

Characteristics of Voluntary Childless Men

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Abstract

In this paper I use new data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) to investigate the characteristics of voluntarily childless men. Little attention has been paid to this group, as prior research has focused on women or couples. I compare voluntarily childless men to other men and to voluntarily childless women in an effort to highlight the distinctions between these groups. Theories which explain voluntary childlessness in women may not hold for men. Men differ from women demographically, across the lifecourse, economically, and attitudinally. In this paper, I test whether or not female-derived theories of voluntary childlessness are applicable to voluntarily childless men. I report that education and Catholic membership are not significant predictors of male voluntary childlessness. However, these are crucial elements of two long-held theories explaining female voluntary childlessness: neo-classical economic theory; and the role of early lifecourse development. As fertility rates in the United States continue to hover around replacement level, understanding men's decisions to forego fatherhood becomes more relevant. Moreover, I find that the NSFG offers researchers a nationally representative dataset which sheds light on this important aspect of fertility in the United States.

Introduction

The demographic transition has lowered fertility rates in the United States to replacement levels. Many other countries have slipped below replacement fertility. With such low rates of fertility, the characteristics of those who forego childbearing become more relevant (Poston and Gotard 1975; Veevers 1979). Coupled with smaller family sizes and subfecundity, voluntary childlessness should depress the overall fertility rate of a country even further.

Previous research on this topic has focused almost exclusively on voluntary childlessness among couples or individual women. Their findings highlight the effect of the radical changes in the social and economic realities for American women since the 1970s. In an early review of the literature, Veevers reveals that, for childless couples,

Available demographic studies suggest that, compared with the rest of the population, persons who deliberately avoid parenthood tend to live in large urban areas, to have been married for the first time at a late age, to have been married more than once, to be non-religious, to be college educated, and to have both husband and wife employed in relatively high income positions (1979: p. 10).

Mosher and Bachrach (1982), using early waves of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), find support for most of these claims, adding that voluntarily childless couples differ from childed couples in their use of the most effective means of contraception. In a study of childless women, Poston (1976) compares voluntarily childless wives to involuntarily childless wives and reports that there is little difference between the groups in terms of socioeconomic status, metropolitan residence, or religious preference.

More recently, speculation about male voluntary childlessness has entered the literature followed by qualitative exploratory studies (Knijn, Ostner and Schmitt 2006;

Lunneborg 1999). Thorton and Young-Demarco (2001) report a decrease in the attitude among men that parenting interferes with other life goals; as well as an increase in the feeling that fatherhood is fulfilling. Lunneborg (1999) gives extensive interviews of thirty men in the book, “The Chosen Lives of Childfree Men,” which reveals the emotional and rational processes of men deciding to forego fatherhood. Knijn, Ostner, and Schmitt (2006) provide exploratory research on attitudinal data such as men’s ideal family size versus their expected family size. This same study, based on a sample of European males, suggests that unemployment increases a man’s odds of being childless, and that education increases odds of childlessness.

Parr (2007) provides the most thorough quantitative treatment of male childlessness to date. Relying on data of Australian men, Parr demonstrates that lower status men are more likely to be childless; and that cohabiting men are much more likely to be childless than married men. However, the experience of Australian men with childlessness is quite different from that of American men. Australia has a high sex ratio for those aged 45-59 due to male immigration after World War II. Also, 12.8% of men are childless—more than double that of men in the United States (5.9%). Importantly, Parr does not exclude sterile men from his investigation of childlessness. Inclusion of this group may inflate the findings for Australian men to some extent.

Difficulty with the definition of “voluntary childlessness” contributes to the wide variation sometimes found between studies. Researchers have often used different units of analysis—currently married women, ever-married women, couples, or individual women. This study adds individual men (both partnered and single) to the list. Another difficulty is that childlessness can be determined cross-sectionally (within each age group

at a single point in time) or by completed birth experience (zero-parity, or permanent childlessness) (Mosher and Bachrach 1982). Yet zero-parity is more difficult to assess in men than in women because there is not a well-defined age limitation to male reproduction. Men may enter into biological fatherhood much later in life than women.

The “voluntary” part of the phrase presents difficulties as well. Houseknecht (1987) sets a high standard for childlessness by insisting that the intent to have no children be coupled with completed birth experience (only post-menopausal women). As mentioned above, this is a difficulty for assessing childlessness in men. Rovi (1994) suggests that intention alone is an adequate criterion for voluntary childlessness. Rovi’s approach is used to gauge childlessness cross-sectionally and works well for measuring male voluntary childlessness.

