

## **Students' Attitudes, Fertility Plans, and Perceptions of Parents and Childless/Childfree Couples**

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### **Abstract**

Rising average ages at first birth and increased acceptance of childlessness in the U. S. have raised concerns about future fertility trends and the prospects of very low fertility, particularly among college-educated men and women. The current study uses college students' responses to hypothetical vignettes ( $N = 1,266$ ) to assess contemporary perceptions of childless/childfree adults compared to parents and to examine their potential links with students' attitudes and own fertility plans. We combine quasi-experimental, social-psychological methods with standard survey questions to evaluate their utility in demographic research on young adults' fertility plans, attitudes, and perceptions. We also examine their connections with gender, race-ethnicity, religion, and family characteristics. Earlier analyses have documented the effects of vignette characteristics – race, gender, parent status, and socioeconomic status - in shaping students' perceptions. The current analyses will build on this earlier work by connecting students' perceptions with their attitudes, plans, and other characteristics.

## **Extended Abstract**

Childlessness has become an increasingly prominent part of the adult life course: young adults wait longer before having children and larger proportions remain permanently childless/childfree. The average age of first-time mothers is at an all-time high of 25 years (Hamilton et al., 2005), and the proportions of women under age 25 who expect to remain permanently childless/childfree is increasing (Chandra, Martinez, Mosher, Abma, & Jones, 2005). For women in particular, the significant economic and social costs of parenthood (Crittenden, 2001) are likely to shape attitudes and perceptions as well as career and family decisions (Blair-Loy, 2003; Koropecykj-Cox & Pendell, 2007; Van Anders, 2004).

Despite these social changes, studies of young adults have shown negative perceptions of childless/childfree couples (Kopper & Smith, 2001; LaMastro, 2001; Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995; Mueller & Yoder, 1997; Ross & Kahan, 1983), and childless/childfree adults report feeling stigmatized (McAllister & Clarke, 1998; Mueller & Yoder, 1999; Vissing, 2002). Adults without children, especially the voluntarily childfree, are perceived as less warm and more troubled than parents (Kopper & Smith, 2001; LaMastro, 2001; Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995; Mueller & Yoder, 1997), though they are also believed to have happier marriages (Kopper & Smith, 2001; Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995). Existing studies, however, date back six years or more (most are over 10 years old), and may not reflect contemporary perspectives on fertility delays, childfree lifestyles, and work-family dilemmas. Furthermore, these social-psychological studies have not examined the potential connections that would be of interest to demographers in understanding and predicting future fertility trends, including attitudes about family and gender, students' own characteristics, and their fertility plans.

The current research uses an interdisciplinary approach to examine the potential inter-

connections between perceptions of parental status, attitudes, fertility plans, and student characteristics. Building on earlier studies, we use a quasi-experimental research design that measures and compares student responses to hypothetical vignettes. By incorporating attitudinal and sociodemographic variables, this study will allow us to assess the usefulness of such a multi-dimensional approach for understanding the cognitive factors that may shape and predict future fertility.

#### BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

Perceptions of childless/childfree adults and parents provide a barometer of young adults' attitudes about childbearing and family norms. Increased acceptance of childlessness in recent decades reflects the greater prevalence of delayed childbearing and permanent childlessness as well as the greater visibility of childfree lifestyles (see May, 1995). Made possible in part by the availability of highly effective contraceptives (Morgan & King, 2001), delayed fertility also resonates with societal messages about the need to meet specific criteria before entering into parenthood, including marriage, economic stability, emotional maturity, and personal 'readiness' (Jencks & Edin, 1995; May, 1995; Rindfuss, Morgan, & Swicegood, 1988). Importantly for the current cohort of college students, these messages have been a central component of campaigns to reduce teen pregnancy over the last 15 years.

Despite these social changes, it is not clear how students currently perceive couples without children compared to parents and how these perceptions relate to individual attitudes and fertility plans. National surveys have indicated greater acceptance of childlessness among younger adults compared to older cohorts, but not necessarily a positive endorsement of childless/childfree life paths (Koropecj-Cox & Pendell, 2007a). Popular culture continues to celebrate childbearing (Douglas & Michaels, 2004), and current ideologies have elevated the

symbolic significance of procreation and moral standards of “good” mothering (Blair-Loy, 2003; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hayes, 1996). Within this context, a life without children may still be regarded as potentially incomplete, undesirable, or subject to later regrets (Hewlett, 2002; see also Edin & Kefalas, 2005).

