloggers might not want to, they end up being polite.

The bloggers have a more difficult time when coping with questions from family, as these relationships are generally more intimate and complex. Usually the bloggers deal with family having strained thoughts by accepting that outcome and by taking their opinions less seriously. Blogger 3 says:

I’m also just taking everyone less seriously because I have finally trained myself to not care about what they think of me. I always believed I had to win my in-laws over and tiptoe around my childfree status, but now I’m focusing less on how they feel about me and more on how I feel about myself.

Some bloggers have gone to therapy to cope with their outsider status. Blogger 6 says, “The cruel irony is that a big part of my current depression is wrestling with my choice and coming to terms with it being my forever choice. This in the midst of all my closest friends having children or, in the case of the latest friend, going through the process of adoption.”

Though the reaction initially starts off with inner frustration, as the years go by, the bloggers seem to settle into a quiet resolve in their own minds. Most bloggers reach a point when instead of feeling frustrated, they shift their attention to something more positive. For example, Blogger 3 has a breakthrough moment where she feels less frustrated about what is, and takes responsibility of what she can do (e.g., celebrate). She is empowered by her own realization that she can give herself permission. Ultimately, the bloggers accept it as their outcome as Blogger 1 explains, “I don’t fit in here, but that’s OK. I’m not meant to.” Another technique is to look at the situation with a sense of humor. The blogger can take the conversation less seriously (by rationalizing why it is not worth taking seriously). However, it is important to note that the humor comes more readily once the bloggers have more confidence after feeling more comfortable with their marginal identity.

In these previous sections we can see that like any identity, there are advantages and disadvantages to a voluntarily childless one. On the upside, all the bloggers feel that their lives are well-balanced, and they have more freedom to pursue what matters to them. They perceive having children and a career as tough to balance and write repeatedly about how grateful they are to be voluntarily childless. On the downside, the balancing act on what, how much and whom to disclose to about their voluntarily childless identities keeps them vigilant. Blogger 3 states, “...being the only childfree woman in the house makes anything I

say extra sensitive. I'm already different, so I have to watch it." voluntarily childless bloggers have to be careful about what they say to others as they do not conform to the pronatalist norm of having children. Though the benefits of being voluntarily childless are lifestyle related, the negative experiences usually come from the social network.

CHAPTER 6

FINDINGS — BLOGGERS' DIGITAL IDENTITIES: RESISTING DOMINANT REPRODUCTIVE IDEOLOGIES

The bloggers' digital identities create a new dimension to be understood as they share information about voluntarily childless lives in various ways. In this chapter, I discuss how the bloggers resist the dominant culture through their digital identities. First, I iterate how the bloggers use their weblogs to bring visibility to voluntarily childless concerns. This act of writing weblogs is itself a form of resistance as they use various ways to justify their stance. Second, I show how these bloggers resist the cultural reproductive notions through the content they write, using techniques of myth busting, challenging dominant ideologies, attempted stigma reversal, and creating new narratives in attempts to level the playing field with competing discourses from the dominant reproductive culture.

How the Weblog is Used as a Medium for Voluntarily Childless Discourse

Response strategies in the online world. The voluntarily childless experience is fraught with complexities that include their own desire to be voluntarily childless and the cultural pressures to procreate that married women face. This creates much confusion and frustration about disclosure. The bloggers, thus, need to navigate specific and situational components of everyday interactions with different sets of people in their social network about their decision. As the offline spaces are so troubled with uncertainties, online spaces that are safe to disclose and discuss their voluntarily childless life becomes a refuge, and a tool for expression.

These bloggers write the weblogs, sometimes for years. It is mainly because they are able to write about this aspect of their identity without being judged. They also have the option to stay anonymous on the weblog as they write, which protects them while making their thoughts openly accessible. There is also the feeling of permanence of writing the blog, as the writing stays on the site long after it is written if the bloggers so desires.

The bloggers write because the weblog is a place to know that they are not alone, vent, express themselves openly, be understood, and show support for other voluntarily childless individuals — thus, making it both a place to be supported as well as support others who have made the same choice. Blogger 1 explains, “After banging my head in frustration over the obsession everyone around me had with procreation, I went online to find a community of people who were more like me.” Similarly, Blogger 3 states, “A few slim months ago, I was a childfree gal blubbing in a puddle because a doctor stepped on my feelings for not wanting children. Then the spark of an idea for a blog about being childfree in this modern world of ours hit me, and I thought, *Well, let’s turn this indignity into something.*” These bloggers use their weblogs as a medium that gives them freedom to narrate voluntarily childless discourses.

There is also a sense that the weblog has helped them evolve as voluntarily childless individuals. Blogger 3 writes, “The blog has helped me figure myself out, like a mirror that shows me both who I am and who I want to be. I am constantly grateful for every single page load, every single reader, and every single comment.” These bloggers also realize that this is one place they will not have to hide their true thoughts. Blogger 7 writes, “The great thing about having our own blog is that we *do* get to share the stuff that doesn’t make the cut elsewhere.” For the bloggers who are here to inform, their main intention to start the weblog

was to let people know that parenting is a choice and to show support for the voluntarily childless lifestyle in general.

However, not the entire online world is “safe” to discuss voluntarily childless topics in. There are certain “safe places” to discuss the voluntarily childless life such as the personal weblogs and voluntarily childless forums — but these bloggers rarely write anything on their Facebook pages or non-voluntarily childless spaces on the internet, as there will be a lot of negative responses. For example, Blogger 1 wanted to write that she is thankful for not having children during thanksgiving but did not want to post this on Facebook as it would attract negativity. So, even in online spaces there is a difference between which spaces are “safe” to disclose and which ones are not.

There are four bloggers who are anonymous and five who are not. For the four bloggers who write the weblog as a personal journal, the weblogs are created out of a need to express what they cannot openly discuss in the offline world. The other five bloggers write to inform others of the voluntarily childless life, though there are overlaps within the weblogs between writing personal anecdotes and information sharing. The four open journal blogs use a more intimate, personal style of writing, discussing their own lives in context to being voluntarily childless, while the other five bloggers who are not anonymous share vast amounts of material from the news, other weblogs and research to comment on voluntarily childless life. I will call the former group “open-journal bloggers,” and the latter “informational bloggers.”

Open journal bloggers. Many of the open journal bloggers discuss incidents that happen and use their weblogs as sounding boards for their thoughts. These bloggers write

mainly for self-expression and with an effort to be understood. Blogger 6 writes, “Why do still I talk about this, after 7 years of doing this blog? Because I wish someone told me 7 years ago that this was okay.” Hand in hand with self-expression comes reflection of voluntarily childless life. Blogger 3 discusses, “Writing Baby Off Board has been an amazing experience, but it has also altered my day to day perspective about life. I used to think about not having kids and how much I liked it, but lately I do so without any guilt whatsoever because I’m so much more confident in who I am.” They feel more “normal” after discussing these voluntarily childless thoughts online. The bloggers will sometimes ask the readers for suggestions, asking questions and receiving answers from the readers.