However, I argue that intent to be childless is not enough. In addition to intent, men who already have biological children, and men who are sterile, should be excluded from the group ‘voluntary childless.’

To compare voluntary childlessness in both men and women, I use three criteria:

1. No biological children to date;
2. No desire to have children; and
3. Biologically capable of producing children.

These criteria allow for a cross-sectional determination of childlessness, which is useful for men. Also, these criteria exclude social children (e.g., adopted children or children from a partner’s previous relationship). Although social children are an important part of many childless men’s lives, in this study I focus on the biological aspect of fatherhood.

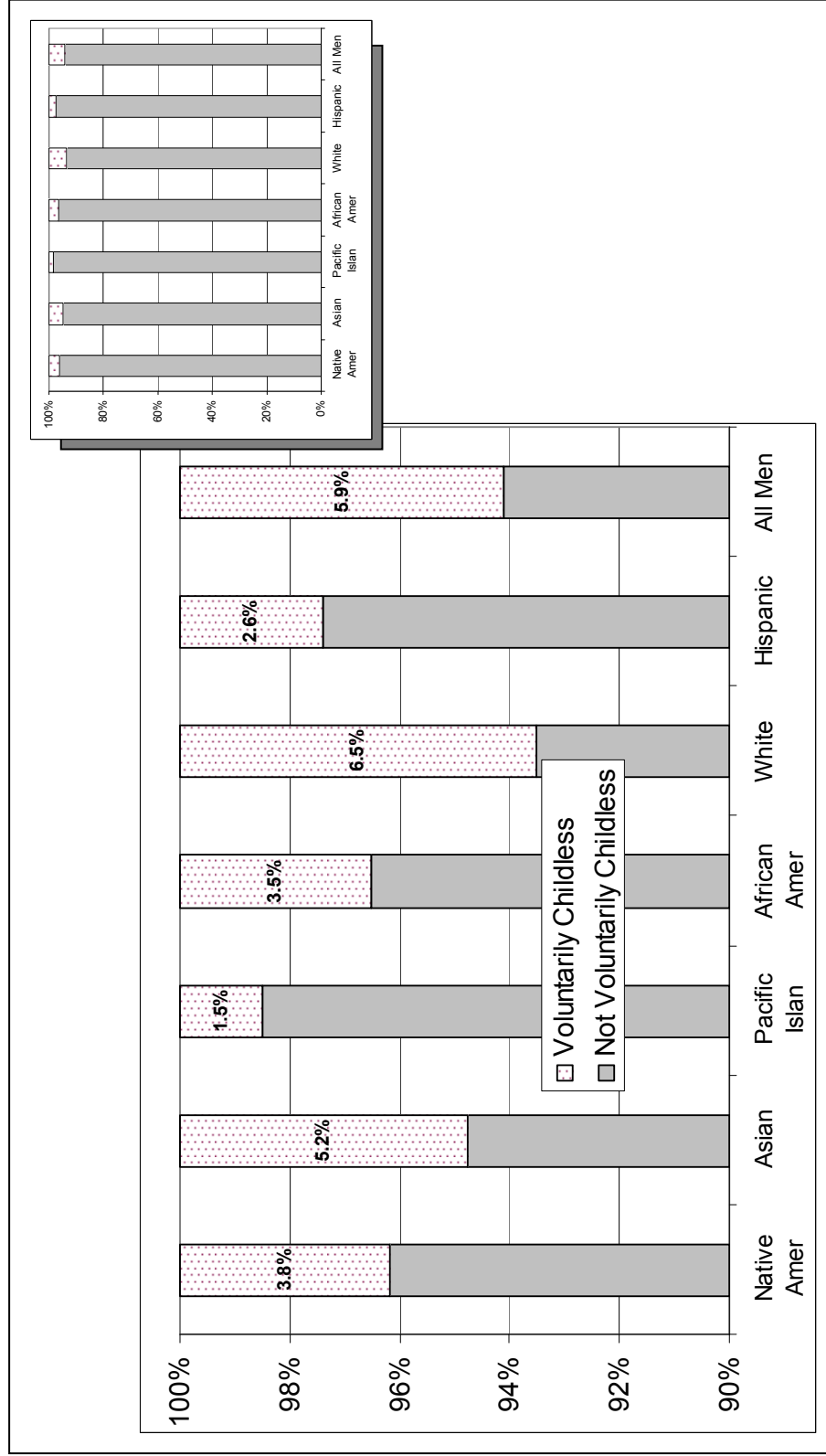
Voluntary childlessness is not common. Veivers estimates 5% of American women end their childbearing years as voluntarily childless (1979). Cross-sectionally, Mosher and Bachrach (1982) estimate that around 1.3% of currently married American women, and 2.2% of ever-married American couples are voluntarily childless. However, current studies chart a steady rise in voluntary childlessness, with a possible peak at 7% in 1995, for all women aged 15-44, followed by a declining rate to 2002 (Chandra A. et al. 2002). I find that around 5.3% of women fall into my categorization of voluntarily childless.

