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# Re-Constructing the Image of the Voluntarily Childfree: An Ethnographic Exploration of Media Representation and the Childless by Choice

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Re-Constructing the Image of the Voluntarily Childfree:  
An Ethnographic Exploration of  
Media Representation and the Childless by Choice

by

Eddy Sass

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of Arts  
School of Mass Communications  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my wife Cynthia. Her love, understanding and encouragement helped make this thesis possible. Thank you for believing in me. I would also like to dedicate this thesis to my cat, Otto. He was diagnosed with cancer during the completion of this study. He is a good friend and will truly be missed.

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RE-CONSTRUCTING THE IMAGE OF THE VOLUNTARILY CHILDFREE:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF  
MEDIA REPRESENTATION AND THE CHILDLESS BY CHOICE

Eddy Sass

ABSTRACT

In the United States, like most other parts of the world, there is a commonly held belief that all capable couples should have children. This belief has contributed to the development of a pro-natalist ideology or concept that having children is good. This pro-natalist belief tends to spill over into the media, as well. Yet, there are those individuals who do not subscribe to the parenthood belief structure and to the manner in which the media frame the parenthood debate. These people are known as the voluntarily childfree or the childless by choice. This thesis is an exploratory ethnographic examination of the childless by choice subculture and their relationship to potential pro-natalist media framing. It is a search for deeper understanding into the relationship between the media and the voluntarily childfree.

In order to gain a better understanding of the childless by choice and their relationship to pro-natalist media representations, this thesis utilized in-depth interviews and participant observation as its methods of data collection. The study utilized eight couples and was conducted during the month of April of 2004. The observation/interview process lasted an average of 85 minutes each.

This study found that a perceived relationship exists between the media and childless by choice sub-culture. This association is complex and is further complicated by the media's apparent lack of knowledge about this particular demographic. The suggested role the media play, in this relationship, is one of enforcer. It perpetuates the dominant pro-natalist ideology and reinforces the status quo. The media also assist in contributing to the stigmatization and negative stereotypes of the voluntarily childfree. Some of the stigma associated with remaining childfree could be reduced if the media portrayed having children as a viable option and not a requirement of adulthood. These efforts, combined with a concerted effort on the media's part to include more frequent and positive representations of this demographic, can be most beneficial to the childless by choice subculture. Through a deeper understanding of this relationship, a more accurate representation of this demographic was allowed to surface.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In the United States, like most other parts of the world, there is a commonly held belief that all capable couples should have children. This belief has contributed to the development of a pro-natalist ideology or concept that having children is good. An ideology by definition is an aggregate of ideas, beliefs or doctrines of a large group of people (Morehead & Morehead, 1981). Ideology can also be described as a body of thought that guides an individual, group, institution, or social movement (Random House Webster's Dictionary, 1998). This pro-natalist ideology places an immense emphasis on becoming a parent. Moreover, this ideology seems to transcend all races, religions, and social classes. Parenthood is one of the most universal institutions known around the globe (Goldberg, 1988; Mahoney, 1995).

This pro-natalist belief tends to spill over into the media, as well. If one were to make a visit to the local bookstore, one might run across magazine publications containing titles like *Pregnancy*, *Parenting*, *Baby Years*, *Mothering*, and *Child*. In addition to these journals dedicated to the pursuit of parenting, other magazines often touch on the subject of having children. For instance, in the March 2003 issue of *Self* magazine, there is a section entitled *The Fertility Diaries*, with a caption that reads, "Whether you want a baby now, in a few years or when pigs fly, don't miss these stories, as told by a nurse practitioner who has counseled thousands on the choices every woman faces" (p. 14). Interestingly enough, when one actually reads the article; all of the women interviewed already have children or expressed the desire to have children

(Davis, 2003). Apparently, the voices of individuals, who consciously decided not to have children, were not included, contrary to the initial caption. Coverage of the voluntarily childfree in American mainstream print publications is lacking. The childless by choice sub-culture have received some minimal exposure in magazines, such as *New Statesman* and *American Demographics*, but have been largely overlooked by the more popular and highly visible print media.

The parenting belief structure is not limited to print media. Viewing television or feature films would most likely yield a constant barrage of programs and movies specifically targeted for mothers and fathers or parents to be. Contemporary television offerings such as *Everybody Loves Raymond* (Rosenthal, 2004) and *The Simpsons* (Groening, 2004) focus on the family as the central theme. These programs are modern iterations of the nuclear family shows of the past; such as *Leave it to Beaver* (Ackerman, 1957) or *Father Knows Best* (Young, 1954). Parenting is also a continual plot in cinema, with contemporary titles such as *Nine Months* (Barnathan & Columbus, 1995) and *About a Boy* (Hornby, 2002). These movies extol the virtues and happiness of being a parent, while portraying the voluntarily childless in a less positive light. In addition, radio, newspapers, the World Wide Web, and other media sources assist in supporting the pro-natalist ideology that most individuals have come to accept as an undisputed social reality.

The manner in which the media portray this positive viewpoint of parenting is sometimes referred to as framing the issue. Framing, properly defined, is the process by which a communication source constructs and defines a particular issue for its audience (Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997). To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived

reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation. Frames are organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world (Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2001). This thesis uses the words “frame” and “portray” interchangeably. No particular preference is given to either word.

Yet, there are those individuals who do not subscribe to the parenthood belief structure and to the manner in which the media frame the parenthood debate. These people, who challenge the dominant ideology, are often referred to as the voluntarily childfree or the childless by choice (Veevers, 1980). Most individuals, who identify with this subculture, do not have a preference over being called childfree or childless. There are some “without child couples” who prefer the word childfree over childless, as childfree denotes liberation, while childless carries a negative connotation of something lacking. Both descriptions can be used interchangeably, with no positive or negative weight assigned to either terminology, unless indicated by the research. Elaine Campbell (1983) stated, “It might be tentatively concluded that the proportion of childless couples is likely to increase” (p.317). According to the National Center for Health Statistics (1997), in 1995, 5.4 million women were childless and expected to remain so in the future. Of these 5.4 million women, 4.1 million, or 6.6 percent of all women were voluntarily childfree.

Set against the backdrop of the turbulent 1960s, and spurred on by the development and distribution of reliable birth control, the equal rights movement, and burgeoning feminist ideology, the childless by choice phenomenon began its early

formation into a legitimate way of life. With the widespread availability of dependable birth control, individuals, particularly women, now possessed greater control over the course of their lives. This greater control assisted in the formation and expansion of the voluntarily childfree subculture. Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this subculture started receiving attention and investigation from the academic arena, particularly the social sciences.

One of the first researchers to study this new phenomenon was Jean Veevers. In her groundbreaking work, *Childless by Choice*, Veevers (1980) attempted to provide the everyday individual with a basic understanding of the childless by choice phenomenon. The purpose of the book was to provide a concise description of the causes and consequences of being voluntarily childfree. Other studies would follow by various social scientists around the globe, which would investigate specific aspects of voluntary childlessness.

Some research has focused on the relationship between parenthood and the media. Peck (1971) argued that motherhood was a learned behavior that women are taught from an early age and that the media assist in the socialization of these future mothers. Kaufman (1999) concluded that television commercials might act as a socializing agent for fathers. The mediated socialization functions as an informal educational tool, whereby it teaches individual members of society what is socially acceptable, what is normal and abnormal, what is good and evil, and what is true and false. By instilling value in society, the mass media have become the greatest educators of people (Hiebert & Gibbons, 2000). It is this mediated socialization that assists in furthering the positive parenthood perception.

Reinforced by the media, the pro-natalist ideology becomes ingrained in society. It then becomes a challenge to determine the motives individuals possess for remaining childfree. Some research shows that individuals remain childfree in order to experience a greater level of freedom or to avoid financial deprivation (Campbell, 1983). Still, other research shows that a higher level of education is related to remaining childfree (Feldman, 1981).

With the positive attributes possessed by the childless by choice, it is quite surprising that the voluntarily childfree are continually perceived in a negative light. Research has shown that the voluntarily childfree are perceived as less sensitive, loving, and well adjusted (Jamison, Franzini, & Kaplan, 1979). This negativity contributes to the stereotyping and stigmatization of this group. Other studies have yielded similar results that indicated that the voluntarily childfree experience negative stigmatization and coercion to alter their choice (Mueller and Yoder, 1999). The negative stereotypes may lead to identity issues and contribute to a falsely constructed reality in which the voluntarily childfree are imprisoned. Some researchers have attempted to deconstruct the false realities surrounding parenthood and reconstruct new realities that produce a more accurate representation (Morell, 2000).

Ultimately, this thesis is an exploratory ethnographic examination of the childless by choice subculture and their relationship to potential pro-natalist media framing. It is a search for deeper understanding into the relationship between the media and the voluntarily childfree. My greater interest is that this will provide some insight into this relationship and assist in re-constructing a more accurate image of their subculture, by promoting a more positive perception of this group, particularly in the media. Through a

better comprehension of this topic, the stigmatizations and negative stereotypes associated with the childless by choice can be reduced or eliminated, while allowing the voluntarily childfree to be given a new voice. In the process, perhaps others will realize that remaining childfree is a normal and desirable way of life.

This thesis is divided into five chapters composed of 1) an introduction, 2) literature review, 3) methods, 4) findings, and 5) discussion section. Chapter two is the literature review pertaining to the voluntarily childfree and media representation. Chapter three provides the blueprint for the qualitative methods used in collecting the data for this particular study. Chapter four highlights the findings of the study, along with selected quotes from the participants. Chapter five concludes with a discussion section on the findings obtained from the investigation, and will also include personal commentary and interpretation of the study's discoveries.



## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter examines the previous studies conducted on the topic of voluntary childlessness and explores research conducted on the subject of family representation in the media. The chapter is divided into eight sections. The first part discusses the reasons individuals provide for remaining childfree. The second section describes the perceptions and characteristics of the voluntarily childfree. The third section focuses on the literature concerning the relationship between media and the pro-natalist ideology. The fourth section deals with mediated socialization. The fifth section focuses on cultivating a pro-natalist ideology. The sixth part is concerned with childfree stereotypes and stigmatization. The seventh section discusses identity issues and image reconstruction. Finally, the last section is a summary of the literature review.

The majority of the mass communications research focuses on the representation of family, while leaving discussions of voluntarily childfree relatively untouched. With a given lack of literature covering the portrayal of the voluntarily childfree in the media, this literature review provides the research that is available in regards to family media representations.

### Why Childfree?

With pro-natalism being the dominant ideology, it is quite surprising that so many individuals choose not to reproduce (Hamner & Turner, 1996). What motivates these

people to remain childfree? Some researchers have unearthed some suggestions that might explain why people chose this particular lifestyle.

In her book, *The Chosen Lives of Childfree Men*, Lunneborg (1999) explored this particular subculture in detail. Her book is a collection of in-depth interviews gathered from 30 voluntarily childfree men. The participants lived in America or Britain, with 28 being Caucasian; one was from Iran, and the other from Japan. They were a convenience sample with ages ranging from 27 to 56 years old. Her in-depth interviews indicated that there were two primary types of decision makers in regards to reproduction. She termed the first type as the “articulator,” a man who knew without a doubt that he did not want children. The second type was the “postponer,” who was a male who kept putting off the decision to reproduce until it was too late. Some of the reasons the men gave for not reproducing were personal development, work and money, and avoiding stress. Lunneborg also examined topics such as regret, overpopulation, and vasectomies.