For open journal bloggers, their self-expression is of the utmost importance. However, these bloggers can only disclose these in their anonymous blogs, but not their personal social media where their identities are not hidden. The bloggers also discuss that they will only admit to being voluntarily childless on their weblogs due to the strain and probing questions they get from others. Having a weblog is a safe place as the bloggers feel that they have created that place for a specific purpose, and are not writing on other people’s site. Blogger 1 states, “Not wanting to be perceived as “trolling” for expressing my Christian perspective on other people’s forums and blogs, I use my own blog to share my musings on childfree life while at the same time expressing my faith.”

There is a sense of control over the weblogs where the voluntarily childless bloggers are allowed to voice their opinions and feelings without the judgement they would typically face offline. Bloggers take measures to not get found out. Blogger 6 expresses, “I hate that I have to be so afraid of my friends. Christ, it’s just Livejournal, it’s just an effing blog, yet I’m so afraid to talk about it I have a special “Childfree” filter on my LJ and I keep this and

my CafePress store a secret.” Similarly, Blogger 6 expresses gratitude yet is weary of lifting the anonymity from her weblog,

You are so amazing it makes me consider lifting the anonymity of my blog, but I still can’t bring myself to do it (not that any of my friends wouldn’t recognize themselves in my stories if they came across the blog, but that’s beside the point). The anonymity protects me, keeps me honest and frank.

There are several times when the weblog is used for venting. For example, when a negative incident occurs, bloggers can write about it and express their true feelings. For example, Blogger 6 discusses at length how a colleague upset her by asking her about children and then asking further personal questions and giving unsolicited advice. Blogger 6 writes about it in the safety of her blog. It is private and public at the same time while allowing bloggers to stay anonymous.

Most of these bloggers are most active in the first few years the blog starts, and then the posting becomes less frequent. For example, Blogger 1 wrote for 5 years (2009-2013), and she posted 25, 25, 27, 11 and 2 times successively in each year. Similarly, Blogger 2 wrote 49 posts in the first year, 14 posts in the second year and did not write for 4 year in the middle and then posted 3 times in the last year of her writing. One reason bloggers mention is that they run out of things to say. There is also an implicit notion that the blog has helped them become more confident about their voluntarily childless status, and therefore, has stopped serving them incrementally. In her last post, Blogger 3 mentions:

It all boils down to the fact that one of the reasons I took a break from the blog was because I no longer needed to desperately vent and find sustenance in a world where I was not considered a massive, tumor-like anomaly for not having children (and not having the decency to be devastated by it).

There is a sense of having expressed oneself and absolved oneself of the burden of secrecy in the privacy of their anonymous weblogs.

Informational bloggers. These bloggers cite articles to make their point to add credibility or use them as sounding boards for their writings. They not only share, but also comment on what they think of the information. One of the major objectives for these weblogs is to shed light on the voluntarily childless life that makes sense to them. These bloggers may also use their weblog to educate the readers. Blogger 4 asks:

Are you aware of pronatalism? I invite you to watch your TV ads. What is the product or service being “sold”? Is it directly related to children or are children in that ad used to suggest it’s the goal of every person on this planet? Are the children all pretty, sweet, adoring? What’s being sold other than the product? What pressures have you felt through pronatalism?

These questions give an interactive platform within the weblogs, where the bloggers actively engage the readers.

The bloggers, who are not anonymous, usually also engage in other social media like Facebook and Twitter with matters pertaining to CF, and then blogs about the comments and discussions. Some of the ways a blogger will use their weblog is through asking readers to participate by writing constructive comments and questions. Blogger 1 indicates, “Questions and constructive comments are welcome; negativity and intolerance are not.” The bloggers usually explicitly state that they do not want any negativity in the comments, as they have seen that some voluntarily childless forums use the platform to mainly attack parents and children instead of discussing their voluntarily childless lives.

The voluntarily childless visibility issue lies at the heart of the weblogs. The weblogs are used as a place where these bloggers can promote their own work such as research,

interviews and books. Blogger 7 publishes information about her own research and interviews on her weblog, which is both generating voluntarily childless information and self-promotion at the same time. Bloggers discuss their books and promote them, such as *Two is Enough* and *Confessions of a Childfree Woman*. By doing so, they also position themselves as experts. The researcher bloggers tend to also use their blogs as an outreach tool for participants or to ask research questions. Bloggers are usually contacted about their voluntarily childless choice by journalists. Their weblogs aid people from the media to find them and invite them for interviews or to speak about voluntarily childless subject matters. This is yet another way for them to bring visibility to voluntarily childless issues.

Along with promoting their own work, most of these bloggers invite other voluntarily childless individuals to post their voluntarily childless stories which the bloggers share on their blogposts. This is called “guest posting.” Some of the bloggers interview other well-known and not so well-known individuals who are voluntarily childless. The bloggers not only use their weblogs to make their own thoughts visible, but also that of other voluntarily childless people. This is an attempt to broaden the notion of who the voluntarily childless individuals are and acknowledge their diversity and prevalence.

The weblogs are used to share important voluntarily childless news. Blogger 5 writes, “The Childfree have made it to the front Cover of *Time*! Four years after my book *Two is Enough: A Couple’s Guide to Living Childless by Choice* was published and one year after the release of my documentary *The Childless By Choice Project*, I finally feel like the childless by choice have been recognized as the important emerging demographic that it is.” For these bloggers, showing the voluntarily childless life as a normal, much varied life which cannot be so negatively stereotyped is important. The bloggers inherently know the

dangers of voluntarily childless individuals not being visible — which leads to more stigma and less acceptance.

Therefore, the weblogs are used in different ways for mainly expressing and venting concerns by open journal bloggers, and by raising awareness and commenting on voluntarily childless related material by informational bloggers that provide visibility to voluntarily childless thoughts and their concerns.

Feedback from the online community. The readers of the weblog play an important role, for the most part to show the blogger that people are reading and are interested, and thus, blogging becomes from just a personal activity to a more social one. Blogger 6 writes, “Seriously, you all are awesome. The influx of support while I’ve been depressed is amazing and encouraging. I thank those of you who are commenting so much. I feel less alone and I’m so glad I’ve made you feel less alone too.” The bloggers usually thank the readers in their posts and tell them how grateful they are for them, especially during times like Thanksgiving or when the blog has hit a certain number of views. Certain things that the blogger themselves might be struggling with is asked to the community through the weblog for the benefit of the blogger and the readers. Engaging readers by asking them questions about their thoughts and experiences is a normal phenomenon in the weblogs.

One thing that incentivizes bloggers is the knowledge that they are helping others who are voluntarily childless to accept themselves without guilt. Blogger 4 expresses that while she was promoting her book, she realized that so many people do not know that having children is a choice. She writes:

I learned and will never forget, there are too many people still under the misconception that not wanting to have children is a sign of a genetic

mutation. I'll never forget the young women who stood there, wide eyed and then hugged me after we spoke. Then there was a young couple, walking hand in hand who purchased the book, smiled and said they really needed to read and discuss it. Whatever their choice is, I wish them well. Sadly, I'll never forget the woman who stood there and cried saying she wished she knew there was any choice before she had her son. It was too late for her now but remains in-printed in me as testimony why my memoir is important in a pronatal world.

These moments create even more incentive for bloggers to keep writing, knowing that voluntarily childlessness still has to gain acceptance in the culture.