Likewise, voluntary childlessness among men is not very common. Figure 1 shows the prevalence of voluntary male childlessness by race. The smaller stacked bar chart shows that over 90% of each group does not fit this categorization. The expanded bar chart presents the same data, but the change in scale reveals some variation between the race groups. Pacific Islander, Hispanic, and African American men have much lower rates of voluntary childlessness (1.5%, 2.6%, and 3.5%, respectively). White and Asian men are voluntarily childless at around twice that rate (6.5% and 5.2%, respectively). I find that 5.9% of all US men are voluntarily childless using these criteria.

Theoretical Focus

Research into female voluntary childlessness has given rise to a number of theories which endeavor to explain the phenomenon. In the following short section, I outline the logic, previous use, and operationalization of four theories and attempt to connect these theories to men's experience of voluntarily childlessness: demographic variation; lifecourse variation; neo-classical economy; and attitudinal variation.

Figure 1. Prevalence of Voluntary Childlessness Men by Race, Ages 18-44, NSFG 2002.



Demographic variation is commonly used to identify the characteristics of voluntarily childless women. The argument is that those who are voluntarily childless vary significantly from those who have or plan to have children (Houseknecht 1987; Poston 1976; Veivers 1979). Age is the most frequent demographic variable used. Older women are more likely to be categorized as voluntarily childless because of diminishing opportunities for childbearing. However, the effect of age on voluntary childlessness among American men has not been reported. Race is another important demographic factor. White women are consistently the most likely to be voluntarily childless (Chandra A. et al. 2002). This may be because of greater economic opportunity for white women than for women of other races (see neo-classical economic theory, below). Marriage greatly reduces the odds of voluntary childlessness. Women who are currently married, or who have ever been married are very rarely voluntary childless (Houseknecht 1987; Poston and Gotard 1975; Veivers 1979). Finally, cohabitation may increase odds of voluntary childlessness by contributing to delayed age at first marriage or creating a family structure that is not child-centered.

Another line of reasoning makes the case that certain lifecourse variables predict voluntary childlessness. These factors are usually determined at birth or during early childhood. Parr (2007) finds that the type of occupation of the parents influences the odds of a male respondent's childlessness in Australia. Generally, men whose fathers had "no occupation" were more likely to be childless than other groups. Another lifecourse variable that has been studied among women is Catholic membership or upbringing (Poston 1990; Poston and Gotard 1975). Because of the Catholic Church's pronatalist

views, female Catholics are estimated to have lower rates of voluntary childlessness. The same argument has not been tested among Catholic men.

Neo-classical economic theory argues that changing economic opportunities have changed the goals and role of family, especially for women in the 20th century (Becker 1981; Bumpass 1973; Lesthaeghe and Moors 1995). Women with high incomes and education are more likely to be voluntary childless than other women (Poston 1974). Veevers (1979) finds that urban residence is associated with increased voluntary childlessness in women. Parr (2007) includes an indicator of a long period of unemployment as a proxy for the financial stability to undertake fatherhood. Also, homeownership may be useful in the study of voluntary childless, since homeownership correlates positively with economic advantages such as wealth and stable residential location.

Attitudinal variables may also play an important role in voluntary childlessness. Lesthaeghe and Moors (1995) identify three facets of cultural conservatism that affect childlessness in four European countries: religious conservatism; political conservatism; and gender-role conservatism. All three attenuate childlessness. Likewise, Thornton and Young-DeMarco (2001) report increases in pronatalist attitudes such as: “fatherhood is fulfilling”; and “parenthood does not interfere with other aspects of life.”