In addition to Lunneborg, Elaine Campbell (1983) discovered other various factors that influenced an individual’s decision to remain childless. During 1974 and 1975, Campbell collected data from in and around a small Scottish city. She conducted in-depth interviews with 78 childless individuals, who had volunteered to participate in the study. The results indicated that individuals who chose to remain childless, were motivated by an avoidance of the penalties of parenthood or the protection of the rewards of childlessness. Some of the reasons given include the thought of parenting as a daunting task, loss of control over self and future, financial deprivation, responsibility, marital harmony, an opportunity to solidify their daily routine, fulfillment through

alternative goals, and finally a moral and social responsibility to the rest of humanity (Campbell, 1983).

The reasons given by all of these individuals appear to be honest answers behind not wanting children. From a financial perspective to the increased responsibility of parenting, the answers given on remaining childfree are rational and valid motives for choosing this lifestyle. Why then are these individuals perceived as irrational, selfish, and irresponsible adults? The next section will illuminate the perceptions and characteristics of the voluntarily childless.

### Perceptions and Characteristics of the Voluntarily Childfree

Traditionally, the desire to have children is seen as a positive quality of couples. When couples do not possess this particular desire, other people in their culture often see them in a less positive light. Furthermore, these childless individuals are often regarded as defective or less caring. For example, Callan (1985) examined the perceptions of parents and the voluntarily and involuntarily childfree via a multidimensional scaling analysis. Callan utilized 45 participants consisting of 24 single and 21 married male and female students. The students were presented with a questionnaire and asked to rate their perceptions of 16 fictitious fertility-status persons. The results of the study indicated that individuals were perceived differently based on their fertility status. First, the more children one had, the more likely they were to hold positive personality attributes. The voluntary childfree and one-child parents were judged least favorably. Callan concluded that individuals are perceived as disadvantaged if they do not have children or families of the right size.

In another study, Jamison, Franzini, and Kaplan (1979) conducted an experiment to determine some assumed attributes of voluntarily childless men and women. The experiment consisted of participants being given a hypothetical description of voluntarily childfree couples and parents, and then they were asked to rate their perceptions of the fictional characters. The researchers' results indicated that individuals did perceive the voluntarily childfree as less sensitive, loving, and well adjusted.

Although people in society may perceive the childfree as disadvantaged or less sensitive, some researchers have compared the two groups to provide some interesting data on the qualities the two groups possess. Interestingly, it is the childfree that possessed greater positive attributes and expressed a greater sense of achievement. For instance, Feldman (1981) attempted to explore the similarities and differences between childfree couples and parents of both sexes. Feldman's study consisted of 42 parent couples and 44 couples who had chosen to remain childfree. Each couple was given two questionnaires and asked not to discuss his or her answers with their spouse. Feldman's findings indicated that the husbands' levels of education did not differ significantly and there was no real difference in their occupational status. On the other hand, the childless wives possessed a higher level of education than the female parents. Feldman implied that the childless wives' educational level might be indicative of a couple's desire for a more equalitarian relationship. This higher educational level might have been related to the childless women's higher career level, which is very similar to their husbands.

Feldman (1981) also examined some conceptual variables within the parent/childfree realm, including family of orientation, self-concept, and marriage. First, the results of his study implied that both groups held similar viewpoints, which included

perception of adequate family backgrounds and happily married parents. Second, the parent couples held a more traditional view toward women, while the childless valued both masculine and feminine traits equally. Third, the childless couples exhibited more positive marital interactions, which included having a stimulating exchange of ideas, fun away from home, and working together on projects. Additionally, the childless couples reported having sex more often.

In addition to the former characteristics, other attributes have been examined. For example, Somers (1993) reported a higher level of marital satisfaction and spousal cohesion between childfree couples over their parental counterparts. Hoffman and Levant (1985) discovered that childfree women viewed themselves as less sex-typed than the child-anticipated women.

Sex role stereotypes have been another area of interest. According to Bram (1984), childfree couples are less traditional in sex role orientation. She conducted in-depth interviews with 83 white couples, which lasted roughly two hours each. Bram found that the childfree were more likely to have procured a professional or doctoral degree, more likely to be employed full-time, and more likely to possess a professional career. Furthermore, the childfree women were more likely to assume traditionally male-dominated professions, work until retirement, express that achievement was a recurring theme, and describe their marriage as more egalitarian. Moreover, the results of the husbands' data yielded similar results. Bram concluded that the childfree maintain these non-traditional sex roles, which in turn provide a better understanding of identities in a modern society.

In addition to sex role stereotypes, marital adjustment and personal welfare have been investigated by social scientists. Callan (1987) explored the personal well-being and marital adjustment of the voluntarily childfree compared to that of parents and of the involuntarily childless. Callan selected 32 voluntarily childfree women, 50 mothers, and 53 infertile women to participate in the study. He mailed them a variety of questionnaires pertaining to their personal well-being, descriptions about life, life concerns, and marital quality. After analyzing the questionnaires, the results of the study indicated the voluntarily childfree women and mothers were satisfied with their lives. Furthermore, the voluntarily and involuntarily childfree were more satisfied than mothers with their levels of freedom, flexibility, personal privacy, relaxation, and independence, with the voluntarily childless stating that they had more time with their spouses, more exchanges of ideas and greater levels of consensus. Callan concluded that the voluntarily childfree were just as happy and adjusted as mothers.

The positive attributes of the voluntarily childfree resonate from other research. Campbell (1983) concluded that the negative stereotypes of the voluntarily childless were completely untrue. These individuals were not neurotic, immature, selfish nor irresponsible. Feldman (1981) also recommended the childless need not feel stigmatized because of being minority, but that if anyone needs assistance it is the parents because of their lower levels of marital interactions. The researchers' discoveries highlighted the truth about the voluntarily childfree. These people were typical adults that possessed a high level of education, achievement, independence, and happiness. The voluntary childfree appeared to be highly motivated well-adjusted individuals, even with the lack of

a child in their lives. In other words, these individuals were not the selfish and immature creatures portrayed in the media.

### The Media-Parenthood Relationship

The aspirational quality of mediated parenthood can be traced back as far as the 1940s. In her book *Family Plots*, Dana Heller (1995) asserted that although television has been divided into multiple channels of thought allowing greater viewer choice, communication scholars are still interested in television's influence on viewers' fascination and romance with the family. Heller contended that at the end of World War II, television became an integral part of the family, right alongside the mother figure. To Heller, television assured females that life fulfillment could be found by having children, experimenting with food, and once again, purchasing consumer products designed for the up and coming stay at home mom.

According to Ella Taylor (1989), from a historical context, the majority of the 1950s sitcoms portrayed middle class families in search of happiness and wealth in the vast depths of the suburbs. Season after season, these television families became increasingly represented by the white middle class individual. These programs were exploring a modern world, yet grounded in traditional ideology. Taylor wrote, "Parents would love and respect each other and their children forever. The children would grow up, go to college, and take up lives identical in most respects to those of their parents" (p.27). She contended that television attempted to portray the "perfect family." In sum, the television series would play out the same pro-natalist family narrative that has been

ingrained in society. Furthermore, this same global story line is rebroadcast decades later thanks to the advent of syndication.

The family sitcoms of the 1950s continued into the 1960s, as well. Taylor (1989) makes note of one show in particular, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. She suggested that this show symbolized the sensibility of the Kennedy years. Although *The Dick Van Dyke Show* was one of the first shows to integrate the work or office environment with household scenes, its message was still the same, which was that hard work and family would provide the dream of upward mobility and that it was available to all (Persky & Denoff, 1961).

Taylor (1989) concluded, “The heterogeneity of viewers must be simultaneously catered to with pluralistic images and glossed over with a more universal language in order to create a mass audience” (p. 166). Taylor suggested that in the 1970s the relevance of this was accepted because it was framed in the universal institution of family. By the late 1980s, Taylor observed that the views of the minority or dissident were being constrained because of television’s return to the more traditional values of nostalgic family programs. She concluded that television portrays the same narratives over and over again, but rarely gives representation to the issues that really need to be addressed.

A contemporary use of media to convey the message of life fulfillment and materialism is best expressed through the use of commercials. According to Peck (1971), one of the primary functions of the media, in relation to motherhood, is in what she terms as the “baby sell.” Her belief was that corporations and advertising agencies cooperate to present positive mother-baby images to sell products. These businesses present an



idealized vision of motherhood in the hopes of increasing profits. Peck used the example of a commercial where a husband serves his pregnant wife Tang fruit drink in bed and Peck warned that some women may begin to imagine themselves pregnant and being spoiled in a similar fashion.

Chambers (2001), like Peck (1971), agreed that popular media representations of a nuclear family as the norm functioned to facilitate the marketing of consumer products. Chambers went further, saying “A predominance of media images lock on to a narrow anglocentric, aspirational nuclear family discourse and celebrate it” (p. 94). She contended that advertisements in particular are aimed at maintaining the traditional family structure in order to sell life insurance, family foods, and family cars. These advertisements attempt to highlight the supposed family qualities of intimacy, affection, caring and a way of life. In the end, children, like houses and cars, become signified as fashion accessories that produce personal pleasure.

This typical portrayal of the nuclear family led Chambers (2001) to explore its appearance in contemporary cinema. She examined the manner in which family ideals are conveyed through popular media portrayals by centering her discussion on the reproduction of the white nuclear family and the emergence of the white fatherhood in mainstream film. First, Chambers asserted that the image of the ideal white nuclear family has been mythologized in the media as being normal and universal. She contested that this “ideal” is seen as a natural heterosexual biological entity, as a household type, a kinship arrangement, a leisure pursuit, and ultimately as a positive aspirational quality.

Chamber’s exploration of parenthood in cinema highlights other generalizations about parenthood and the voluntarily childfree. She explored the shift in mainstream

cinema to a more sensitive kind of male role model or father figure. She wrote “Hollywood films have moved their focus from the responsibilities of paternity as a burden and a threat to personal independence, to a celebration of the liberating or transformational experiences and virtues of fatherhood” (p. 104). Chambers used the movie *Nine Months* as a prime example of this genre. In this film, Samuel, played by Hugh Grant, is a child psychologist, who leads an affluent lifestyle and has a girlfriend, Rebecca, played by Julianne Moore. When Rebecca tells Samuel that she is pregnant, he is reluctant to get married and acts as if parenthood will rob him of his personal freedom. Later in the movie, Samuel changes his mind about fatherhood, when his bachelor friend expresses a desire to have a wife and family and an apprehension to facing life alone. Afterwards, Samuel watches a video of the ultrasound of his child and makes the conscious decision to become the responsible father. The movie ends with Samuel and Rebecca reading childcare manuals, Samuel trading in his sports car for a family car, and Samuel apologizing for being so selfish. They get married and live happily ever after (Barnathan & Columbus, 1995).

*Nine Months* acknowledges another common theme that consistently emerges in the media, which is the “pregnancy = living happily ever after” idea. Peck (1971) noted these recurring narratives in magazines of the 1970s. The morals of the stories were to have a baby and everything will turn out fine.