Research since the 1970s on family norms and social perceptions of childless adults and parents has focused on identifying and measuring stereotypes related to parental status (Calhoun & Selby, 1980; Callan, 1985; Jamison, Franzini, & Kaplan, 1979; Peterson, 1983; Polit, 1978; Shields & Copper, 1983). Using quasi-experimental methods with hypothetical vignettes, these studies have documented negative biases against childless/childfree adults (Jamison, Franzini, & Kaplan, 1979; Peterson, 1983; Polit, 1978). More recent studies have shown the persistence of these attitudes as well as the importance of attributions regarding parental status, with the voluntarily childfree rated most harshly (Kopper & Smith, 2001; Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995; LaMastro, 2001; Mueller & Yoder, 1997). Vignettes with no explanation for childlessness are rated most positively, perhaps reflecting approval of delayed fertility (Kopper & Smith, 2001; see also Koropecj-Cox, Romano, & Moras, 2007). At the same time, other research has documented negative attitudes about working mothers (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004), which may suggest a changing tide with regard to perceptions of parenthood compared to childlessness. As most men and women in college now expect to combine work and family life, the combination of perceptions, attitudes, and students’ own characteristics and fertility plans may provide important new insights into contemporary thinking about work, family, and fertility as well as future fertility trends.

#### RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The primary objectives of the current research are to examine the connections between

perceptions of parents and childless adults and (a) attitudes about fertility, family, and gender; (b) young adults plans regarding age at marriage, age at first birth, and desired number of children; and (c) students' characteristics, including gender, race-ethnicity, religion, and family background. We use hypothetical vignettes that present research participants with a brief descriptive text in which particular details are randomly varied. These vignettes describe a heterosexual married couple with either no children or two children. We measure and compare students' ratings of the vignette couples and of husbands and wives individually, using scales employed in earlier research (see LaMastro, 2001), including interpersonal warmth, drive, negative emotionality, and marriage quality. We also measure general attitudes, students' sociodemographic characteristics, and future family plans.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The research study involved 1,266 research participants (909 women and 357 men) who were undergraduate students in introductory liberal-arts courses (mostly sociology, with a few in psychology and humanities) in a large public university in Florida. We focused on courses that included a range of students with regard to academic standing and major while minimizing the number of advanced sociology students whose training would have primed them to concerns about gender, race, social class, or parenting issues. Students were mostly of traditional college age, with a mean age of 19.4 years ( $SD = 1.85$ ), but ranging from 18 to 40. About 16 percent of the students ( $n = 206$ ) identified themselves as Black or African American, 58 percent identified as White ( $n = 740$ ), 10 percent as Hispanic or Latino/a ( $n = 131$ ), and the remainder as Asian ( $n = 76$ ) or other or mixed ( $n = 113$ ). Eighty-six noted more than one racial category. A total of 526 (42%) were Students of Color. The vast majority of students (90%, or 1,141) were never married

and not living with a partner. The rest were divorced ( $n = 6$ ), currently living with a partner (64 plan to marry and 19 do not), engaged but not cohabiting ( $n = 17$ ), or married ( $n = 15$ ).

### *Measures*

*Positive perception of the couple's relationship.* Our study replicated core elements of earlier studies, particularly drawing on LaMastro's (2001) versions of several outcome measures, including perceptions of the couple's relationship and personality rating scales. Positive perceptions of the couple's relationship were measured using the following five items (Cronbach's alpha = .82): "will have a good life together;" "have a happy marriage;" "have a fulfilling sexual relationship;" "are likely to stay married for the rest of their lives;" and "will enjoy a happy old age together." Average factor scores were calculated using a 5-point scale, with 1 anchored as "very likely" and 5 as "very unlikely"; items were reverse-coded so higher scores indicated more positive ratings. This measure captured perceptions of current and predicted relationship quality.