Exchange theory is an important consideration in the literature. Generally, exchange theory has been applied to negotiations within couples (Oppenheimer 2000). I do not explore exchange theory in this study. That decision is based on my data’s small number of social psychological indicators and lack of longitudinal data which would be most appropriate for estimating these types of relationships. However, a weakness of

exchange theory is the possibility of deciding to be childless without negotiating with a partner—especially for men.

Data and Methods

My data come from the NSFG, Cycle 6 (2002) which includes fertility questions of both male and female respondents (Chandra A. et al. 2002). The NSFG is a nationally representative sample of women 15-44 years of age and men 18-44 years of age.

Voluntary, confidential interviews were completed in-person for 7,643 women and 4,928 men.

To determine voluntary childlessness for both male and female respondents, I follow Poston and Gotard's definition (1975) based on meeting all three of the following criteria: 1) no children to date; 2) no desire to have children; and 3) not sterile—biologically capable of reproduction. Using this categorization, I find that 5.9% of all men, and 5.3% of all women may be classified as voluntarily childless.

Since the dependent variable is dichotomous, logistic regression is appropriate. To facilitate interpretation, I report the odds ratios of coefficients.

For independent variables, include indicators from four theoretical perspectives: demography, lifecourse, neo-classical economic; and attitudinal. I include the following demographic variables: age, race (white/non-white); ever married; and ever cohabited.

My lifecourse indicators are: father's highest degree earned; mother's highest degree earned; and Catholic Church membership. Parent's education on following scale: 1=Less than High School; 2=High School; 3=Some College; 4=Bachelor's or Higher.

Predictors from neo-classical economic theory include: total income; educational category; homeownership; did respondent ever not work for 6 months or more; and metropolitan residence. Income is total combined household income, and ranges in 14 categories from less than \$417/month to more than \$6,250/month. Respondent's educational categories range from 9 to 19 and corresponds with years of education completed. I also include one employment variable which refers to those who did not work full time for a period of six months or longer.

I also include one attitudinal variable concerning gender roles. The variable coded as a Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree) for those who agreed with the following statement, "It is much better for everyone if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home and family."

Using the appropriate NSFG weights, I create logistic regression models which estimate the odds of voluntary childlessness among all US men and women. These weights are "design-based," to account for the complex sample design of the NSFG (see www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg.htm).

Results

Table 1 shows the average values and distributions of the independent variables weighted to the population of the United States. The first column presents data for voluntarily childless men; the second column presents data for all other men; and the third column presents data for voluntarily childless women. Generally, voluntarily childless men are more like their voluntary childless female counterparts than the broader grouping of men. Both male and female childless groups are on average older, whiter,

Table 1. Weighted Means and Distributions of Variables for Voluntarily Childless Men, All Other Men, and Voluntarily Childless Women, National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle 6, 2002.

| | Voluntarily Childless Men | | Other Men | | Voluntarily Childless Women | |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|----------|------------|----------|--------------------------------|----------|
| | Mean | St. Err. | Mean | St. Err. | Mean | St. Err. |
| Demographic Variables | | | | | | |
| Age | 35.13 | 0.56 | 32.48 | 0.25 | 35.39 | 0.56 |
| Percent White (%) | 89.4% | 2.4% | 78.8% | 1.1% | 88.1% | 2.0% |
| Ever Married (%) | 45.1% | 4.9% | 65.3% | 1.3% | 50.8% | 3.8% |
| Ever Cohabited (%) | 47.5% | 6.0% | 34.0% | 1.3% | 63.9% | 3.5% |
| Lifecourse Variables | | | | | | |
| Father's Educ | 2.55 | 0.13 | 2.42 | 0.03 | 2.60 | 0.09 |
| Mother's Educ | 2.45 | 0.11 | 2.35 | 0.03 | 2.52 | 0.07 |
| Catholic (%) | 21.7% | 3.2% | 28.1% | 1.1% | 22.8% | 3.5% |
| Economic Variables | | | | | | |
| Income | 9.96 | 0.25 | 10.04 | 0.09 | 9.90 | 0.27 |
| Education | 13.48 | 0.29 | 13.41 | 0.08 | 14.59 | 0.22 |
| Homeowner (%) | 59.7% | 5.2% | 56.1% | 2.0% | 55.1% | 4.5% |
| Ever Not Working (%) | 45.8% | 5.3% | 32.2% | 1.2% | 41.9% | 3.7% |
| Metro Residence (%) | 81.2% | 3.5% | 81.9% | 1.3% | 89.4% | 2.2% |
| Attitudinal Variables | | | | | | |
| Male Head of Household | 2.50 | 0.09 | 2.74 | 0.03 | 2.02 | 0.09 |
| n | 3,267,784 | | 55,218,734 | | 3,235,571 | |