This “happily ever after” thought resonated in research as well, when Peterson (1983) examined attitudes toward childless lifestyles using an unstructured response method in order to clarify the motivations for and effects of remaining childless. He used 203 first-year psychology students as participants. Each student was given a response

booklet containing six starter sentences pertaining to fictitious characters and their choice in having children. The stories included the character's thoughts and feelings, how others reacted to the situations, and an outcome ending. In the study, a frequent theme that re-emerged was one of a childless woman accidentally becoming pregnant and only then realizing that it was the greatest thing that has ever happened to her. Moreover, many of the students' responses indicated that when the woman accidentally became pregnant, the stories would end with statements such as "they were happier than ever."

Overall, *Nine Months* typifies the predominant pro-natalist story line that pervades much of today's media. The movie highlights the selfishness of the non-parent, the happiness incurred after the realization that children are the most important thing in life, and the altered consumption patterns of parents versus non-parents. This movie solidifies the belief that family and children are the ideal way of life and are pathways to happiness and fulfillment.

#### Pro-natalistic Media Socialization

In 1971 Ellen Peck published *The Baby Trap*, which conveyed her observations about human reproduction and the value of remaining childfree. Peck asserted that motherhood is not innate, but instead a learned behavior that women are taught from an early age. Her reasoning was that if motherhood was instinctual, no woman would be able to resist giving birth, but many women do.

Most psychologists concur that the idea of child bearing must be learned (Michaels, 1988). Sources of pro-natalist influence range from family and friends to the media. Some individuals base their reproductive decision on various external factors.

For example, Ritchey and Stokes (1974), conducted research on childlessness and expectations to remain childless. The researchers utilized data from the Survey of Economic Opportunity of 1967, which is a self-weighting sample of 18,000 households. The researchers limited their analysis to Caucasian wives, age 15 to 39, married once and living with a spouse. The results indicated that various socio-demographic factors influence a couples' decision to have a child. The results suggested that structural influences such as education, employment, and family income affect the frequency and projections of childlessness (Ritchey & Stokes, 1974).

Since it can be demonstrated that external stimuli, such as education and employment can influence reproductive decisions, it could be suggested that external forces in the form of media could also influence an individual's ideology about parenthood. Many social scientists are studying the socializing relationship between media and the general populous.

This socializing aspect of media can be attributed to the traditional and often stereotypical portrayals of family. Skill, Robinson, and Wallace (1987) investigated the structure, type and frequency of families on prime-time television. The researchers conducted a study to identify the program offerings for the years 1979 to 1985. The results from the study suggested that network television assists in reinforcing the traditional models of family. Skill, et al. concluded that over 65 percent of television families were a conventional configuration. In addition, the television programs that have been aired the longest tend to demonstrate the traditional family configuration.

Other researchers have discovered similar findings. For instance, Douglas and Olson (1996) had discovered that television portrayals of familial rights and

responsibilities have remained stable across multiple generations. Some social scientists have turned to academic texts as a source for media representation. Low and Sherrard (1999) investigated the portrayal of women in sexuality and marriage and family textbooks. These researchers examined more than 1000 photographs of women from college-level textbooks. They found that, in the 1970s, there were a higher percentage of photographs of women in traditional roles, and in the 1990s, that over two thirds of the female photographs were devoted to traditional gender roles. Low and Sherrard concluded that college-level textbooks may be reinforcing traditional gender roles, such as homemaker or mother.

According to Robinson and Skill (2001), families portrayed on television have become benchmarks on how American families are doing in the real world and are at best close followers of real world lifestyles. Furthermore, television portrayals were more likely to reinforce traditional family structures, with character representations remaining quite stereotypical. In conducting this present study, Robinson and Skill, attempted to examine television family portrayal via an exhaustive content analysis. They selected prime-time fictional series that possessed a family-type situation, which aired on ABC, NBC, CBS, and Fox between September 1950 and August 1995. The scientists utilized TV Guide and various program and fan websites to assist in verifying some of the data.

Each television show had to meet at least the minimum criteria of possessing an identifiable family configuration. Robinson and Skill (2001) did not constrain their definition of family either. If an adult performed parental duties as head of the household, the show was considered a portrayal of family regardless of the legal marital status. In coding this study, the childless families were defined as married couples living

in the same home without children. In addition, the researchers limited their inclusion of shows to programs that featured a family as the primary, recurring story vehicle. This decision was based on the belief of the scientists that individuals in the real world learn or possibly live vicariously through known and familiar characters of mediated images and these recurring representations of families, portrayed as the primary story vehicle, would exert possible influence on real world individuals.

The results of the Robinson and Skill's (2001) study showed that between September 1950 and August 1995, 630 fictional family-centered television programs aired on the four major commercial networks. Parents and childless married couples have been the principal head of household categories across all decades, but it is the married couples without children that have possessed a steady decrease in representation on television. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, the representation of childless couples on television has decreased from 20.4 percent to 6.9 percent.

Furthermore, Robinson and Skill (2001) contended that there is no dominant household configuration that depicts how families live on television. Although a variety of configurations exist, the nuclear family configuration remained between 24 percent and 26 percent of the televised representations between the 1960s and the 1990s. This suggested to the researchers that the nuclear family portrayal has remained relatively stable across the decades. As the representation of the childless as a legitimate family configuration decreased on television, other types of family models have shown dramatic increase. These family types included the multiple family configuration, the extended family model, the reconstituted family, and the single-parent model.

In addition, each decade marked a steady increase in the total number of family-centered programs and a continuous decrease in the percentage of series featuring a childless family. Moreover, the number of children depicted in television series had increased dramatically from 120 in the 1950s to 316 in the 1980s, with the average televised family size increasing from 1.8 children in the 1950s to 2.2 in the 1980s (Robinson & Skill, 2001).

Robinson and Skill (2001) concluded that the idea that images of family as portrayed on television could serve as useful milestones, in which real world individuals judge themselves. Robinson and Skill contended that if real world individuals were to conclude anything about televised families from this study, it would be that families are most desirable, but individuals could be happy with the family configuration, even if it were childfree. Robinson and Skill stated, “Although many ‘real-life’ married baby boomers may have been building their careers and delaying parenthood during the 1980s and 1990s, the data indicate that television was not providing many family models that reflected this trend” (p. 147).

Based on the findings, it would appear that television programs have placed more emphasis on children and have allowed for more representation of families that contain children. It is this child-centric emphasis that assists in the perpetuation of the pro-natalist mindset and contributes to the marginalization and stigmatization of the voluntarily childfree.

## Cultivating a Pro-natalist Ideology

Other social scientists have indicated a strong relationship between media representation and the cultivation of certain ideologies. Cultivation analysis contends that the media, particularly television, present a system of messages comprised of aggregate and repetitive patterns of images and ideologies that individuals absorb and adopt over a long period of time. For example, Albada (2000) made an interesting point in her research on public and private dialogue about families on American television. She observed that her participants formed a relationship between traditional family structures and positive family values, and that non-traditional family structures would lead to negative family values. Her study also suggested that most of her real-world participants believed that television family representations could possibly influence real-world individuals about what is right, what is normal, and how they should act within the family. Kaufman (1999) concluded that television commercials might act as a socializing agent for fathers, thus providing a point of comparison that many men might use to adopt certain beliefs or daily lessons of the real world.

Two of the more prominent proponents of cultivation are Nancy Signorielli and Michael Morgan. Signorielli and Morgan (2001) suggested that individuals learn about families through the mediated images in television and film, and consequently judge their own family structure through this lens. Furthermore, Signorielli and Morgan stressed that media play an important role in the socialization of children and adults. These scientists applied the theoretical framework of cultivation analysis to the understanding and conception of family. They proposed that home and family were two of the most common themes of network dramas, with 8 out of 10 programs centered on the topics.



The researchers implied that the early television families, such as those portrayed in *Leave it to Beaver*, were intact, perfect, and sterile. Even during the 1990s, many programs still portrayed the traditional and conventional values of family. The researchers intimated that, overall, television families have remained more conventional. During the 1970s, for instance, married women were presented in traditional roles, such as having children and being portrayed as happy, nurturing, and feminine. Signorielli and Morgan concluded that whatever future representations are to come, television would be there to portray how families are structured.

Thus, the media frame narratives, which standardize and amplify common cultural norms, such as the desirability to have children. The media present mirror-like stories, either through television sit-coms, mainstream cinema or the chapters in academic texts that reflect commonly accepted social practices. These standardized stories, such as raising a family and living happily ever after, not only reinforce the status quo, but cultivate homogenized ideologies and also marginalize the individuals, who do not hold the same beliefs. These culturally accepted story lines are consistently perpetuated through the utilization of media and contribute to the stigmatization of the voluntarily childfree.

### Stereotypes and Stigmatization

One of the most harmful consequences of being voluntarily childfree is the stigmatization the individuals frequently experience. This stigmatization helps create and foster negative stereotypes of the childfree individual. Ultimately, these stereotypes and stigmatizations construct a social reality that supports the pro-natalist status quo, while

marginalizing the childfree minority. This stigmatization is at the heart of Jean Veever's research on the voluntarily childfree.

In her ground-breaking work, *Childless by Choice*, Veevers (1980) consolidated the data and results from her previous research projects into a volume that addressed the voluntarily childfree from an academic standpoint, while providing the everyday individual with a basic understanding the childless by choice phenomenon. The book was based on 156 in-depth interviews with childless individuals, who were chosen purposefully for this on-going study. The purpose of the book was to provide a concise description of the causes and consequences of being voluntarily childfree. Her first research project was published in 1973 and was an exploratory study designed to gain insight into this growing phenomenon.

According to Veevers (1973), her exploratory study focused on unstructured interviews with a non-random sample of 52 voluntarily childfree women. At the time of this particular study, it was somewhat difficult for Veevers to utilize conventional sampling techniques in Canada because of the small number of individuals choosing not to reproduce. Instead, Veevers obtained participants through the use of advertisements in London and Toronto newspapers. The average age of the participants was 29, with the range being 23 to 71 years in age. All of the participants were Caucasian, most of which were middle-class, with education ranging from grade school through post-doctorate. Most were from stable traditional nuclear families and involved in their first marriage with their spouse. In addition, more than half of the women were on some form of birth control pill, and 25 percent of the participants' husbands had obtained a vasectomy.

Veevers (1973) used the following criteria in choosing the participants; the females' childlessness was based on choice rather than biology, the woman must have been married for at least five years or have been of post-menopausal age, or she or her husband had been voluntarily sterilized for contraceptive purposes, and finally that she had not given birth or played the role of mother. Veevers then conducted unstructured in-depth interviews, which lasted an average of four hours and included topics such as the woman's life history, her marriage and her husband, and attitudes towards the maternal role.

Veevers (1973) stated,

All of the wives interviewed feel that they are to some extent stigmatized by their unpopular decision to avoid having children, and that there exists an ubiquitous negative stereotype concerning the characteristics of a voluntarily childless woman, including such unfavorable traits as being abnormal, selfish, immoral, irresponsible, immature, unhappy, unfulfilled, and non-feminine (p.360).

In addition to these feelings, many women felt pressure to become mothers by subtle means, but others perceived more direct informal sanctions by ways of explicit and unsolicited comments advocating motherhood. A large percentage of the participants had reported never seeing the topic of voluntary childlessness being discussed in the mass media. Veevers suggests that support groups for this population segment might be very successful, because most are unaware of the others who share their viewpoint (Veevers, 1973).