*Assessments of the husband and wife.* A 28-item personality scale (LaMastro, 2001) was used to assess perceptions of the husband and wife. Respondents were asked to rate the husband and wife on identical pairs of items, on a scale from 1 to 7, where each pair represented opposite descriptors, such as likable-unlikable and successful-unsuccessful. We used principal components factor analyses to identify three factors each for the husbands and wives, similar to those used by LaMastro (2001), and using the same factor loading criteria. The factors correspond to ratings of interpersonal warmth, agency (which we refer to as drive), and negative emotionality. The wife's interpersonal warmth consisted of nine items: caring, warm, likable, kind, sensitive, nurturing, sincere, traditional, and feminine-masculine (Cronbach's alpha = .90). Like LaMastro, we found that femininity and traditionality loaded strongly and positively on this

factor for women. We also calculated and analyzed a version of this measure without femininity (alpha = .91). The husband's interpersonal warmth consisted of eight items (the same as for the wife, but excluding feminine-masculine; alpha = .89).

The wife's drive was measured with 11 items, including ambitious, hard-working, determined, success-oriented, career-oriented, successful, confident, competent, stressed, mature, and reliable (alpha = .92). For the husband, drive was measured with nine items (alpha = .90), eight of which overlapped with the wife's factor items; husband's drive excluded mature, hard-working, and reliable but included materialistic. Lastly, negative emotionality was measured for the wives with four items (anxious, lonely, feels inferior, and feels sorry for self; alpha = .63), whereas husbands' negative emotionality was measured with three items (lonely, feminine, and feels sorry for self; alpha = .55) and without the feminine-masculine item (alpha = .55;  $r = .38$ ).

For each measure, we analyzed average factor scores, which ranged from 1 to 7; high scores indicate higher ratings on a factor. Using averages allowed us to compare similar factors across women and men and maintain a metric that was consistent with the original response scales. We note that these personality scales correspond to gendered stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, and we include separate analyses of masculinity-femininity.

*Affective Reaction.* In surveys regarding parents and the childless/childfree couples with no intent to become parents, we included a series of 7 items measuring the students' affective reactions to the vignettes. Based on factor analyses, we formed two factors – negative affective reaction (angry and irritated, alpha = .77) and positive affective reaction (warm, admiring, and accepting; alpha = .76). These measures are designed to tap into a student's self-reported affective responses after reading the vignette.

*Vignette characteristics.* The primary independent variables in the analyses were the

vignette characteristics – parental status (parents of two children or childless/childfree), the race of the couple, occupation of husband, and occupation of the wife. We examined each variable for its potential direct effects as well as interactions between vignette characteristics. We also examined whether the gender and race of the student were related to their ratings of the vignette couple and whether these characteristics interacted with the vignette characteristics.

### *Procedure*

We used a vignette method and written survey that presented students with a uniform text briefly describing a hypothetical couple that was childless/childfree (with no explanation given;  $n = 478$ ), parents with two children ( $n = 480$ ), or childless/childfree with no intent to have children in the future ( $n = 308$ ). Within all of the vignettes, the couple's race (African American or white), husband's occupation (stock broker or construction worker), and wife's occupation (lawyer, secretary, or nursing assistant) were varied, resulting in a  $3 \times 2 \times 2 \times 3$  comparison matrix (i.e., parent status by race by husband's occupation by wife's occupation; the vignettes for childless couples with no intent to have children excluded the nursing assistant variant).

Surveys were conducted between July 2005 and October 2006. The surveys were administered to students in their classrooms, with the instructors' advance permission, and took about 15 to 20 minutes to complete. Participation was entirely voluntary and confidential – students could choose not to complete the survey, and no information was divulged to instructors regarding student participation. After we explained the study and obtained informed consent, each participant was presented with one of 36 vignettes that briefly described a hypothetical heterosexual, married couple – childless (with no explanation), childless with no intent to have children, or parents with two children. The data collection was conducted in three phases, with the childless (with no explanation) vignettes fielded first, followed by parents and then childless



with no intent to have children. Students were asked to consider the vignettes as if they had met the couple in an informal social setting, like a community block party or barbecue. An example of a childless/childfree vignette is as follows:

*Kevin and Jennifer, a White American couple, were married when they were 27. They are now 37 years old and have no children. Kevin is a construction worker, and Jennifer is a secretary for a small local business.*

The vignettes for childless/childfree couples with no intent to have children added the phrase “and they do not plan to have any children in the future” at the end of the second sentence. The following is an example of a parent vignette:

*Kevin and Jennifer, an African American couple, are married, are in their mid-30s, and have two children. Kevin is a stock broker, and Jennifer is a lawyer.*

The wording of vignettes for parents was adjusted to allow for (and examine) students’ own interpretations or inferences regarding age at marriage and children’s ages.