Ways of Resisting the Cultural Reproductive Notions

In this section, I explore ways that the bloggers use the content of the weblogs to create discourses that show how they resist the dominant cultural reproductive ideologies. Since all the bloggers are married to their voluntarily childless partners, it is important to note that these resistance strategies are used by the bloggers within a framework that takes into account their marital status.

There are four major strategies that are used by the bloggers when they resist: first, by defending their choice through myth busting; second, by challenging the pronatalist ideologies through offense strategies; third, by confronting dominant culture by attempts at stigma reversal, and fourth, by creating new narratives. I find that some of the themes within these four major strategies overlap. This happens in two ways; one, due to having similar content and, two, the content may cover more than one strategy at the same time. However, to keep the categorization simple, I sort them into four key strategies.

The process of myth busting includes putting an end to untested claims about the voluntarily childless individuals, especially negative stereotypes. While myth busting, they

are attempting to reject the stigma that is put on them by going on both defense of their position as well as offense of their opponents position.

On the other hand, the stigma reversal process (Goffman, 1963) includes putting stigma onto the dominant group by confronting and questioning existing pronatalist ideologies. These bloggers not only coped with the stigma of being “childfree”, but reframed this cultural dishonor into a courageous practice, for example, discussing the impact that over-population has on the planet. This phenomenon of recreating the narrative into a “heroic morality play” is a way of reversing stigma reversal (Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010).

Myth busting is used as a defense and offense mechanism, whereas stigma reversal is used solely as an offensive one. Even though the subject matter may be the same, what distinguishes myth busting responses from stigma reversal ones is how they are responding to these cultural ideologies. Therefore, it depends highly on the context in which the content it used. These themes along with the process of myth busting and attempted stigma reversal are discussed below.

Defending the voluntarily childless choice through myth busting. The four ways they do this is through; (1) discussing research, (2) stating their opinions, (3) using analogies to express themselves, and (4) sharing narratives of other voluntarily childless lives. They do this to invalidate certain negative stereotypes attached to their identity.

First, the bloggers diligently discuss voluntarily childless matters using research that is published. These bloggers share several research articles on various topics related to voluntary childlessness and parenthood. This is mainly to bring visibility to the fact that the

voluntarily childless individuals are a sizable amount of the population and their needs and wants are important. The research is shared to show credibility to what they are claiming is not just their opinion.

For example, the bloggers discuss how happy they are with their current life and how grateful they are for being voluntarily childless. Blogger 7 writes, “Now I’m in my early 40’s. I’ve been married for 18 years. I love my life as it is, childfree.” Voluntarily childless bloggers claim they are happier (research cited also), and how parents can be less happy, as the downsides are more than the rewards. Blogger 5 mentions, “Childfree people report greater happiness and well-being than their peers with children, just dig a bit deeper in the archives of this blog.” In both happiness and regret expressions, the bloggers’ argument is that voluntarily childless may potentially have both more happiness and less regret than parents. Other research cited include topics such how voluntarily childless individuals have longer and better quality marriages than parents and how the women are showing a trend to becoming the dominant earner in the household. Showing the benefits of voluntarily childless life which are embodied in freedom and flexibility, the bloggers “put down” the parenting life which do not seem to consist of these qualities.

Second, the bloggers state their own opinions to show their stance about various topics. Blogger 2 writes:

Today I read someone’s intriguing point... no one EVER questions a couple who chooses to have kids if they thought long and hard about it, at least not if they’re in a position like A and I are — financially stable, emotionally stable. No one asks a pregnant woman “what if you regret the decision?” When a woman says she wants to have children, no one explores the emotions behind that decision, yet I have to justify everything.

These bloggers discuss how unfair it is that they have to justify their choice while parents do not.

As the voluntarily childless stereotype of selfishness is bought up, and a more positive notion is replaced by rewriting the narrative in the weblogs. Blogger 4 writes:

Not having kids allows me to be more generous with my money.
Instead of having to feed an offspring, I often donate to nursing homes, single moms, missionary groups, and the humane society.
That kind of financial generosity would not be possible from me if I had to feed, clothe, and support a child of my own.

The bloggers compare their choices to that of parents, and discusses how some of them are more in tune with giving to society, while showing how parents might not have the time or resources to do so.

Another myth about voluntarily childless individuals is that they are rich, to which the bloggers say that they are comfortable with their income, but they are not rich by any means. Blogger 6 writes:

Childfree couples certainly aren't all wealthy. My husband and I do okay, but we live what I consider a modest lifestyle. Even so, we D.I.N.K.s (Dual-Income No Kids) take a lot of flack for "hoarding" cash or being big spenders. But aren't we doing what we're SUPPOSED to be doing? Preparing for our futures?

The bloggers write extensively about how they will never regret their decision, and how they get more and more sure every year (along with the less personal blogs guest-posting with people who say they have not regretted it, especially quoting older voluntarily childless people). The bloggers discuss that the voluntarily childless friends that they do have, have busy and fulfilling lives. Other related assumptions about the voluntarily childless life that the bloggers outright deject is that they are going to be lonely, will not

have anyone to take care of them when they are old and will regret their decision later in life.

On the assumption that voluntarily childless individuals hate children, blogger 5 writes:

I guess because people make the assumption that all of us who choose to remain childless hate kids they are surprised when they find out that some of us happily choose to have children in our lives. We teach, coach, mentor, babysit, foster, or marry someone who has children from a previous marriage, and sometimes we even adopt. These actions do not negate the choice we made to live a life without biological children.

The technique of myth busting is to show the opposite of what is claimed of the stereotype.

The bloggers also confront the notion that parenthood does positive things for society. Blogger 8 states, “If we were to base assistance on the idea that mothers are doing a positive good, could we not then demand an accounting of that fact? I doubt many would endorse a scheme whereby we evaluate the quality of parenting.” However, the bloggers are accounting for how they are improving society. Blogger 8 writes:

Asking a childfree woman if she’s thinks her decision is selfish is not a question. It’s a judgment disguised as a question. Childfree women are actually great assets to the planet. Our carbon footprint is smaller than a mom’s! And we have enough money to write checks to organizations that help kids get vaccinations, vitamins, and educations; yet have plenty of free time to advise your daughter that one day she will regret piercing her lip.

This is a classic example, where there is myth busting of certain negative assumptions on voluntarily childless, while volleying the stigma onto the dominant group by confronting them to account for their contribution.

The voluntarily childless bloggers attempt to display the positive side of voluntarily childlessness, as there are already many negative stereotypes prevalent about them. When there are negative aspects associated with the voluntarily childless life are displayed, they immediately try to defend it. For example, Blogger 7 responds about an article that stated that a man who did not want to sit next to a baby on a plane because he was childfree, “If the author didn’t drag the word “childfree” into the piece it would just be a story about an asshole on a plane... an asshole that is likely to have kids of his own. After all, the childfree are only about 10% of the population.” The bloggers do not tolerate bad behavior from other voluntarily childless individuals and discuss that in any group, there are people who are extreme in their behavior and thoughts. They reassure that majority of them are not like that, and should not be looked at through that lens.

The bloggers understand the importance of parenthood, but also advocate that culture should have a more balanced perspective of it, rather than a highly romantic one. Blogger 8 writes:

What if, instead, we saw parenthood a bit more realistically: as something that most people do and that’s necessary to continue the human race; as a thing that is fundamentally difficult and deserving of strong social support; and also as something that shouldn’t be an assumption or a cultural marker of adulthood.