Other social scientists have studied the stigmatization of the childfree and each of them has discovered similar findings. The recurring pattern that systematically emerges is

that the voluntarily childfree are perceived in a negative light and consequently are stigmatized due to their choice of lifestyle.

Somers (1993) compared voluntarily childfree adults and parents. Her study consisted of 74 voluntarily childfree men and women and 127 mothers and fathers. The results of the study indicated that the voluntarily childfree viewed that others perceived them more negatively, with more negative stereotype radiating from relatives rather than from friends.

Mueller and Yoder (1997) explored the gendered norms of family size and the repercussions of violating them. They focused on gendered stereotypes relating to women's family size, and examined undergraduate students' stereotypes of individuals who either conformed to or deviated from gendered norms of family size. The study utilized 400 predominantly white, young students, consisting of 270 females and 128 males. The students were each given a booklet containing one of 40 short vignettes that described a hypothetical couple, but focused more on the wife. After reading the stories, the students were given two questionnaires that focused on gender identity, and the students' perceptions of the target wives' characteristics such as emotional adjustment, life fulfillment, and future happiness.

The results of Mueller and Yoder's study (1997) suggested that the childfree women were rated most negatively, and the women with two or eight children were rated most favorably. Mueller and Yoder concluded that remaining voluntarily childfree does pose a risky choice laden with negative perceptions by others. They suggested that women who fulfilled the "motherhood mandate" stood a better chance of rebuffing the negative stereotypes.

Two years later, Mueller and Yoder (1999) once again revisited the stigmatization of non-normative family size. The scientists interviewed 45 mostly white, college-educated, employed women. The results indicated that the voluntarily childfree individual experiences negative stigmatization and coercion to alter their choice. Moreover, these women reported experiencing intrusive interrogations from others in addition to unsolicited medical advice from physicians.

This feeling of stigmatization is not isolated to Western civilizations. In a study of childless women in South India, Riessman (2000) investigated the stigma associated with childlessness and the resistance techniques employed by her participants. Because of cultural limitations, Riessman was only able to interview three voluntarily childfree women. Her findings conveyed the women's feelings of isolation and struggle with self-definition. Furthermore, they highlighted the ways in which the women encountered intrusive questioning from others and their means of dealing with the interactions.

Many individuals develop a system to combat this negative stereotyping and find other methods of coping with the stigmatization. Veevers (1975) suggested that childless women utilize a variant worldview to counter balance society's negative sentiments. Other methods have also been discovered.

According to Park (2002), individuals who choose to remain childless quite often experience negative stereotyping and increased social pressure from others to change or justify their choice. Park delved into this stigmatization by conducting in-depth interviews with 24 voluntarily childfree men and women, and then used inductive analysis to discern the methods employed by the participants to cope with the stigmatized identity. The participants used various impression coping techniques to manage internal

and social interactions. Examples of the methods included identity substitution, condemning the condemners, and asserting a right to self-fulfillment. The participants used these techniques to renounce discreditable constructions of the voluntarily childfree. The traditional negative constructions of the voluntarily childfree present serious challenges to the childless individuals who attempt to redefine his or her identity and reconstruct a more accurate image of the childless by choice.

### Identity and Reconstruction

In addition to the negative consequences of stigmatization, voluntary childlessness also produces identity issues. Peck (1971) argued that the media construct images of motherhood as mystical identities, which border on glamorous. These images convey a desirable lifestyle that many women attempt to adopt.

Hird (2000) contended that the modern iteration of motherhood was constructed as a social role for women, rather than as a reproductive one. Hird stressed that although feminist analyses have increased the definitional boundaries of womanhood, the relationship between females and sexual reproduction is still heavily intertwined. Hird stated, “In effect, childless women are an oxymoron, defined by something they are not” (p.347).

In addition to Hird, Gillespie (2000) subscribed to the idea that the construction of the female identity and women’s social role has been traditionally intertwined with the institution of motherhood. Gillespie contended that motherhood has been historically perceived as natural, desirable, and essential to the construction of the female identity. Gillespie attempted to establish whether the presence of pro-natalist ideology, which is a

central tenant of female identity, has decreased. Gillespie also hoped to find ways in which women could subvert and transform the traditional cultural norms in order to construct a new identity of woman separate from motherhood.

Gillespie (2000) conducted in-depth interviews with 25 voluntarily childfree women in a large city located in the south of England. These women were between the ages of 18 and 51, and all but one was white. The participants discussed how pro-natalist discourse was still present, and how others reacted to their decision to remain childfree. The reactions ranged from disbelief to disregard to conviction as deviants. Results indicated that through resistance to traditional roles of motherhood, the female identity could be reconstructed, validated, and accommodated. Gillespie concluded that a better understanding of the voluntarily childfree could contribute to this reconstruction and a better understanding of the female identity.

To better understand the female identity, Morrell (1994) investigated the voluntary childfree. Morell explored the oral histories of the participants and attempted to discover patterns that might interfere with the reproduction of motherhood. She also investigated the discourses that construct the childless, the maternalistic ideology that stigmatizes, and the participants' attempts at reconstructing meanings.

Morell (2000) suggested that when women refuse to have children, they are often the subject of misunderstanding and misnaming. Due to the perception that children are necessary to complete a woman's life, childless women are often viewed as deficient. She conducted in-depth interviews with 34 childless women between the ages of 40 and 78. All participants lived in the United States and were European-American, except for one Latino woman. Three fourths of the participants were from poor or working-class

backgrounds, and many related their upward class mobility to the decision to remain childfree.

The results of Morell's (2000) research suggest that two dominant experiences are predictable for non-mothers. These experiences were the "wavering no," which is concerned with the disturbances in women's everyday comfort with remaining childfree, and the other is the "saving no," which is concerned with women's experiences of openness and freedom and their ability to live a life childfree. Morell attacks the topic of childlessness from a post-structuralist point of view in order to deconstruct symbolic meanings, disrupt "natural" categories, and reconstruct alternate realities. For Morell, her re-descriptions of the interviews constituted liberation for the childfree and contributed to alternative perspectives of childlessness as a normal, desirable, and viable option.

### Poststructuralism and Summary

In order to address these issues and arrive at a necessary starting point for the research, it is necessary to approach this thesis from an appropriate philosophical point of view. Thus, this thesis is written within the post-structuralist philosophical framework.

Poststructuralism is concerned with theories pertaining to the relationship between human beings, the world, and the practice of producing and reproducing meanings. Meanings and values, which represent the relationship we believe we have to our real conditions of existence, are sometimes produced and reproduced by certain institutions within society. These institutions may include religion, political systems, the family, the media, education systems and many others. Often, these institutions are the topic of discussion in many media portrayals. These institutions, with their dominant ideologies,



help create a reality that fosters and solidifies the status quo. Poststructuralism is a challenge to these institutions and their traditional theories of culture and language, in addition to the conventional explanations of what is possible to know and what it means to be human. It disputes traditional explanations and beliefs and begs the question of who is in control (Belsey, 2002).

By constructing this thesis within the post-structuralist philosophical framework, the pro-natalist ideology is brought into question, along with the media representations that support the parenthood belief structure. This research study is concerned with producing a better understanding of the relationship between media portrayals and the voluntarily childfree, all the while attempting to help reconstruct a more precise image of the childless by choice. It is an attempt to comprehend the intersection of pro-natalist media portrayal and the formation of ideologies. It is an endeavor to reduce the stigma associated with childlessness, convey voluntary childlessness as a normal desirable option and release individuals from the throngs of pro-natalist ideology.

In summary, many individuals choose not to have children for a variety of reasons, including personal development, financial deprivation and marital harmony. Although the voluntarily childless provide valid justification for their choice, they are often perceived as defective, disadvantaged, less caring and less well adjusted by other members of society. As the research shows, the childless by choice possess greater positive attributes, including higher levels of education, higher levels of marital satisfaction and more positive marital interactions. Moreover, the voluntarily childfree are less traditional in sex role orientation, were more satisfied with their levels of freedom and reported having sex more often than their parental counterparts. The

childless by choice are not immature, irresponsible, selfish individuals, but highly motivated well adjusted people.

The relationship of parenthood and media dates back to the 1940s, with the majority of the 1950s sitcoms portraying middle class families grounded in traditional ideologies. The image of the ideal nuclear family has been mythologized in the media as being normal, universal, and as a positive aspirational quality. Many popular media representations of the nuclear family also function as a marketing device for consumer goods, such as life insurance and family cars. These traditional media representations can be disseminated through television, cinema and even college textbooks.

Most psychologists agree that the idea of parenthood must be learned. One source of pro-natalist influence is the media. The socializing aspect of the media can be attributed to the traditional portrayals of family. Television family portrayals have become benchmarks on how real-world families are doing and are at best close followers of real world lifestyles. Furthermore, television portrayals are more likely to reinforce traditional family structures, with character representations remaining stereotypical. These images of television families could serve as useful milestones, in which real world individuals judge themselves and decide how he or she should act within the family.

The media play an important role in the socialization of individuals, simply by the manner in which it portrays the pro-natalist narratives. These stories standardize and amplify common cultural norms such as the desirability to reproduce. These standardized stories, such as raising a family and living happily ever after, not only reinforce the status quo, but cultivate homogenized ideologies and also marginalize the individuals, who do not hold the same beliefs. These culturally accepted story lines are

consistently perpetuated in the media and contribute to the stigmatization of the voluntarily childfree.

One of the most harmful consequences of being voluntarily childfree is the stigmatization the individuals frequently experience. These people quite often experience negative stereotyping and increased social pressure from others to change or justify their choice of lifestyle. Moreover, these individuals struggle with feelings of isolation and self-definition. Ultimately, these stereotypes and stigmatizations construct a social reality that supports the pro-natalist status quo, while marginalizing the childfree minority. The next chapter outlines the research methods used in this study to investigate the perceptions of the voluntarily childfree, especially as they pertain to popular and media.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

This introductory section provides a brief summary of the research methods used in this thesis; more detailed explanations are provided later in this chapter. In conducting this study, this thesis utilized criteria similar to Veevers 1973 study when selecting the voluntarily childless participants. The participants for this study consisted of a convenient purposeful sample of voluntarily childfree individuals who were recruited from a local county chapter of the group, *No Kidding*. The study consisted of 16 individuals and was conducted at the participants' residences and other convenient locations that offered privacy and security. Before conducting the interviews and observations, the participants of this study signed a release form confirming their involvement in the study and were briefed on the nature of this research.

Before conducting the interviews and in order to assemble a more well-rounded study, a period of participant observation was conducted. During the observation, the participants were asked to view a commercial-free episode of the CBS prime-time situation comedy, *Yes Dear*. The interviewing process then began with an introduction, resolved any definitional issues, and provided easy opening questions. The next part of the discussion was the core component of the interview, moving from general to more specific questions. Finally, the last part of the interview allowed the participants to answer questions related to future portrayals of the childless by choice.

The interviews/observations were conducted in April 2004. The observation/interview process lasted an average of 85 minutes each and the interviews

were recorded to micro-cassette tape. The recorded transcripts of the voluntarily childfree were then transcribed and sorted into a more manageable arrangement. The participants' sentences were used as the unit of analysis. Initial themes were generated, at which time the data was labeled, sorted and synthesized. Descriptive accounts and key dimensions of the voluntarily childfree were then prepared, along with the range and diversity of the pro-natalist media framing phenomenon. After the typologies were developed, the researcher looked for emergent patterns within the data and then provided some explanations of the findings.