Immediately after reading the vignette, students were asked to write several sentences about how they perceived the couple. The childless/childfree vignettes asked students to describe why Kevin and Jennifer have remained childless. The parent vignettes instructed students to “write a few sentences describing Kevin and Jennifer as parents: when and under what circumstances they probably became parents and what they are like as parents now.” Although we strove to make the vignettes as comparable as possible, the different circumstances of childlessness compared to parenthood required somewhat different approaches; asking “why a couple had children” was not likely to yield meaningful responses. Our objective of tapping into students’ perceptions of the couples, therefore, required phrasing the instructions in ways that prompted students to consider parental status in their assessments of the vignette couples.

After completing the open-ended portion, students were presented with a series of closed-ended scales rating their perceptions of the couple and of the husband's and wife's personality characteristics. The second and third phases of the study included additional questions on students' affective reactions to the vignette. The survey also included questions about students' attitudes about gender, family issues, and infertility, as well as socio-demographic questions, including gender, racial-ethnic group, age, religious preference, and family characteristics (e.g., own marital or relationship status, number of siblings, own fertility, and how many children they expected to have someday). When time allowed, a brief classroom discussion followed in which students were given the opportunity to ask questions or comment on the study.

#### FURTHER ANALYSES

Analyses to date have compared the perceptions of the childless/childfree couples and parents. Results from these analyses are attached as Tables 1 and 2. The final paper will provide an overview of these analyses of perceptions and will examine the correlations among perceptions, attitudes, fertility plans, and student characteristics. We will also use regression methods and structural equation models to analyze the interrelations among the variables.

The resulting paper will contribute new insights into the on-going discussion of the role of cognitive factors (e.g., attitudes, perceptions, preferences, intentions, decisions) in shaping eventual fertility. Whereas demographic research has mainly focused on standard survey questions as indicators of fertility-related considerations, the current research puts forth the unique potential of hypothetical vignettes and quasi-experimental methods for tapping into additional dimensions of fertility-related processes.

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Table 1. *Comparisons of Mean Values (and Standard Deviations) of Ratings of Childless Couples and Parents by Vignette Characteristics – Parental Status and Race (N = 958).*

	Childless (n = 478)		Parents (n = 480)	
<u>Ratings of Wife</u>				
Interpersonal warmth	4.82 (.92)*** <sup>a</sup>		5.22 (.93)	
Drive	5.36 (1.03)		5.28 (.98)	
Negative emotionality	3.67 (.90)		3.57 (1.05)	
<u>Ratings of Husband</u>				
Interpersonal warmth	4.46 (.82)** <sup>a</sup>		4.60 (.89)	
Drive	5.02 (1.11)		4.99 (1.11)	
Negative emotionality	3.00 (.99)* <sup>a</sup>		2.85 (1.00)	
<u>Rating of Couple</u>				
Positive relationship	3.65 (.66)*** <sup>a</sup>		3.50 (.63)	
	Childless By Race of Couple		Parents By Race of Couple	
	African American (n = 238)	White American (n = 240)	African American (n = 242)	White American (n = 238)
<u>Ratings of Wife</u>				
Interpersonal warmth <sup>b</sup>	4.87 (.93)** <sup>a</sup>	4.77 (.91)*** <sup>a</sup>	5.28 (.91)	5.16 (.94)
Drive	5.43 (1.02)	5.29 (1.04)	5.39 (.98)	5.17 (.97)
Negative emotionality	3.63 (.90)+ <sup>a</sup>	3.70 (.90)	3.46 (1.06)	3.67 (1.02)
<u>Ratings of Husband</u>				
Interpersonal warmth	4.52 (.82)*** <sup>a</sup>	4.39 (.81)	4.81 (.85)	4.39 (.89)
Drive	4.99 (1.13)	5.04 (1.09)	5.01 (1.05)	4.98 (1.17)
Negative emotionality <sup>b</sup>	3.03 (1.04)** <sup>a</sup>	2.98 (.93)	2.75 (1.07)	2.94 (.92)
<u>Rating of Couple</u>				
Positive relationship	3.72 (.64)+	3.58 (.66)*** <sup>a</sup>	3.62 (.59)	3.37 (.65)

Note: + .05 <  $p$  < .09, \*  $p$  < .05, \*\*  $p$  < .01, \*\*\*  $p$  < .001. Statistically significant mean differences for comparisons of childless couples to parents, within each sub-category, using t-test.