The bloggers do not want a one-sided conversation of what is fulfilling and would like the culture to be accepting of other types of families.

Third, the bloggers represent their choice is through use of analogies. The bloggers use analogies to portray their choice. Blogger 6 explains, “Building analogies helps me understand my feelings and realize they’re okay.” The bloggers allude to analogies such as choice; Blogger discusses, “Not wanting children is like not wanting to go camping, or

major in psychology or moving to Alabama.” Blogger 5 has a similar analogy, “some people want to be lawyers, and others want to be teachers. Similarly, some people want children, some people do not.”

Blogger 1 discusses how being voluntarily childless is akin to a natural instinct and yet is at odds with how society is structured and what the people in the culture readily accepts:

As I considered this, I began to make connections between childfreedom and left-handedness. Lefties comprise only about 10% of the population too. We struggle to navigate a world built for right-handers (ladles with spouts on only one side, salad bars/buffets designed for people to hold a plate in the left hand while serving up food with the right, machinery levers positioned so as to be grasped with the right hand, scissors, right-handed desks in classrooms and lecture halls, etc.)

This powerful analogy shows how they feel marginalized for their choice. Analogies can also be used to describe their outsider status in society, as Blogger 3 puts it:

For a little while now, I’ve felt like being childfree is the new gay. It’s an alternative lifestyle that is a major societal taboo and unaccepted by many, many people. We aren’t allowed to talk about it. We aren’t supposed to own up to it. And we definitely aren’t allowed to be thrilled about our choices.

Fourth, the bloggers often invite other voluntarily childless individuals to share their own voluntarily childless experiences. This could be done through “guest posting,” where other voluntarily childless individuals are invited to write their own thoughts and experiences and these are posted on the weblogs, or are interviewed by the blogger about their voluntarily childless related thoughts. These interviews and guest posts function to reveal that there are various people out there who are voluntarily childless, and they are a diverse set of people. Some guest bloggers are usually people who write weblogs of their

own or have written books on voluntarily childless. So in a way, they are “experts” on the subject matter and inform the voluntarily childless discourses.

Challenging the pronatalist ideologies through offense strategies. The bloggers write to counter dominant reproductive ideologies in the culture. They challenge the pronatalist narratives through: (1) stating their opinions, (2) discussing aspirational responses to rude questions and comments, (3) using humor and sarcasm, and finally (4) discussing misunderstandings between voluntarily childlessness and parenthood lives.

First, the bloggers share their opinions when confronting the mainstream pronatalist ideology. They shun the parenthood narrative that states parenting is one of the most fulfilling activities in an adult person’s life. One way the bloggers discuss fulfillment is by contrasting their own experiences with that of parents they know and their lives. Blogger 6 compares her life where she has a job she loves and decides before moving to do something, and her step-sister, who is a stay at home mother and is miserable. She goes on to explain just how parenting is not always glorious:

Of course she loves her boys, but after only a month at home with them she’s losing her mind. She misses the challenges of working in the lab, working toward something, toward her dream job. This wasn’t what she signed up for. She still feels that one baby they could have handled, but being blindsided by two is just too much.

By comparing and contrasting voluntarily childless and parent lives, the bloggers challenge the notion of high fulfillment that is derived out of parenting, while showing that the notion may not always hold true.

Bloggers write about how parents miss things like travelling and free time they used to have before having children. The blogs measure the pros and cons of having children to verify and validate their choice. Blogger 6 writes:

Mothers and fathers wonder all the time what their lives would have been like if they didn't have children and many come to the conclusion that it wouldn't be worth it because they wouldn't have their child in their life. Well, we look at the decision too, and when we start weighing things, yeah, maybe we'd be pretty great parents, but then we'd lose us in the process, and that just wouldn't be worth it.

These differences in lifestyle already divides parents and non-parents into two distinct groups with different life trajectories. The bloggers allude to the notion that parents lose themselves, while voluntarily childless individuals strengthen their personalities by opting to work on themselves.

For the view that many voluntarily childless individuals regret their decision, Blogger 6 writes, "Many childfree people find solace in the stories of parents who regret their decision. We look at the woman who resents her children and feel validation, seeing our biggest fears about parenthood happening." The bloggers also point out that they have read parent's confessions on the internet and looks as them as cautionary tales. Blogger 5 writes of a colleague, "I feel bad and sad that this woman agreed to have two children she clearly didn't want out of a sense of obligation and guilt." They challenge the notion that parenthood is the most meaningful experience by showing us examples of parents who regretted having children.

Many bloggers feel that it is their duty to make others aware of the pitfalls of pronatalism. Blogger 8 writes:

No matter how valid the claims are, when the demands of such groups are so many, and the cost so great, there needs to be someone pushing back from the other side, someone to challenge their assumptions and point out the costs to society. Childfree people just do not have that sort of voice, organization, or legitimacy yet. I fear that until we do, the agenda of this group will rage on, checked only by the slow process of democracy. I am beginning to appreciate our founding fathers all the more for purposefully designing it that way.

Second, the bloggers discuss aspirational responses to bingos from others such as, “It’s different when it’s your own.” The bloggers usually refrain from responding this way in the offline world as it would be seen as rude on their part, but these responses show what they would rather say if they could. For example, to the comment that stable, married couples have no excuse for not having children, Blogger 2’s aspirational response is, “the excuse is *I don’t want to*”. In another instance, Blogger 8 writes that when people tell her having children is natural, she would like to say, “in that case they should live in caves and hunt by hand because it’s natural.” For the question, “when are you going to start a family?” Blogger 8 would like to respond by saying that she already did when she got married. Blogger 3 would like to answer the question as to why she does not have children with another question: “why are you not sterilized?” These are various examples of how the bloggers portray their true feelings on the weblog, and informs the readers of how they really feel. Many times the bloggers write about these responses online, instead of acting them out as the situation unfolds. This discussion in the weblogs itself is a form of challenging the pronatalist discourses as the bloggers express what they would have said if they could openly air their views.

Third, the bloggers use humor and sarcasm to prove a point that they do not agree with. Blogger 4 writes:

This childfree blog post may be one of the funniest ones that I've ever read. This hilarious "letter" from a happy mom reveals how lonely the childfree must be. You may burst a seam reading it. I think I might have to print this one out for my personal collection of comedic writings. Let me know if you'll be putting this blog post on your refrigerator.

Laughter is a way of challenging the dominant discourses, as it undermines the weight of certain arguments presented by the pronatalist culture.

Here, Blogger 3 uses sarcasm to discuss the assumption that they do not know what love is:

I guess when I donate buckets of money to international children's charities, I don't know what love is. I guess when I unload gobs of my time to volunteer in the community, I'm nothing more than a hollow shell. When I stay up late nights because Bosco [her dog] or the hubs are sick, when I cook dinners, clean up a messy house, hunt Bosco down to brush her teeth, or tell people "I love you," it's all worthless.

By using sarcasm, they bloggers can easily portray how unreasonable the dominant cultural claims are.