### Use of Qualitative Research Methods

In order to gain a better understanding of the childless by choice and their relationship to pro-natalist media representations, this thesis utilized qualitative research as its basis of inquiry. Qualitative research was the most logical choice for this type of study, due to its ability to assist in understanding complex human or social problems and its propensity to comprehend the meanings which people assign to phenomena within their social reality (Snape and Spencer, 2003).

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) stated,

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (p.3).

Furthermore, according to Snape and Spencer (2003), qualitative research views social life as a process rather than a static instance, while supplying a holistic perspective within defined contexts. It offers an in-depth understanding of the world of the research participants by learning about their circumstances, experiences, perspectives and histories. Qualitative research is concerned with what exists in the social world and the dynamics of how things operate (Ritchie, 2003). This particular work is an ethnographic exploration. According to Creswell (1998), ethnography is a depiction and interpretation of a cultural or social group. This research is concerned with the depiction of the childless by choice subculture.

Jane Lewis (2003) stated, “Qualitative research fieldwork involves interaction between participants and researchers. Researchers make rigorous attempts to present themselves objectively and neutrally and to minimize the extent to which they themselves intrude on the generation of fulsome and authentic accounts” (p.65). To clarify, I, personally, do not hold any anti-natalist sentiment, nor do I possess any pro-natalist sympathy. Whether or not to have children is simply a lifestyle choice made by individuals based upon his or her own belief structure. Being a voluntarily childfree male, I find it important to note that sharing this commonality may be helpful in understanding the participant’s experiences, but in the end this thesis cannot be made free from *all* bias. Although I have tried to limit my personal ideologies from influencing my writing, the work was written as objectively as possible.

## Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following research questions.

1. What is the relationship between pro-natalist media framing and the voluntarily childfree?
2. If a relationship exists, what impact does this relationship have on the individual?
3. In what ways can the pro-natalist media portrayals be altered to provide a more accurate representation of the voluntarily childfree?

## Ethical Considerations

In any research study, obtaining participants' informed consent is necessary.

Informed consent provides the participant with information about the purpose of the study, who the researcher is, how the data will be used, subjects likely to be covered and what will be required of them (Lewis, 2003). The participants of this study signed a release form confirming their involvement in the study and were briefed on the nature of this research. Moreover, the selection of interview locations ensured a comfortable level of privacy, while protecting the researcher and participants from harm. Every attempt was made to provide participant anonymity and confidentiality. In regards to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher obtained the appropriate IRB certification, filed the required IRB forms and adhered to the proper IRB guidelines. See Appendix A for a copy of the participant personal data questions, Appendix B for the interview guide, Appendix C for a copy of the informed consent release form, Appendix D for a copy of the researcher's N.I.H. certification, and Appendix E for participant background data.

## Selecting Participants

Qualitative research utilizes non-probability samples for selecting participants, because participants are selected based on particular features. This purposeful sampling enables detailed exploration of central themes inherent to the group being studied. “Homogeneous samples” are chosen to provide in-depth details of a particular phenomenon. Typically, qualitative samples are small in size and supplemental participants can be added later. Convenience sampling offers samples based on the ease of access (Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam, 2003).

This thesis used criteria similar to Veevers 1973 study, when selecting the childfree participants. The heterosexual husband/wife participants possessed the following characteristics:

1. The couples' childlessness will be based on choice rather than biology.
2. The couples had to be married for a minimum of three years.
3. The female must be of post-menopausal age or she or her husband must have been voluntarily sterilized for contraceptive purposes or they must be actively practicing in some form of birth control.
4. The individuals must have not given birth or played the role of parent previously.

In regards to negotiating access to the participants, this thesis attempted to adhere to similar guidelines as expressed in (Lewis, 2003):

1. being sensitive to the hierarchy or organizational structure: particularly getting clearance from senior people who are 'gatekeepers';
2. providing clear information about the objectives and purpose of the study and why that setting has been chosen;
3. being open and consistent about what is required, in terms of the number of visits envisaged, the amount of time required, the range of people the research would involve;
4. being clear about how the findings will be used - plans for reporting, disseminating and conditions for anonymity and confidentiality;



5. anticipating, but more importantly being responsive to, concerns and sensitivities raised;
6. having a single point of contact within the organization: to avoid duplication or gaps in communication. Finding someone who will be a 'champion' in the organization can also help being flexible about shaping the study approach in response to the precise setting, and accepting advice;
7. considering how findings can be shared and at what stage: early discussion of emergent findings; providing copies of reports or papers; dedicated dissemination to research participants (p.62).

The participants of this study possessed some interesting personal background information. Of the 16 participants, 12 were under the age of 40 years, with the average age being 39.63 years. Of the 8 couples involved in this study, the average length of marriage was 15 years. In regards to the participants' education level, 11 of the individuals possessed at least a Bachelors Degree. Three of the individuals possessed a Masters Degree, one possessed a Medical Degree, and one had received a Doctorate. In regards to the forms of birth control used, four of the individuals had been voluntarily sterilized, two were of post-menopausal age and two were utilizing birth control pills.

The participants for this study consisted of a convenient purposeful sample of voluntarily childfree couples who were recruited from a local county chapter of the group, *No Kidding*, which is an organization devoted to the childfree lifestyle. Initial contact was made through the organization's website <http://www.nokidding.net> (Steinberg, 2004). In addition, other participants were selected based on meeting the above guidelines.

## Data Collection

Typically, qualitative data collection methods involve close contact between the researcher and the participants and require methods of data collection that are flexible and sensitive to the social context in which they are produced (Snape and Spencer, 2003). The in-depth interview is one of the most effective choices in conducting qualitative research. The in-depth interview offers insight into participant's perspectives and interpretations of their beliefs and behaviors, in addition to affording an understanding of the meanings that they attach to them. Furthermore, in-depth interviews are highly adaptable to research that requires an understanding of delicate or deeply rooted phenomena (Ritchie, 2003). The in-depth interview provides access into the mental world of the participant, and the content of his or her daily experience (McCracken, 1988).

Although qualitative data collection is highly flexible, it still must possess some level of structure in order for the research to move forward. Less-structured exploratory studies are designed to comprehend underlying values or concepts and encourage participants to shape their own narrative, while in-depth interviews are designed with context and the individual experience in mind (Arthur and Nazroo, 2003).

This thesis employed in-depth interviews in a semi-structured manner as the means of collecting its field data. I presented the participants with broad questions to allow them the opportunity to reconstruct their reality, while focusing on the pro-natalist media framing relationship to provide context for their individual experiences. The interviewing process began with an introduction, resolved any definitional issues, and provided easy opening questions. The next part of the discussion was the core

component of the interview, moving from general to more specific questions. Finally, the interview started to wind down and allowed the participants to answer questions related to future portrayals of the childless by choice.

Furthermore, in order to assemble a more well-rounded study, a period of participant observation was conducted. Observation is one of the cornerstones of research methods. It allows the researcher to observe the participants in a lab or natural setting and provides data on participant body language and gestures (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). During the observation, the participants were asked to view a commercial-free episode of the CBS prime-time situation comedy, *Yes Dear*. This particular program was selected due to the character structure of the show and its' ranking in the top 25 of the Nielsen Ratings (Nielsen Ratings, 2004). The show contains two sets of nuclear families with two children per couple that live at the same residence. Although this show is a situation comedy, the key characteristic of offering two arrangements of nuclear families concurrently would offer clearer insight into traditional television portrayals. The commercials were deleted from the episode, in the hopes of reducing any bias towards later questioning. The participants were aware that the show was being used merely as a tool to promote more discussion on this particular topic.

During the episode, participants were encouraged to make any comments pertaining to the show, media, children, and the voluntarily childfree. In addition to these comments, field notes were taken containing information on their mannerism and the voiced commentary. After viewing the show, the participants were given time to gather their thoughts and convey any other ideas or opinions related to media representation and

the voluntarily childfree. The episode lasted 22 minutes and the field notes were concluded when the participants were done expressing themselves.

The study consisted of 16 participants, and was conducted at the participants' residences and other convenient locations that offered privacy and security. I met with six couples at their house and met the remaining two couples at local coffee houses. The observation portion of the study was facilitated by the use of a portable DVD player. The observations/interviews were conducted in April 2004. The observation/interview process lasted an average of 85 minutes each and the interviews were recorded to micro-cassette tape.

The actual experience of collecting the data was most enjoyable and exciting, as the participants were eager to make their voices heard. The majority of the couples felt comfortable enough to open up their homes to me, which allowed me to visit them and conduct the interview/observation in their place of residence. The geographic locations of their residences varied, so I got to travel to new and unexplored locales within the county. Most of their homes were of moderate incomes, although a few of the participants displayed a slightly higher than average income and their homes reflected it. All of these participants welcomed me into their homes and some offered refreshments. One couple in particular offered me some soda and fresh baked cookies, which made me feel right at home. Most of the interviews/observations were conducted in the participants' living rooms, which facilitated a relaxed atmosphere that proved conducive to the study.

Two couples felt more comfortable conducting the interviews/observations in a public setting. In both instances, local coffee houses were chosen as an ideal meeting

place. Upon meeting each couple at the coffee houses, a table at the back of the store was chosen to facilitate the interview/observation. The coffee houses were usually quiet and the location of the tables provided some semblance of privacy. Although these interviews/observations did not have the same “homey” feel to them, they were still relaxed and casual enough to allow an open and honest exploration of the topic.

### Data Analysis

According to Spencer, Ritchie and O’Connor (2003), “Unlike quantitative analysis, there is no clearly agreed rules or procedures for analyzing qualitative data” (p.200). Qualitative research, though, provides some general guidelines that facilitate data analysis.

At the onset of qualitative analysis, the researcher is faced with large volumes of unorganized information derived from transcripts and field notes. The initial task is to sort and reduce the data into a more manageable form. At this stage, themes and concepts are generated according to which the data are labeled, sorted and synthesized. The researcher then uses the synthesized data to prepare descriptive accounts, identify key dimensions, and map the range and diversity of each phenomenon. Once the phenomenon have been clarified and the data classified, the researcher then develops typologies, which are specific forms of classification that help describe the segmentation of the social world or the way a phenomenon can be characterized. After the typologies have been developed, the researcher begins to look for patterns of association within the data and attempt to account for why those patterns occur. The final stage of qualitative analysis is to generate an explanation of the discoveries of the research. Unlike

quantitative analysis, which seeks to determine causal relationships, qualitative research attempts to construct an explanation based on the way in which different meanings and understandings within a situation come together to influence an outcome (Spencer, Ritchie, and O'Connor, 2003).

The above method is quite similar to the procedures outlined in Strauss and Corbin's (1998) book on qualitative research. In their book, Strauss and Corbin provide a systematic outline to approach data analysis. First, the data is examined and questions are raised in order to discover concepts and relationships. Sentences are used as a unit of analysis. Events and outcomes are then conceptualized and classified and through this, categories and relationships emerge. During the conceptualization stage, large amounts of data are reduced to smaller more manageable forms and are then given a name for what it stands for. The name may be created by the researcher, which is an "etic" code or the researcher may use a name taken from the participants themselves, which is called an "in-vivo" code. Concepts are then grouped together based on their salient properties and these concepts are then compared for any recurring patterns. Axial and selective coding can be used to enrich and refine the categorization process. Finally, a written explanation or understanding must be generated from the processed data.