Parent's education on following scale: 1=Less than High School; 2=High School; 3=Some College; 4=Bachelor's or Higher. Income is total combined household income, and ranges in 14 categories from less than \$417/month to more than \$6,250/month. Respondent's educational categories range from 9 to 19 and corresponds with years of education completed. Ever not working variable refers to those who did not work full time for a period of six months or longer. Male head of household variable is a Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree) with the following statement: "It is much better for everyone if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the home and family."

and less likely to have been married than the group of other men. Both voluntarily childless groups have parents with higher educations, and are less likely to be Catholic than the broader group of men. The only two exceptions to this generalization among all of the variables are in homeownership and metropolitan residence—voluntarily childless men are more likely than either other group to own a home; and they are less likely than either other group to live in a downtown area.

Table 2 presents the results for four logistic regression models predicting voluntary childlessness among males and females. All coefficients are reported as odds ratios; standard errors are reported below in parenthesis.

The first model compares the likelihood of voluntary childlessness between men and women using only demographic predictors. All effects are significant except those for cohabitation. And variables for both male and female groups are affected in the same direction. Employing the common interpretation of the odds ratio for age—the odds of a man being voluntary childless increase by 9% (an odds ratio of 1.09) for each increased year of age, holding constant the other effects in the model. This is a larger effect than found for women, where each year of age increases the likelihood of voluntary childless by 6%. Being white doubles the odds of voluntary childless for both men and women (odds ratios of 2.10 and 2.01, respectively) all else equal. Those who have ever been married are much less likely to be voluntary childless than those who have not. For men, the odds of being voluntary childless decrease by 72% (an odds ratio of 0.28) when they have ever been married. For women the effect is stronger with the odds of being voluntary childless decreasing by 84% (an odds ratio of 0.16) when they have ever been

Table 2. Odds Ratios for Effects of Demographic, Lifecourse, Economic, and Attitudinal Variables on Male and Female Childlessness, Ages 18-44, NSFG 2002.

| | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | | Model 4 | |
|------------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| Demographic Variables | | | | | | | | |
| Age | 1.09** (0.01) | 1.06** (0.01) | 1.09** (0.01) | 1.07** (0.01) | 1.09** (0.02) | 1.12** (0.02) | 1.09** (0.02) | 1.13** (0.02) |
| White | 2.10** (0.45) | 2.01** (0.31) | 2.34** (0.55) | 2.14** (0.40) | 2.37** (0.63) | 2.86** (0.58) | 2.36** (0.63) | 2.76** (0.56) |
| Ever Married | 0.28** (0.07) | 0.16** (0.03) | 0.28** (0.07) | 0.17** (0.03) | 0.25** (0.07) | 0.19** (0.04) | 0.26** (0.07) | 0.21** (0.04) |
| Ever Cohabited | 1.29 (0.31) | 0.86 (0.11) | 1.29 (0.35) | 0.96 (0.14) | 1.27 (0.38) | 1.48* (0.26) | 1.26 (0.37) | 1.32 (0.24) |
| Lifecourse Variables | | | | | | | | |
| Father's Educ | | | 1.07 (0.11) | 1.10 (0.10) | 1.08 (0.13) | 1.02 (0.11) | 1.07 (0.13) | 1.01 (0.11) |
| Mother's Educ | | | 1.00 (0.09) | 1.13 (0.12) | 1.06 (0.11) | 1.15 (0.12) | 1.04 (0.11) | 1.14 (0.12) |
| Catholic | | | 0.66* (0.12) | 0.68** (0.10) | 0.74 (0.14) | 0.68* (0.13) | 0.75 (0.14) | 0.68* (0.13) |
| Economic Variables | | | | | | | | |
| Income | | | | | 1.00 (0.03) | 0.99 (0.03) | 1.00 (0.03) | 0.98 (0.03) |
| Education | | | | | 0.96 (0.04) | 1.10* (0.04) | 0.96 (0.05) | 1.08+ (0.04) |
| Homeowner | | | | | 1.20 (0.32) | 0.91 (0.19) | 1.21 (0.33) | 0.90 (0.19) |
| Ever Not Working | | | | | 1.44 (0.32) | 0.53** (0.09) | 1.44 (0.32) | 0.54** (0.10) |
| Metro Residence | | | | | 0.85 (0.19) | 1.53* (0.31) | 0.85 (0.19) | 1.60* (0.32) |
| Attitudinal Variables | | | | | | | | |
| Male Head of Household | | | | | | | 0.88 (0.07) | 0.71** (0.06) |
| F statistic | 15.05 | 40.29 | 10.31 | 26.95 | 7.22 | 16.40 | 7.00 | 15.74 |