Fourth, the bloggers also realize that there is generally a lack of understanding in the culture about who the voluntarily childless are. They do not understand why it is difficult for parents to understand why not everyone would want to raise children, as Blogger 6 discusses:

I truly do not understand their shock that "this wasn't what they thought it would be like" when things aren't always peachy. "What a parent is like" is all over the place. It's the hardest job in the world to raise kids at all, much less well-adjusted, well-behaved kids. Why can't these women who are living this life comprehend why someone might want to follow another path?

The bloggers discuss at length that having a family can be achieved in many ways, which extend from the concept of what a traditional family looks like. There is a certain

frustration the bloggers feel, because they realize that none of the lifestyles are better than the other, and people should be able to choose what suits them best, and not be judged for it. Blogger 8 discusses, “I get that parenthood can inspire new perspectives and skills, but so can a childfree life. Either choice brings trade-offs. Either can be jammed with joys and fears, unpredictability and intimacy.” Ultimately what these bloggers are trying to communicate is that everyone should be allowed choice — and parenthood is already accepted widely, while being a voluntarily childless is not.

Altering pronatalist ideologies through attempted stigma reversal. They attempt to stigma reverse by: (1) showing how parents may not make responsible decisions about child-bearing and child-rearing; (2) discussing how parents’ resources (time, money and energy) are tied up and, therefore, may not be able to contribute to social good for the larger community; (3) conferring the environmental influence that over-population has on the planet; and lastly (4) suggesting that having more children in the world is unjust when there are already so many children who exist that need to be cared for.

First, some bloggers discuss how parents may not make the decision to have children in a responsible manner. The bloggers discuss that they do not feel the reasons to bear children are legitimate, such as someone to take care of the parents in old age, or someone to accomplish certain aspirations that the parents might have had. Blogger 1 states:

At the same time, I sometimes wonder why my parents felt so compelled to pass on their faulty DNA. I look at the psychological problems they passed on to me, and I wonder why anyone would want to force that on another person. I listen to my mom’s laundry list of health problems - some of which I have had the pleasure of experiencing myself - and I wonder how many more of these problems I have to look forward to as I age.

Blogger 1 alludes that some parents procreate even though they know the child might suffer from genetic ailments. Blogger 8 discusses that parenting can be more harmful when done wrong:

So I will instead champion those who choose to dedicate their time to those activities that are sure to make the world a better place, and to those who contribute in ways better suited. Moreover, I will champion those who realize that doing nothing is a hell of a lot better for society than subjecting a child to a lifetime of unwilling parents because that very society has not really thought through what it is asking.

This example shows an attempt to reverse stigma by suggesting that some parents are irresponsible decision makers when it comes to child-bearing.

Second, the bloggers discuss how culture idealizes parenthood for being good for the society and questions that notion. Blogger 8 questions:

At best, parenting is *one of many* selfless things people can do for the world. How come we do not have the same condemnation of the “volunteer-free”? How come we do not label selfish those who refuse to adopt instead of giving birth, those who pass right by their local soup kitchen and go to the gym instead, those who could care for a pet but do not take one home from the local animal shelter?”

The blogger discusses how being a parent may not necessarily equate to doing societal good. In fact, she may be referring that parents may not be able to volunteer or spare resources to give to the society due to having children.

The bloggers indicate that parents might be selfish as the reason they want children is not to do social service, but because they want to experience parenthood or for someone to take care of them when they are older. This indicates that the bloggers might see parents as self-regarding, which is yet another way of reversing the stigma.

Third, the bloggers discuss the environmental damage that over-population causes. Blogger 8 shares a study, “Researchers have calculated that one additional U.S. child increases the lifetime carbon emissions legacy of either parent by nearly six times. Thus, not having children is by far the single greenest action any one of us can take, although the child-free choice is not usually green-motivated.” Blogger 5 also discusses that environmental consciousness was the driving force behind some people choosing not to have children:

Back in September I spend an evening with a group of Asheville, North Carolina residents who were concerned about global population. Most in the room were inclined to remain childfree because of the environmental impact of overpopulation, including a woman who really, really loved children yet had decided she couldn’t, in good conscience, have one of her own.

This line of thought reverses the stigma on parents who are having children, (especially the ones who are having many children) as individuals adding to the environmental detriment of the planet.

Fourth, the bloggers suggest that having more children in the world is unjust when there are already so many children who exist that need to be cared for. Blogger 6 writes, “But until every child can be cared for and cared for well, I will continue to believe that there are already far too many children for this little planet to handle, and it would be wholly irresponsible for me to add to that burden.” Blogger 5 discusses similar sentiments:

And finally, on the kid front, I’ve never really understood why people insist on procreating when there are so many children who need good homes. What’s that all about? I mean, seriously. Why are we so intent on making new humans when so many of us already exist and so many have basic needs that aren’t being met?

The bloggers put the stigma on the dominant group for having children when there are already children in need.

Constructing new voluntarily childless narratives. The bloggers write to create new narratives for their voluntarily childless choices and push to create greater understanding of their lifestyle in the culture. They do this by: (1) accepting their predicament as voluntarily childless individuals, (2) taking action towards voluntarily childless visibility and acceptance, (3) celebrating the choice, as well as (4) giving suggestions of how to bridge the gap of unawareness and unacceptance of voluntarily childless individuals in the culture.

First, the step towards creating new narratives is the acceptance of themselves and the realities of their own predicament in society. The bloggers seem to get more confident through the years about their voluntarily childless status. Blogger 6 writes:

I don't know if I was so self-conscious about my childfree status that I overreacted to the in-laws' reactions last year, or if they actually did verge on frigid (or maybe just disappointed). Either way, I'm grateful that over the last year we each may have evolved. I'm a lot braver—or really, just no longer ashamed or apologetic about who I am. I've learned to screw the lid.

Their writing becomes less indecisive and helpless and more confident with time.

The bloggers also realize that the voluntarily childless are tolerated but not really accepted in the culture. Blogger 8 discusses this:

Honestly, I see acceptance as being more condescending than tolerance. Tolerance is really saying “I don't like the fact that you're gay, but I'll deal with it.” Almost an admittance that being critical of someone for being gay is a personality flaw in and of itself. Acceptance is a little too close to “approval” for my liking.

This blogger says that she does not care for being tolerated by the dominant culture. The ultimate form of creating their own narrative is not needing the dominant group's approval at all.

Second, the bloggers also show resistance to pronatalism through action. They do this through writing the weblogs, writing books, doing voluntarily childless research as well as other things such as making voluntarily childless documentaries and being spokesperson for voluntarily childless causes. They also show action in other more creative ways in their personal lives. For example, Blogger 3 sent out paper invites for getting her 2nd dog. Announcing their 2nd dog through paper announcement was not just any announcement, it was one to be taken seriously as a family. She tried to do the same thing people do when they have a new addition to the family. Blogger 3 writes, "Sending a formal mailed announcement was also a big deal because I have always valued celebrations and, as a childfree person, sometimes feel left in the dust." Many times, voluntarily childless individuals make their own rituals to feel legitimate, even if it is in half-mockery.