The data analysis for this particular study followed similar guidelines as expressed in the previous paragraphs. The recorded transcripts of the voluntarily childfree were transcribed and sorted into a more manageable form. The participants' sentences were utilized as the unit of analysis. Initial themes were generated, at which time the data were labeled, sorted and synthesized. In performing the data analysis, conversational data were placed in mutually exclusive categories. Descriptive accounts

and key dimensions of the voluntarily childfree were then prepared, along with the range and diversity of the pro-natalist media framing phenomenon. After the typologies were developed, the researcher looked for emergent patterns within the voluntarily childfree data, and finally, in the discussion section, provided some explanations of the findings. To verify the validity of the findings, a follow-up email containing a summary of the study's findings was sent to the participants requesting their thoughts on the accuracy of the data collected in this research.

This study examined the voluntarily childfree subculture in an attempt to discover recurring cultural themes or patterns pertaining to the potential media framing of the pro-natalist ideology in the hopes of reconstructing a more accurate image of the childless by choice and providing better insight into the impact the media has on these particular individuals. The following chapter highlights the discoveries of this study.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The findings chapter is divided into four sections. The first three sections are based upon the data collected from a specific phase of the study. The last section contains a summary of the study's findings. The first section contains collected data pertaining to the observation of the participants viewing an episode of the CBS situation comedy *Yes, Dear*. The second section highlights the discoveries made during the in-depth interview phase. The third component of this chapter data centers on the member checks portion of the research. The final section is a summary of the findings. Please see Appendix F for the In-Depth Interview Coding Outline, Appendix G for the In-Depth Interview Data Matrix, Appendix H for the Sit-Com Observation Data Matrix and Appendix I for the categories and range of concepts discovered in this study. Extreme care was taken that participant quotes were true to the intent of the speaker. In an attempt to provide narrative clarity, ellipses are used to omit redundant words, phrases, and hesitations.

### Sit-Com Observation

The observation portion of the study was facilitated by the use of a portable DVD player. When conducting the interviews/observations at the coffee houses, the DVD player was positioned on a table to allow both participants ample viewing space, in addition to optimum audio clarity. When viewing the sit-com in participants' homes, if they did not have DVD player in their living room, the portable player was placed on



their coffee table for viewing or the study was relocated to the participants' dining room and the player was placed on the dining table. In either circumstance, the DVD player was positioned to allow the best possible viewing experience.

During the viewing of the sit-com, *Yes Dear*, most of the couples watched intently in a relaxed fashion. The majority of the couples laughed at least on one occasion. It was difficult to ascertain if they were laughing due to the humorous nature of the show or if they were laughing because of their feeling of the overall quality of the show. All but one of the couples alluded, either verbally or physically, to their apparent disappointment of the quality of the show. Some participants would shake their heads during certain parts of the show, while others would act as if they were nauseated or groaning in pain. One participant put her hand on her head as if she was hurting, while another participant continually rolled her eyes at specific jokes. One couple looked quite uncomfortable or restless, while participating in this part of the study. The apparent feelings for this show were also conveyed verbally. Their comments ranged from "wouldn't watch, not funny" to "so stupid." Another couple said it was manufactured comedy. Only three participants found the characters realistic. Very few of the couples made comments during the show, but instead waited until the end to convey their thoughts. Surprisingly, the topic of childlessness did not come up during the observation portion of the study.

The three most popular adjectives used to describe this show were predictable, simplistic and unrealistic. Two couples found the show to be completely predictable. One couple referred to the plot as "cut and dry" and the humor as "rehashed." The other couple said it was like every other show and made references to *Leave it to Beaver*. Both couples predicted the outcome of certain scenes before they were even played out. In

regards to the simplicity of the show's plot, three couples made comments that ranged from "too easy" to "black and white" to "simple view of the world." The majority of the couples found the show just unrealistic. They felt that the show did not accurately portray how life really is, while one participant made a special comment about how the women's roles were lame and one-dimensional. These comments underscore the following section on how the participants felt about the characterizations and other plot dimensions.

When the participants started talking about the tone of the show and messages it conveyed, three words kept popping up. Those words were sex, violence and stereotypes. One of the couples felt that the sexual overtones present in this show were inappropriate for children to watch, while another participant mentioned that the show does a good job teaching about violence, but not a good job teaching about sex. The basic message that came across to some couples was that it was acceptable to use violence and to tell children that violence is ok in certain situations. One couple made note that the show portrayed violence as the only option available to the children. One of the more common stereotypes cited was the creation of the "macho" dad and the "geek" dad and how their constructed personalities dictated their actions.

Aside from these common characteristics, another commonality surfaced. Two of the participants inquired about the content of the commercials shown during the show. They were interested in knowing if the commercials were geared towards children or families. This facet will be addressed in the discussion chapter.

Although much information was gathered from the observation portion of the study, the in-depth interviews yielded a considerable amount of useful data. This data

provides key insights into the world of the voluntarily childfree. The findings of the in-depth interviews follow.

### In-Depth Interviews

This section contains the participants' responses to the in-depth interviews. This section is divided into several parts, with each part covering a specific topic and providing the participants' range of responses.

### *Media Portrayal*

When asked about their general feelings about how the media portray having children, the voluntarily childfree provided a variety of responses. These responses ranged from the perceived positive aspects of parenthood to the negative connotations accompanying childlessness.

#### *“A Certain Sense of Abnormality”*

Many childfree individuals have expressed a certain sense of abnormality they felt by remaining childfree and they attribute this feeling to how the media portray having children. Bob said “You're not whole unless you have children. It seems that if you don't have children, you're considered a playboy or somebody that's not going to make it in the marriage.”

You're not a complete family unless you have children. A couple isn't considered to be a family. They're going to eventually have children but everyone thinks and that you're abnormal if you don't want to have children. - Mary, age 32

There is a certain sense of abnormality to remaining childfree. People that you meet and you say you don't have any kids and you can see it in their

face. There's a definite change. One, they don't know whether or not you've chosen to or you haven't. And if you haven't, then my god it's a tragedy and god has smote you in some way. Now, they must pity you. I think media portrays it as you can't truly be responsible. You can't be a responsible individual until you have your 2.3 kids. – Scott, age 36

These participants did not feel that they were accepted as normal functioning members of society because of the lifestyle choice they had made.

### *An Expected Progression of Life*

Overwhelmingly, all but two couples expressed that the media portray the act of childbearing as a normal and expected part of life. Most of the couples conveyed that child bearing is perceived by most of contemporary society as the predictable progression of life.

In all of the commercials, in radio advertising, newspaper advertising, magazines, you're always seeing a family or an S.U.V. Things like that, and so everyone expects that there's going to be, eventually, a family of more than two people. - Mary, age 32

I think there is a very strong draw towards get married, have kids. And have some more kids. I don't think there are any magazine articles about you shouldn't have kids or you should think about having kids or do you really want kids. All it is about basically you're gonna have kids, you should have kids. Therefore we are going to write about it from that standpoint. - Chris, age 35

### *“A Very Positive Thing”*

In addition to being an expected part of life, the childfree feel that having kids is portrayed in a positive light in the media. Ellen said “I think that they portray it as a very positive thing. And that's it's more or less expected that is what people will do.”

It (child bearing) always seems to be a positive aspect. It never seems to be a downside portrayed to it. That I can see. And everybody does it.

Those who don't, usually have something wrong with them. That's pretty much how it's portrayed. – Tom, age 37

### *Glorification*

Some childfree women suggested that the media gloss over the negative parts of parenthood. This unrealistic portrayal has led some voluntarily childfree to propose that the media glorify the act of child bearing. Ann said, “They portray the Kodak moments. Like the Publix commercials where the whole family gathers around the table.”

Well, back to the whole thing of the media portraying parenthood through very rose-colored glasses. Where you're seeing the fun and the happy moments and you're not seeing the 3a.m. projectile vomiting, screaming cause they can. And they just don't show that. They really glorify the whole pregnancy and they discuss that the whole season and the season culminates with the childbirth and then it gets kind of, then it really doesn't become a factor in the story too much more. - Sally, age 37

### *No Portrayals*

The positive portrayal of parenthood in the media has generated a consensus amongst the childfree on the lack of portrayal of not having children in the mainstream media. Most childfree individuals feel that the mainstream media do not even portray the voluntarily childfree.

I think that you don't see too many (television shows) that don't have kids in general. Where there's people on TV actually talking about choosing not to have any. They may not mention it but they never actually have, say us, portrayed on there as actually saying hey we're not going to have children. They just don't bring up the subject so they just assume that people watching will just assume that they will have kids at some point. - Sara, age 35

I don't even think the choice (to have children) is ever portrayed. It's never something that you see any kind of discussion or thought put into it or anything like that. It's only a matter of when. Even when you see shows like *Dateline* or something like that. They run stories about people who don't have kids but it's like some horrible heartbreaking sort of story where it's you don't have kids but it wasn't your choice and make's it seem like there aren't any people out there that remain childfree by choice. It's not even talked about really. - Sally, age 37

*"The Happily Ever After"*

One salient media construct in American culture is the "fairy-tale ending" or "children equal living happily ever after." Many of the childless by choice reported that they had noticed this construct in the media. Some of the participants referenced particular studios and programs that they believed extolled this particular message. Sally said, "Because it seems like the whole movie, you know, focuses on the story of bringing people together and the happily ever after. It's sort of presumed that there are children showing up in it."

We have little nieces that grow up on Disney and they see that fairy-tale. I would have to say there's got to be some portrayal somewhere. It's got to be implanted in our minds that we want children. - Tracy, age 37

A perfect example is the Nicolas Cage movie we just saw. What was the very last scene they showed. He got married and she was pregnant. So that was kind of a tie up. Going o.k. everything is solved and he was happy. They got to throw the baby thing in there. It's kinda like saying it's the baby that's gonna make everything ok. - Sara, age 35

So, if your a little kid growing up, and you're watching the *Brady Bunch* and the *Partridge Family*, and all these different shows, it's like everybody like has four kids on these shows. It may not be deliberate but they portray it as get married, have two point whatever kids, the house with the white picket fence, and you'll live happily ever after. It's like, in a round about way they do. - Brian, age 36

## *Reproductive Persuasion*

### *“Brainwashed”*

To the voluntarily childfree, the notion of “having a child will translate into happiness” message is often ingrained in the media, particularly television and movies. Some of the childfree believe that this message influences individuals’ real world decisions concerning parenthood. They feel that the media persuade certain people in society to reproduce based upon exposure to this message.