<sup>a</sup> Difference between parents and childless remains statistically significant at  $p$  < .01 after controlling for other factors.

<sup>b</sup> Interaction of race and parental status is statistically significant at  $p$  < .05 after controlling for other factors.

Table 2. Comparisons of Mean Values (and Standard Deviations) of Ratings of Childless Couples and Parents by Vignette Characteristics – Husband’s and Wife’s Occupations (N = 958).

	Childless By Wife’s Occupation			Parents By Wife’s Occupation		
	Secretary (n = 139)	Nursing Assistant (n = 147)	Lawyer (n = 192)	Secretary (n = 161)	Nursing Assistant (n = 156)	Lawyer (n = 163)
<u>Ratings of Wife</u>						
Interpersonal warmth	4.91 (.90)*** <sup>a</sup>	5.16 (.93)** <sup>a</sup>	4.49 (.81)*** <sup>a</sup>	5.44 (.80)	5.45 (.98)	4.79 (.84)
Drive	4.80 (.92)	5.18 (.83)	5.91 (.97)	4.83 (.87)	5.15 (.93)	5.84 (.86)
Negative emotionality	3.75 (.97)	3.80 (.80)** <sup>a</sup>	3.51 (.90)	3.83 (1.04)	3.44 (1.08)	3.43 (.97)
<u>Ratings of Husband</u>						
Interpersonal warmth	4.45 (.92)	4.42 (.78)* <sup>a</sup>	4.49 (.76)	4.60 (.88)	4.61 (.89)	4.60 (.91)
Drive	4.82 (1.19)	4.98 (1.01)	5.18 (1.11)	4.97 (1.05)	5.00 (1.15)	5.00 (1.14)
Negative emotionality <sup>b</sup>	3.05 (1.02)+ <sup>a</sup>	3.05 (.89)** <sup>a</sup>	2.94 (1.03)	2.82 (.95)	2.74 (1.06)	2.97 (1.00)
<u>Rating of Couple</u>						
Positive relationship	3.65 (.67)+	3.68 (.64)+	3.63 (.66)** <sup>a</sup>	3.51 (.66)	3.55 (.60)	3.44 (.64)
	Childless By Husband’s Occupation		Parents By Husband’s Occupation			
	Construction Worker (n = 227)	Stock Broker (n = 251)	Construction Worker (n = 241)	Stock Broker (n = 239)		
<u>Ratings of Wife</u>						
Interpersonal warmth	4.76 (.92)*** <sup>a</sup>	4.87 (.92)*** <sup>a</sup>	5.19 (.84)	5.25 (1.01)		
Drive	5.24 (1.02)	5.47 (1.03)	5.18 (.99)	5.37 (.96)		
Negative emotionality <sup>c</sup>	3.62 (.88)	3.71 (.92)** <sup>a</sup>	3.67 (1.03)	3.46 (1.05)		
<u>Ratings of Husband</u>						
Interpersonal warmth <sup>c</sup>	4.52 (.82)	4.40 (.81)** <sup>a</sup>	4.56 (.84)	4.65 (.94)		
Drive	4.33 (.82)	5.63 (.97)	4.34 (.87)	5.65 (.92)		
Negative emotionality	3.02 (1.00)	2.99 (.97)** <sup>a</sup>	2.94 (1.02)	2.76 (.98)		
<u>Rating of Couple</u>						
Positive relationship	3.65 (.68)** <sup>a</sup>	3.65 (.63)+	3.45 (.67)	3.55 (.59)		

Note: + .05 < p < .09, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001. Statistically significant mean differences for comparisons of childless couples to parents, within each sub-category, using ANOVA or t-test. <sup>a</sup> Difference between parents and childless within each subgroup remains statistically significant at p < .01 after controlling for other factors. <sup>b</sup> Interaction of wife’s occupation and parental status is statistically significant at p < .05 after controlling for other factors. <sup>c</sup> Interaction of husband’s occupation and parental status is statistically significant at p < .05 after controlling for other factors.