Third, an active way the bloggers create new narratives is through celebrating the voluntarily childless choice. They do this in various ways. For example, August 1 is CF day, and many bloggers do something special on that day. Some bloggers celebrate the day they or their husbands got sterilized, and they became "officially" voluntarily childless. Yet, other bloggers celebrate the start of their blog, as Blogger 7 states:

This way we can uncork a bottle of the same wine once a year from now on to celebrate the birth of our childfree blog and to see how the wine develops over years of nurturing in our cool basement. Sort of like how parents celebrate the birth of their children annually.

Any childfree celebration in essence is about stigma rejection, and is a symbolism for self-acceptance within the voluntarily childless community.

The bloggers also attempt to bring awareness to this celebration by trying to formalize the process of giving awards to deserving voluntarily childless individuals. For example, Blogger 4 received the Lifetime Contributor Award for voluntarily childlessness, which is set up by the bloggers as a community. Blogger 4 writes:

It's an honor! I'm proud and feel excited to be worthy of this first time recognition. When I think of the 40 years or more I've fought the battle against pronatalism, faced so much in losing a job and being called "perverse" after being on "60 Minutes", had to cross picket lines when I had speaking engagements and the loss of friends, I sigh. Thinking back, it was all worth it. (Well maybe not the loss of a job as my pension now reflects the years I couldn't teach!).

The bloggers understand that because their status is marginalized, celebrating (and perhaps even formalizing it) is an important ritual to infuse themselves with confidence, remind themselves who they are and what they stand for as well as legitimizing their choice.

Fourth, a way to create new narratives for the choice is by offering advice to other voluntarily childless individuals, as well as recommendations of change the culture as a whole. The bloggers write about things they would recommend when it comes to various topics. For example, they suggest that the policies are looked at more closely so that everyone gets fair treatment. For the environment, they suggest to have fewer children per couple and to adopt if possible. For visibility purposes, they discuss how important it is to have these conversations openly about childfreedom on various platforms. Bloggers feel that there should be open discussion of choices and feels that parents should say both the good and the bad, instead saying it is such a great experience. They recommend making an informed decision about being a parent, Blogger 4 suggests:

If only media would stop highlighting pronatalistic nonsense and start sharing real stuff like asking yourself: “Am I parent material? Do I really have enough time, energy and money to raise a child? Am I having a child because I don’t want to be considered an “other” in our society? Am I having a child to get attention? Am I having a child to get myself away from a boring job or schooling?”

These suggestions are for the readers of the weblog and clues in to what changes the voluntarily childless want to make.

This chapter explains how weblogs are used in different ways to make the voluntarily childless life more visible, by raising awareness to their experiences and concerns. The major ways that the weblogs are used for resistance to the dominant culture is to representing their thoughts and concerns by quashing negative stereotypes about voluntarily childlessness (i.e., myth busting), countering pronatalist narratives by challenging dominant ideologies, attempting to reverse the stigma onto the dominate group and creating new narratives for the voluntarily childless community.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION

In summary, my three research questions pertain to, first, what the voluntarily childless bloggers reveal about their perceptions of themselves and the dominant culture, second, what common experiences the bloggers face with respect to their voluntarily childless identities, and third, how the bloggers resist the dominant culture through their digital identities.

A lot of the past literature was confirmed in my study about voluntarily childless individuals. All the bloggers confirmed permanence of not wanting children is an important definition of being voluntarily childless similar to Veevers' (1980) study. These bloggers believe that being voluntarily childless is an active choice and there is no room for ambivalence. According to the bloggers, individuals who are ambivalent about child-rearing are not truly voluntarily childless. This active choosing is a reaction to the pronatalist culture, where the voluntarily childless they get push back for their choice. Additionally, it is revealed that they see themselves as a complete family unit with their spouses.

The reasons for being voluntarily childless aligned with Houseknecht's (1977) study. However, I found that the reasons were more nuanced in the way it was explained by the bloggers. It seemed that the child-rearing package appeared unappealing to the bloggers in its entirety than individual straight-forward reasons. It may be that the lack of desire is the main deciding vote in those who are voluntarily childless.

Characteristics of the bloggers also matched previous literature, with the blogger's exhibiting more open-mindedness (Callan 1983; Bram 1984), less religiosity ((Mosher,

Johnson et al. 1986; Heaton, Mosher, Williams et al. 1992; Jacobson et al. 1992), higher education (Chandra et al. 1997; Bachu 1999; Biddlecom and Martin 2006; Dykstra et al. 2008; Kneale and Joshi 2008), egalitarian marriages (Connidis and McMullin 1999) and steady careers (Crispell 1993; Abma and Peterson 1995; Bachu 1999; Gramotnev et al. 2006).

The blogger's perceptions also confirmed the literature on elevated value on marriage and child bearing by the culture. They see the disadvantages of parenthood more strongly than they see the benefits for themselves. The bloggers believe that parents usually trade off other facets of life to cater to parenthood, including their work and marriage. Moreover, the bloggers see the choice of procreating as a fundamental right and advocate active choosing after considering the pros and cons of being a parent.

Voluntarily childless individuals and parents have different trajectories in many life aspects such as work, marriage, contraception and how time is spent. They look at it as a sort of separation in identity between themselves and parents. There seems to be an "us against them" mentality from both sides, with very few accepting individuals in the middle who accept both choices. Bridging the gap that arises is difficult as there might be a gap in understanding and awareness of these different life courses. This is the idea of "symbolic boundary" (Lamont and Molnar 2002) used by the bloggers and emphasizes advantage over conventional ideologies.

The bloggers discuss various topics such as gender, pregnancy, infertility, adoptions, media, policy and religion. Their stance on these issues are important in understanding their views more clearly as a community. Aspects such as policy are less discussed than day to

day life, though the voluntarily childless have policy concerns. Their main policy concern was that they are not socially and legally recognized, which makes it more difficult to bring up topics that concern them into policy making.

This study found that there were gender disparities in how voluntarily childless is experienced. Since almost all the bloggers were women, the perceptions of the experiences of women were more observable. This shows two critical things: first, that marriage is an important milestone before the subject of children becomes pressing in individuals' lives in the culture, and second, that women are the ones that seem to be affected by the pressure. It also seems that voluntarily childless men are not as involved as voluntarily childless women about the issue of childfreedom.

The second research question pertains to experiences of these bloggers due to their voluntarily childless identity. A major divide in how voluntarily childless individuals and parents spend their time and what their priorities are, is highlighted in the weblogs. The priorities for these bloggers usually consist of work, marriage, taking care of their homes and themselves, hobbies, travel and volunteering. They do not feel they would be able to balance their priorities if they had children, especially when their priorities do not include raising children. The bloggers do not have ample free time as many would think, and are occupied by many priorities. They also discuss how they have more flexibility with work, money, travel and place, among other decisions. Another aspect the bloggers discuss is how important long-term and, most times, permanent contraception is to them. Sterilization can sometimes mean that the bloggers are now "officially" voluntarily childless, as the threat of pregnancy is removed. This phenomenon shows how permanent contraceptives are intricately intertwined with their voluntarily childless identities.

None of the bloggers mentioned having a child and then putting it up for adoption. This could be due to some individuals in the voluntarily childless community feeling that having a child does not make one voluntarily childless anymore. Their voluntarily childless identities are all about not having children, so having a child might be something that nullifies that identity. Another aspect is that many voluntarily childless individuals feel that pregnancy is an undesirable experience. Moreover, many people in their lives are rooting for them having children, that they might feel pressure in keeping the child — as pregnancy cannot be hidden. Therefore, abortion seems like the most logical choice in such a situation.