Childlessness is characterized by no biological children; no desire to have children; and ability to have children.

*** p < .01.

** p < .05.

+ p < .10.

Standard errors are in parenthesis.

married. Cohabitation is not significant here, and is not significant in the final model of selected effects.

The second model holds the demographic variables constant and introduces lifecycle variables. Once again, patterns of significance, direction, and magnitude are similar between males and females. Parent's education is not significant for either group. But Catholic membership decreases the odds of voluntary childlessness by 34% in men and 32% in women, when holding constant the effects of the other variables.

The third model holds constant the demographic and lifecycle variables, and adds economic predictors. Here, we begin to see quite a difference between gender groups. All of the variables in this set, except income, have opposite effects between men and women (i.e., odds ratios on either side of a value of 1.00). However, none of the economic variables are statistically significant for men. For women, each increase in education category, among eleven categories, increases the odds of voluntary childlessness by 10%, all else equal. Metropolitan residence increases the odds of voluntary childless in women by 53%. The indicator of a long period of unemployment is significant and substantial for voluntary childlessness among women—but I am suspicious of the validity of the variable. I think this strong negative effect is a result of including women who have taken time off of work to care for their children. Without controlling for that group of stay-at-home mothers, this variable should be discarded.

In the final model, no effects are stronger for men than women. Also, only the demographic variables are statistically significant predictors of voluntary childlessness among men. The final model adds a single attitudinal variable which indicates feelings towards traditional gender roles in the family. Women who have traditional attitudes are

29% (an odds ratio of 0.71) less likely to be voluntary childless than women who do not hold such attitudes, all else equal.

Discussion

This work finds that theories applicable to women's experience of voluntary childlessness cannot be extended to men. Indicators from lifecourse, neo-classic economic, and attitudinal theories which are critical for understanding female voluntary childlessness are not significant for men.

Basic demographic variables (such as age, race and ever-married status) are quite similar in predicting male and female childlessness. However, effects are consistently stronger for women than men. Prior experience with cohabitation is not significant for men or women in all but one model—and that significance disappears when the attitudinal variable is included. The insignificance of cohabitation on voluntary childlessness is distinct from findings reported from Europe and Australia. One possible explanation is a regional difference in the goal of cohabitation. If American women are more likely to view cohabitation as a prelude to marriage, then their cohabitation may be an indication of future parity. Whereas, women from other regions may, on average, view cohabitation as an alternate arrangement specifically designed for childless marriage. Future research may be able to address this regional variation by turning to attitudinal data available by country.

Lifecourse variables of parent's education were not significant for men or women. But Catholic membership is significant for men until controls for socioeconomic status are included. But for women, Catholic membership has a strong negative effect on

voluntary childlessness. Catholic membership influences women more than men in terms of voluntary childlessness.

I find that economic variables such as education and metropolitan residence are significant for predicting female voluntary childlessness, but are simply insignificant for men. The same is true for attitudes on traditional gender roles in the home. These distinctions are important because much of the prior research focuses on the role of higher education contributing to higher rates of voluntary childlessness among women. Yet for men, education plays no such role.

The theoretical models presented here are quite basic. One should not conclude that lifecourse or economic indicators have no effect on men. But it is clear from this preliminary study that commonly accepted indicators of these theories, which work for women, don't work for men. Future research should expand, refine, and retest these theories. Particularly, future research should endeavor to identify lifecourse and attitudinal variables which correlate with men's voluntary childlessness.

Finally, future efforts to outline theories of male voluntary childlessness can rely on the NSFG. Now that we have reliable data, and a nationally representative sample, we no longer need to speculate that voluntary childlessness is the same for men as it is for women.

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