I think that people have been brainwashed to think that that’s what they’re supposed to do. I think that there are few couples at our age that actually think about the ramifications and what it entails. I think that a lot of people do think that way. That’s is accepted and expected of them. They all think about the results. I think a lot of them do think lets have a baby and it will solve our problems. - Sara, age 35

I think that the media dupes people into thinking that kids equal happiness. And I think that if you watch TV shows, everyone is basically happy. Nobody is simply suffering financially or they don’t realistically demonstrate any of the realities of having kids. So if you just watch the media and you are able to be influenced or you’re very young and you look at that and you say I’m not happy. I want to be happier. You could look at that and say oh that will give you something. - Chris, age 35

Even movies. They all have happy endings where the couple gets together and they’re going to have a baby or they already have a family or that they’re going to blend their family together with the children that they each have separately. That’s what the media tries to get people to believe, that’s why a lot of young girls end up getting pregnant or wanting to become pregnant because they see it on TV, “Oh, what they do makes me happy, everyone has to have a baby, how cute, how nice, and how fun,” and then people end up with all of these children that they shouldn’t have. – Mary, age 32

### *Little or No Influence*

While this common story line might influence individuals' decisions on becoming pregnant, most of the voluntarily childfree stated that the media had little, if any, influence on their decision to remain childfree. Some remained childfree for purely personal reasons. Sara said, "Mine was basically seeing other people with kids. It was more personal. They make it look so nice and rosy. It's hard to be swayed against it because they don't portray it in a bad light at all on TV."

I just sort of kind of made up to know that I didn't want to have kids. I was kind of the outcast, you know, when I would go to slumber parties. The girls would talk about how many kids they were going to have and what they were going to name them. I always knew that I didn't want to have. I used to actually think that something was wrong with me. Because I'm a girl, who doesn't want to have kids. Obviously, a girl would have kids but I mean, you know, I'm just saying just cause that's the way we were brought up. You get married. You have kids. - Tracy, age 37

I just think that we understood what that particular life script was. It's not the way I wanted to live. And so I made the decision not to live that way. I don't think it was influenced by the media, but I could be mistaken. I spend more time reading than I do watching TV. And what I read is not usually magazines. It's usually books. And it's just not something that really came across too much that I was exposed to. It was decision we came to after we were married. - Tom, age 37

Still, others stated that they chose to remain childfree in order to maintain a certain level of freedom and experience personal contentment and security.

We're happy with our lives the way they are, we can get up and go do whatever we want to for the weekend, maybe being able to go and just not have to worry about finding a babysitter or anything like that. - Mary, age 32

One of the things that you have to know is that I used to teach in the public schools. And after having 150 of them all day, it was not exactly my idea of coming home and especially with some of the kids I had. I was



afraid of what might happen. And it was more of a conscious choice on our part not to. Then, I always felt that we carved out a very nice life for ourselves. And we didn't need children to fulfill it. And so once we were in the position that we financially and emotionally could have, we didn't want to. - Bob, age 55

### *“Postpone It”*

Two of the voluntarily childfree women stated that they did not choose to not have kids but instead chose to postpone pregnancy. They suggested that they wanted to plan out their lives and be more financially stable before they had kids. They continually postponed becoming pregnant until they reached a point in their lives, where they realized that they were never going to become mothers.

Because anything can happen once you have kids and, you know, to see really bad struggling, living in places you wouldn't necessarily want to live, and so you're thinking, I'm a smart person, I want to plan, I wanna take steps. - Pam, age 57

Well, it was a definitely a conscious choice in the beginning. We were going to postpone it. And it just seemed like the longer we postponed, the more likely it was we were going to stay in that. I don't think we ever consciously said we're never going to have kids. We started out saying we're not going to do this right away. – Ellen, age 55

### *Positive Media Influence*

A few of the childless by choice did state that the media had influenced their choice to remain childfree. It was an indirect effect based on the positive portrayals of a life of excitement and achievement. These participants chose to remain childfree, in order to accomplish specific goals and attain a certain level of success.

I never looked at those family shows and said I don't want that but I looked at certain other shows that I said I do want that. Like Emergency from way back when and I wanted to be the doctor. Maybe in some way that I proceeded to become a doctor and not doing the standard get out of college get married and have kids. - Chris, age 35

I know the media had a direct effect on me. One of the main reasons I went to college is because when I went to a bar, the guys that were driving BMWs and wearing suits, the media told me that that's the kinda guys that were successful people and they had degrees and they made good money. And I thought, I'm gonna put off the having kids until my education and all this kind of stuff, but I definitely think that the media played a lot of the part in me and the media made me kind of feel like to do it the *right* way, I had to do it like this, so I think that kind of affected my decisions. - Sam, age 44

### *Positive Family Portrayals*

Now, although the media may have not had much influence on the childfree individuals' initial decisions to forgo parenthood, the majority of the childfree interviewed reported feeling pressure from the media to reverse their choice. Many of the childfree say that the source of the pressure comes from the positive portrayals of families as a means to happiness and fulfillment.

A little pressure maybe. Influence. When you do think back, most of the family sitcoms had a central family but then you had the single neighbor next door. They were portrayed differently. They were portrayed as if the only way they could be happy was to be part of that family. - Ellen, age 55

Well, again it's basically the way they portray it. If your married and that's married, not gay marriage but even gay marriages doesn't seem like gay marriages can be good unless they adopt a child or have a. I'm thinking of several comedies that have gay people and they're always trying to have children some way or another. It seems that the media basically say that two is not a good number. That it has to be three or more. That's the only way to be fulfilled as a family. -Bob, age 55

In addition to television programs, some of the childfree reported feeling pressure from even the commercials on TV. These commercials also contained positive portrayals of happy families as a source of happiness.

There's that one commercial where the little boy is opening up a soda bottle and it squirts all over and the mom says, oh, why did you do it like that and then she turns around with the sink sprayer and starts spraying him and having a good time. They don't show the whole, the entire concept of it, of having a child twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. - Mary, age 32

### *No Representation, No Influence*

There were a few childfree individuals that stated that they did not feel any pressure from the media to alter their decisions. One of the predominant reasons they gave for not feeling any pressure was the belief that the voluntarily childfree subculture was non-existent to mainstream media and was not being positively portrayed.

They (media) sure don't exert any influence on saying that it's (being childfree) ok and it's a good option. By not reinforcing that that I think in a way you're doing the opposite. The standard is to have the family. But they sure don't support it and they really don't talk about it. And they sure don't portray it in a popular way. - Chris, age 35

I don't think that they (media) try to push us towards that (child bearing) because to them we don't exist. Other than the bombardment of the normal images of family and everything. We're invisible. – Penny, age 33

### *“Indirectly”*

While on the topic of influence, one surprise finding of the study was that while the majority of voluntarily childfree did feel pressure from the media, many stated that they receive pressure from family and friends. Some individuals believe that the media

have more influence on family and friends and in turn, they feel more pressure indirectly from their peers. Scott said “I think what we’re saying is not directly from media. Whether or not there is an indirect correlation between the way our families act towards us or the way society acts towards us. Maybe it influences them. Indirectly.”

It has affected my family. My family feels that way because of the media. Oh, you’re never gonna have children You don’t wanna have any, don’t ever have a baby? Never? I’ll never have grandchildren or a niece and nephew And so it has affected them a lot. - Mary, age 32

I think this whole what society’s supposed to be, you get married and have kids, if you don’t, you stray from that, you get pressure, from friends, family because you’re against the norm. And going back to the media. The media portrays the norm. Reinforces. – Ann, age 33

Like when were just married, the first five years, you know, they’re like, you guys will change your mind. Oh, you’d make such great parents. And you could sit there and be watching a TV show with your parents and they’ll go, see, don’t you kids want that? You know, doesn’t that look so nice. Look at them. That’s how I picture. It’s like, O.K. you basically want us to be, you know, John, Mary, and John Jr. Whatever. - Brian, age 36

These participants suggested that the media have more influence on others than themselves, and that the media indirectly pressures them because it attempts to reinforce the status quo by positively portraying parenthood.

### *Mediated Socialization*

Another aspect of the media-childfree relationship focuses on the socializing characteristic of the media and its association with the consumption of products. The participants in this study described to varying degrees the complexity of the socializing aspect of the media as it pertains to the childless by choice.

### *Not a Conscious Effort*

Only two of the participants felt that the media do not attempt to socialize individuals into becoming parents. They believed that the media were attempting to appeal to the masses via formulaic comedy that the majority of individuals could identify with. James commented, “I don’t think that the media makes a conscious decision to perpetuate. It seems to be easy formulaic comedy that people can identify with to appeal to a demographic.”

I don’t get the feeling that they’re setting out to necessarily, purposefully trying to have a show to convince people but I think that they’re looking out for the most audience they’re going to get to. We are a minority. And we know minorities. So I don’t think it’s necessarily there’s not a huge target audience for people without kids. And they’re in the business to make money and get their advertising. So they’re just going out there to target the most individuals to get their Neilson ratings, to get their advertising dollars. - Chris, age 35

### *“Guilt You Into It”*

Some of the participants felt that the media attempt to guilt individuals into becoming parents. This feeling of guilt is attributed to the manner in which the media portray marriage and parenthood. The media-induced negative reinforcement felt by the participants led to thoughts of disappointment and emptiness among some. Ellen stated “I was thinking it’s almost as if something’s wrong if you don’t have children. You know. If you don’t, you’re expected to agonize the matter.”

You feel left out or resentful if you don’t have kids and you don’t have a family. I think part of what the media does is suck up to family things cause they try to guilt you into it. So of course the media is always harping family. – Sam, age 44

In order to have what might be considered a successful marriage, is to have children. They're basically causing you to feel that the only way you can be complete is to have children. And that way maybe they're almost indoctrinating you to think that children are the way to be complete in the marriage. - Bob, age 55

I think they just don't leave any opening for any other choices in the way things are presented. Without saying so, they just are implying. I think people are being persuaded because they don't want to feel left out, but I don't think anyone is saying don't feel left out, I think it's just that they're not giving you an alternative that you could feel comfortable and accepted doing. – Pam, age 57

### *Positive Reinforcement*

Other participants thought that the media used positive imagery reinforcement to strengthen the glamorized visions of parenthood. These unrealistic images presented the voluntarily childfree with a picture of an ideal quality of life.

You get married and have children. On soap operas that's always the story line. You get married and you have kids. They're saying it's o.k. It's o.k. You hit it outside and you're surrounded by it. And then you get home and you're bombarded by it on TV. The happy families. – Ann, age 33

### *Marketing the Idea of Family*

Still others believed that the media were actively marketing the idea of family directly to the masses by promoting a family-friendly image to consumers. These participants believed that the media were utilizing pro-natalist ideology to influence the masses.

The minivan, the S.U.V., the soccer mom, the Happy Meals. You take the kids to McDonalds, take the kids everywhere. Even restrooms at sporting facilities now have changing tables in the men's restrooms, in the women's restrooms because everyone is going to have children. - Mary, age 32

It is portrayed whether blatantly or subconsciously that the normal American family is has a son and a daughter and the white picket fence and the house. That is you Century 21 ad, your Disneyworld ad, that is your Listerine ad. It's the mom and dad and the two kids. And it's always two kids. So what does that say. To me, obviously there is some normalcy in that and anything that doesn't fit that is not normal. - Scott, age 36

I have a theory behind that. And the theory behind that is many media companies are owned by large corporations and that families with children tend to have more debt and spend a lot more. Much higher consumption helps the companies' bottom line. And so I can see how one thing could feed the other. – Tom, age 37

### *Mediated Consumption*

The participants' beliefs, about the socializing impact of the media, were overshadowed by the overwhelming opinion that the media's primary function was to assist in the creation of markets and encourage the consumption of consumer goods. This is facilitated by marketing to the family.