The social experience is also nuanced, with majority of people not supporting their voluntarily childless choice. Their disclosure of their voluntarily childless identity usually elicit shock or disapproval. This aligns with Goffman's (1963) "Stigma theory" which demonstrates that if people do not conform to the norm, they are negatively perceived, and their lack of conformity is justified through assigning negative stereotypes to that group. For this reason, they face judgement and comments that they feel is unwarranted. The "bingos," which are comments they usually get when they say they do not want children, are pronatalist assumptions of the dominant culture.

The main pressure comes from the families of the bloggers, especially their parents or in-laws. The bloggers end up disappointing them due to their choice, and feeling guilty for it. Other than family, as their friends and acquaintances starts becoming parents, their social network goes through change that make their predicament more conspicuous. The bloggers feel subtly excluded from the on-goings in other people's lives to which they were previously a part of. Even doctors are weary of taking these women at face value, and have to be convinced before the women are allowed to go through sterilization. The bloggers feel

frustrated at their social predicament for not fitting in, and feel a sense of exclusion.

Ultimately, the social network refines itself through time to include only people who are accepting of the bloggers and their lifestyle.

To respond to these negative retorts from others, even if the bloggers are frustrated, they try to be polite by feigning interest or conforming to what is expected of them socially. This is because the bloggers know that it is difficult to explain their identity, and try avoiding confrontation when possible, as it does not benefit them. Sometimes, though, depending on context, the bloggers confront others (for example, if someone keeps probing). Sometimes, the bloggers just avoid answering altogether. However, the bloggers found it more difficult to cope with family than with other sets of people. The way bloggers respond depends highly on the situation and the person they are communicating with. These ways of coping are aligned to Vinthagen and Johansson's study (2013) of how resistance is managed through confronting, accommodation, or escape/avoidance.

Their voluntarily childless experience, thus, has the advantage of having more flexibility in their lifestyle due to not having children, while having the disadvantage of being socially judged by different sets of people such as family, friends, coworkers and even strangers. The fact that strangers might feel it acceptable to come and ask the reason for not wanting children shows that this personal decision confronts the very boundaries of culture itself. Though the benefits that come from being voluntarily childless are lifestyle related, the adverse experiences are usually attributed through communication of that identity in the social network. Unlike gender, age, race or class, the voluntarily childless identity is not overtly visible, which is one of the nuances of this group that allows for the aspect of selective disclosure.

Through writing their weblog, these bloggers resist the dominant culture through their digital identities. These bloggers engage in evaluating social forces and testing reflexive limits, as a way of practicing freedom (Foucault 1997). The bloggers are saying things that are true for them, but also taboo in our culture to disclose. However, these resistance strategies are also contextualized and informed by their own circumstances in life. For example, since all the bloggers are married, they use resistance strategies that take into account their marital status.

These bloggers use their weblogs for self-expression, venting and information giving, in line with Nardi, Schiano, and Gumbrecht's (2004) research. Even though many of the points are repeated by the bloggers, the procreation culture is so prevalent that the voluntarily childless attempt to keep repeating themselves to make the arguments "stick."

As the weblogs are written in frequently, this is a cultural form of resistance and is what Scott (1985) would identify as "everyday resistance." This sort of resistance is not driven by collective and organized opposition (such as a political rally or protest), but is done individually by the bloggers. Their writings are not seen as politically driven as political resistance, as that sort of resistance is identified differently in our culture (Kwan and Roth 2011; Vinthagen and Johansson 2013). Therefore, this is "embedded resistance" which questions the dominant cultural notions that are prevalent, thus, expanding the boundaries of cultural beliefs (Mihelich and Storrs 2003).

In line with Kim and Chung (2007) research, blogging creates a place for getting support from like-minded individuals as the readers encourage the bloggers to keep writing. Readers may connect more readily with the bloggers as they represent the voluntarily

childless life by becoming the consistent aspect, making the readers feel that they are both personally connected to the blogger while being culturally connected to the entire voluntarily childless community. Both sorts of bloggers bring visibility to voluntarily childless issues while giving them the option to conceal their identity if they wanted. The bloggers can disclose only the aspects they want to disclose in their weblogs (Markham 2005).

The “open journal” bloggers voice their true opinions about their thoughts, experiences and concerns in the safety of their anonymity. The aspect of anonymity of the bloggers shows that the “open journal” bloggers who write more intimately about their voluntarily childless experiences do not reveal their personal identity. There is visibility in content, yet invisibility of personal identity. The fact that the “open journal” bloggers are exclusively anonymous points to the circumstances that these women are in with respect to being voluntarily childless in society.

The “informational” bloggers use the space to comment on the voluntarily childless life and culture. These informational bloggers, even though they are under the same threat, might not need the cover of anonymity like the “open journal” bloggers because they usually do work related to voluntarily childless such as academic research, writing books and being spokespeople for voluntarily childless related subjects (such as for No Kidding group). Therefore, they establish themselves as experts on the subject which legitimizes them to air their views in public.

These bloggers show resistance by writing their weblogs as “oppositional acts” (Vinthagen and Johansson 2013) in a proactive attempt to counterattack pronatalist

narratives. As Weitz (2001) stated in her article, resistance is not just about individuals not accepting their relegated status, but also by challenging it. However, resistance is a complex concept, taking into account various different techniques by individuals using creative and contradictory actions and words (Vinthagen and Johansson 2013). Therefore, different performances must be looked at in a situational context to define resistance.

In this study, resistance is used by these bloggers in three ways: one, through myth busting negative stereotypes about the voluntarily childless (thus, defending their position); two, by challenging the pronatalist ideologies through offense strategies; three, through attempted stigma reversal, where they question many aspects of the dominant culture (thus, trying to refuting their dominance); and four, by creating new narratives for their community. The way stigma reversal works is by using assertions of ethics and accountability against the dominant group to assert advantage of the bloggers' position (Killian 1985). This way their own marginalized position is given a boost towards cultural legitimacy.

The way they defend their voluntarily childless lives and show it through a more positive manner is by citing research, voicing their opinions, using analogies, as well as highlighting other voluntarily childless individuals' voices through posting them on the weblogs. When defending themselves, they are more likely to use the myth busting process of the negative stereotypes that are attached to their identity, thus, shielding from negative connotations (i.e., stigma rejection) as well as promoting a more positive narrative of their community.

The method they use in countering pronatalist ideologies is by directly confronting the dominant reproductive ideologies, discussing their aspirational responses to cultural

bingos, using humor and sarcasm to undermine the pronatalist position, and explaining the misconceptions that exist between the voluntarily childless individuals and parents to show the gap in understanding. They primarily do this by going on the offense.

The bloggers attempt to alter pronatalist ideology through stigma reversal. Attempted stigma reversal is the effort by the bloggers to confront the mainstream reproductive ideologies by attempting to relegate the elevated status given to parents in culture. They do this by showing how parents may not make responsible decisions, discussing how parents' may not be able to contribute to social good for the larger community, conferring the environmental effect that over-population has on the planet; and suggesting that having more children in the world is unjust when there are already so many children who exist that need to be cared for. The bloggers redirect the stigma onto the dominant group by showing that their choice to procreate may be harming society in various ways.

The means they use to create new voluntarily childless narratives is by accepting their quandary as voluntarily childless individuals, taking action towards voluntarily childless recognition, celebrating the choice, as well as recommending how to bridge the gap of unawareness and unacceptability of voluntarily childless individuals in the larger community. Through creating these new narratives, they are attempting to uplift their community to reach legitimacy in the culture.

The bloggers walk a thin line while trying to explain that their lives are more fulfilling and interesting than parents' lives and explaining that both trajectories are acceptable and each of the choices should be respected. The bloggers consistently juggle discussing how all choices are legitimate and should be so in society, and then upholding

their choice for being voluntarily childless at the same time. It is a complex narrative that the bloggers keep shifting back and forth from.

Even though the bloggers might not want to attack parenthood, it becomes one of the major ways to prove their stance. This push back from the bloggers happen because they are frustrated about their own inconspicuousness — as it seems like they are following most of the social rules (such as by getting married and having careers), yet they are not following one of the major rules of wanting to have children. Ultimately what these bloggers are trying to communicate is that everyone should be allowed choice — and to shed light on how parenthood is already accepted widely, while being voluntarily childless is not. For this, they usually have to show the negatives of parenthood as well, in line with the idea that “offense is the best defense.”

There was no mention of trying to convert anyone into being voluntarily childless. The bloggers were more concerned about respecting different choices that people make when it comes to the decision of having children. The bloggers seem to be asking to not be stigmatized for their choice, but to be understood as adults who have made an informed choice for themselves.

On their weblogs, the individuals are writing personal narratives to construct their digital selves. An audience is needed for narratives to be displayed (Plummer 1995). However, these narratives are not necessarily unbiased selves, as much as they are preferred selves (Langellier 2001). For example, the bloggers may take the victim role or the agentic role when they are put in a stressful situation. The narration is really a performance of one’s self by picking a certain story above another (Langellier 2001).

Choosing which story is a struggle for these bloggers, as there are so many different possibilities. An individual usually depicts oneself as a unified whole, without too many contradictions within their self-concept (Langellier 2001). The bloggers use words to frame their stance to intensify performance of self (Capps and Ochs 1995). Additionally, the bloggers position their selves through their writing to convey very specific messages to the reader by using grammatical resources (Goffman 1963).

The bloggers realize that stigmatization may be more deeply rooted than just the presence or absence of children. Women who are mothers have certain standards to live up to and will be judged if they do not abide by them. However, women are also judged when they cannot or will not have children as it is the expected route in the mainstream reproductive ideology. Ultimately, the dominant cultural argument seems to hold the message that not wanting to have children is not seen as a valid reason not to have them. This disapproval leads to policing women about what is acceptable and what is not is vital to consider. Responding to this, the bloggers write their weblogs as an argument of why voluntarily childless is a legitimate option for some individuals.

The bloggers use their weblogs to write what is true for them, while resisting the prevalent negative stereotypes of them. Throughout the weblogs, the bloggers set many facts “straight,” as they do not agree to be portrayed in a certain way. The bloggers do their part to expel the myths, confront the dominant reproductive culture, and stigma reverse, as well as attempt to create new narratives. The discourses by the bloggers compete with the dominant pronatalist discourses.

Theoretical Significance

This study gives a glimpse into how women are redefining femininity by changing the rules. The weblogs give space for voluntary childless individuals to construct their own narrative. The bloggers are challenging the dominant lens that voluntarily childless individuals are being looked through and giving others a way to look at them through their own lens. The agency the bloggers show in writing the weblogs is a proactive way of resisting and making their stance visible and, thus, attempting to change the established cultural notions.

These bloggers are writing extensively about voluntarily childlessness because not having children means very different life course outcomes than having children. Each of the bloggers have their own set of personal biographies and circumstances. It delves deep into these individuals' inner thoughts about their voluntarily childless identity, which might usually be hidden. The processes of reflexive thinking of the options, limitations, and boundaries that these individuals encounter in their daily lives are exhibited on their weblogs. Through these online narratives, how the bloggers have personally resisted the stereotypes that have come with their stigmatized identity are identified.

The voluntarily childless bloggers are showing resistance to the prevailing ideology of compulsory childbearing. Thus, the target becomes people who strongly believe in the obligatory notion that having children as a required step in adulthood, especially for those individuals who are married. What seems to put the bloggers on the offense is the lack of acceptance of their voluntarily childless choice. It is a push-back on the notion that everyone should choose parenthood. Therefore, it also becomes imperative for them not only to discuss why they are content with their choice, but also to justify why parenthood is not the

right option for them. As the bloggers in my study have written on a consistent basis, it can be seen as an act of “everyday resistance” to the pressure put on them to become (or at the very least *wanting* to become) parents.

As voluntary childless individuals are marginalized in normative culture, blogging seems to be a fitting way to get their voices heard. This research shows how marginal groups are left out of the political, legal as well as cultural aspects of the dominant society, leaving them unacknowledged on these fronts. They, therefore, have to create visibility for themselves while, at the same time, protect themselves through anonymity or through showing credibility through their expert status on the topic. Public discourses have always been restricted for sidelined groups but writing weblogs allows these marginalized groups to enable their discourses to be heard.

These online spaces are where communities and conversations are sprouting and they have become a way of life for some individuals. This research demonstrates how weblogs can be used in various ways to communicate and express resistance to dominant discourses. Voluntary childless individuals use their weblogs less for political activism causes and more as “everyday resistance” to the hegemonic ideals of the society. Weblogs become a space for discourses that are not limited by cultural politeness or the threat of social sanctions for the bloggers views. In this way, these discourses in the weblogs knock on the established notions of the mainstream reproductive culture, and demand to be acknowledged as a fully acceptable and legitimate choice in society.

Limitations of Study

There are some limitations that arise in my study. First, different bloggers had dominant themes that they were concerned about. For example, Blogger 1 was interested in

exploring how her religious identity and voluntarily childless identity worked together and Blogger 8 was concerned about policy. Second, as content analysis is a static process, I was unable to get feedback from the bloggers about things they did not discuss or disclose in their weblogs and certain things about them remain unknown. Third, the weblogs were written almost exclusively by married, white, middle-class women, so it is out of the scope of this research to understand variations between gender, race, marital status or socio-economic differences. Fourth, there might be private voluntarily childless weblogs that are not open to the public. These weblogs were not accessible to me, so I do not know how many people actually write voluntarily childless weblogs except the bloggers who write publicly.

Directions for Future Research

There are various topics of further research that can be pursued. An important study would be to understand how voluntarily childless individuals who come from different cultures resist the pronatalist culture. As the cultural backdrop changes, the context of these resistance narratives might also change. Another thread of research would be to understand how the voluntarily childless plan their old age and end of life. This is important as traditionally, children are seen as support systems in one's old age. Since the voluntarily childless do not raise children, it would be important to understand how they deal with this aspect of their lives. Other than that, the internet can be a window into issues that are not discussed openly as they might be taboo. Future research must continue to investigate non-traditional mediums, such as online spaces, for analysis on other marginalized identities to understand their points of view and communities better.

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