#### *“Geared Towards Families”*

The majority of the participants felt that the media attempted to use the pro-natalist ideology to market merchandise to families with children. Sam stated “Growing up, I remember ads for toys for kids but I don't remember constant advertising that are all about family and having a great time. And so, it's family.”

Well, it seems like most of the commercials that are on doing those types of shows are all geared towards, things that have to do with having a family, that the minivan, products that are geared towards families that have children. - David, age 38

Some of the childfree participants stated that the media actively markets products and services to mothers and children. They felt that the media were targeting this particular demographic. Tom commented “From what I’ve seen, the marketers tend to gear most of their messages, at least on television, to mothers and children to a huge extent.”

Advertisements are directed more at children. Children probably drive a lot of the consumption in a family to some degree. Portray everything in a nice rosy colored light. And encourage that sort of behavior. - Sally, age 37

Sometimes you can tell by the commercials, what audience the show is being geared for. There are a lot of shows that have toys in it and you know that it’s not really geared for the adult. It’s geared for the child. - Bob, age 55

### *Positive Family Imagery*

The marketing of goods is sometimes facilitated by the use of family-oriented imagery that conveys the idea that children and parenthood are normal and expected of everyone. Some participants felt that the positive imagery of family and child bearing reinforces this belief and leads to the consumption of goods associated with the parenting lifestyle.

You see the ad campaign for Chrysler. Dramatic music. They’re in the crash test hangar. And they said we brought in the strictest test evaluators and it was three girls from ages 5 to 7. And it was totally geared towards the whole fact of, I can’t get my bike in there. I can’t get my stroller in there. Where the girls were talking to the engineers. Marketing to the family that have now found themselves with fertility drugs with triplets, instead of one kid or something like that. - Scott, age 36

Well, even just lasagna, Stover’s lasagna commercial or something. It’s a family coming together. They’re showing the product bringing the family



together. And they have the telephone commercials with family talk time. And if there are two people portrayed on a commercial, it's two people getting away on a vacation away from their family. Not just two people going off and doing something fun together. Because everyone does have a family. - Mary, age 32

*“The More Babies You Have, The More Consumers They Have”*

A couple of the participants possessed some interesting ideas on how the media, children and the economy are related. They suggested the inter-relatedness of the above three contributing factors and how they operate in our society.

The more babies you have, the more consumers they have. It's that simple. And they don't want you to stop using their products. So they wanna tell you, keep having children because we want to keep making more money and they're gonna portray their products in the light of the family type thing. - Sara, age 35

I mean, the only act in society that benefits every single business is having a child. And if that factor did not continue, then everyone from the baby people, from the toy maker, to the diapers to the cribs from there to the food to the entertainers to the home builders to the car producers to everyone. I think they're all invested in having people have more babies have more babies have more babies. Because ultimately the only thing that's ever going to hurt this country significantly on those lines is a dip in population. The more the better for consumerism. - Chris, age 35

*Stigmatization and Stereotypes*

Aside from pressure from members of society and the media, the voluntarily childfree are often the recipients of negative stereotyping and stigmatization. All but one of the couples believed that the media contribute to the stereotypes and stigmatization to some degree.

### *No Representation, No Stigmatization*

The couple that did not feel stigmatized by the media felt so because of their belief in the lack of representation of the voluntarily childless. Scott said “In the applesauce mentality of sitcoms, I don’t think there is enough depth expressed to really contribute to the stigmatization.” Penny stated “For me, it keeps going back to that there is no stigmatization, because we’re not in society, we’re not acknowledged. I don’t ever remember seeing or reading anything criticizing me for my childfree stance.”

### *“Stereotype by Omission”*

Still others felt that this lack of representation was part of the cause of the stigmatization. Several participants believed that it is a stereotype by omission.

By not promoting it, there almost saying there’s something wrong with it because they don’t put it on TV and they don’t show it as something that is a viable option. So, if it’s not portrayed, even if they’re not on purposefully, trying to say that it’s negative, you know, they could be doing that by not promoting it. – Sara, age 35

I think it’s almost a stereotype by omission. You don’t see it. I’m trying to think of any show and how a couple our age that doesn’t have children. That shows couples without children and I really can’t name one. I can’t even think of where we’re portrayed in the media. - Sally, age 37

### *Media Perpetuate Stereotypes*

For many of the participants, the media actively assisted in perpetuating negative stereotypes. From a selfish stereotype to creating the feeling of failure in individuals, the media had a varied impact on some of the participants. A few of the participants gave only a small amount of credit to the media for creating negative stereotypes.

The media, I think, because they are so visible people tend to give them a lot more influence than they really have. They do play a role. I'm not even sure if it's a predominant role. We're a minority and in many cases minorities aren't represented well on television. That we're only interested in our careers or that we're cold people. - Tom, age 37

Those stereotypes are portrayed. There are likable people in movies and they come around and fall in love and eventually have a baby. It's easily recognized. It's easy to blame the media. It's not just the media's fault. – Pam, age 57

I don't think it's rampant but I definitely think it exists. They don't portray it as just, these people don't want to have kids. That's all it is. They don't portray it that way. They have to have some sort of hook. They gotta have some sort of angle otherwise, it's not newsworthy. It's like these people are child-haters. - Brian, age 36

Other participants referenced contemporary television shows that they felt stigmatized the voluntarily childfree. The participants felt that these shows portrayed the childfree as selfish and immature, and unable to attain happiness with children.

There's a recent episode of *The Simpsons*, but it was a little tongue in cheek where they had they wanted to get rid of children on TV and there was this one woman pushing this movement and Marge ran into her in the parking lot and she said something about, oh you know let me just take my disposable income to skydive and have all this free time. *The Simpsons* were throwing this image out like that's what we hear. That's what we believe. We better do that before we have children. Pressure. Selfish. – Ann, age 33

I do think this stereotype of this childless couple is that they're selfish, that they're really not grown up. Immature. And that it's unnatural. Even in the sitcoms, like *Mad About You*. That was a very different show before and after they had a baby in that. I liked it so much better before they had the baby. It was one of the few at that point where they were presented as adults. They were both working in careers. Neither one of them were a helpless wimp. Then it's like when the baby line came in all of sudden it became so stereotypical. That they were desperate to have a baby and that there was something wrong that they couldn't and their lives would never be happy again until they had the baby. - Ellen, age 55

The remaining participants believed on a larger scale that the media actively contributed to the negative stereotyping and the suffering they experience. The negative connotations ranged from feeling like a failure to a certain sense of selfishness.

We come across as there is something wrong with you. The first idea is that you can't have kids. For some medical reason. And the second is well if you're not having them, what's wrong with you. Why don't you want to have them. And the third comes to the anger or you're selfish or there's something wrong with you. Or your self centered. And if you choose not to have them, you're not being more selfish, because in reality having a kids ruins the planet a heck of a lot more than not having kids. From the environment to whatever. And I think that a strong portrayal comes across. You should be having kids, and you should be seeking this and if you don't, there's something wrong with you. - Chris, age 35

You see people in their 30's and if they're not married with kids they feel like total failures. And there is no way that their family is making them feel like that that. Its society pressure and part of that is learned. If all you see are shows. A young adult or teen is watching a sit-com, they must be teaching people something about the norm. As a man, I feel like if you don't have kids, you're some kind of loser. I feel it. Personally. Stigmatized? Yeah. – Sam, age 44

### *Identity Issues*

These negative stereotypes and stigmatizations can often lead to complex identity issues within individuals. Three couples said they experienced some form of identity crisis related to not having children.

What if I want to coach little league? Not that I want to. But, somehow, I'm not as qualified since I don't have kids. I can go with that on a few things, but I think identity wise. Maybe I don't feel it that bad. Maybe when I was younger. – Sam, age 44

Let's say we go up to Buffalo and my sister's in town. O.K. so, they're there with all their kids, my brother and his wife come over with all their kids, and then my sister's friend comes over with her husband and their

kids, and even though we're all grown ups and we're all the same age, all of a sudden I feel like I can't participate in this discussion because obviously I don't fit in, I can't contribute to this discussion. I can say something that's my opinion but it's like who the hell is he to say that. He doesn't know what he's talking about. He doesn't have kids. So, I definitely think that it does. – Brian, age 36

When I was younger, yeah, I did, I did used to think I don't fit because of those slumber parties and us girls would get together and talk about who we were going to marry and how many kids we were going to have. I didn't fit because I didn't care to talk about that sort of stuff. - Tracy, age 37

These identity issues created feelings of doubt, constructs of being a misfit, and a belief in the lack of validation of opinions. Luckily, the rest of the couples were content with themselves as individuals and quite comfortable with the choices that they had made.

### *Childfree Representation*

Although the voluntarily childfree experienced stereotyping and identity issues, most of the childless by choice were concerned with how their subculture was being represented in mainstream media and how the image could be altered to paint a more realistic view. One participant expressed that the media only represent the voluntarily childfree when it meets their needs for their own agenda. Sam commented “I think the main way is that they are very careful about it. If they do represent it, there's a damn good reason.”

#### *“We Don't Even Exist”*

Over half of the remaining participants felt that the voluntarily childfree were only minimally represented in the mainstream media. Several childless by choice

individuals doubted that the subculture was represented at all. Tom said “We’re not represented. I don’t know what there is to feel about. We’re just not there. Pretty much invisible. The homosexual community seems like it’s more visible.”

I’m having trouble even thinking of any example that I have even seen of a married couple without children. Where is there a childfree couple that are an integral part of the story? I can’t think of anything like it. - Pam, age 57

I think their lack of portraying people who choose our lifestyle, they seem to not portray us at all, like we don’t even exist. Yeah, like there’s nobody out there on TV that doesn’t have children. – David, age 38

I feel that they portray us as non-existent. They don’t portray us. They don’t know how to portray us. They don’t know what our interests are. They don’t care to know. Cause they think someone with kids is going to spend more money. - Tracy, age 37

### *Minimal Representation*

Two of the participants stated that even with the minimum representation within the mainstream media, the portrayals are typically negative. These participants felt that the negative portrayals were downbeat representations as opposed to all-out derogatory depictions. Bob stated “They’re incomplete. They are peripheral not the center because they don’t have the children. They’re the friends next door. Very seldom have them be the center of it.”

I can’t think of any characters. They’re either portrayed to busy or it’s the connotation that you really don’t know what you want. And usually they’re not happy either. And the other thing is because you don’t have a kid, this other stuff you think is making you happy, but you just don’t have

the family. When you deal with people that don't have kids, they're typically not the heroes of the movie. - Sara, age 35

*“Evil, Selfish, Vain People”*

The remaining participants just felt that the mainstream media portray the childless by choice in a very negative light, without conveying any positive attributes. These participants believed that the media were generating mean and damaging depictions of the childless by choice. Ellen commented, “I do kind of feel like they portray people who do not have children as either immature or selfish or again that there is simple something wrong with you for not wanting this.”

Because they don't necessarily address the fact that there are couples on a television show or just a movie who don't have children. Most of them do. If they are childfree, they're selfish, they're self-absorbed, they're social climbers, they're just evil people, evil, selfish, vain people. - Mary, age 32

*Image Reconstruction*

Although the childless by choice is either not represented or not represented very positively in the mainstream media, the voluntary childfree did offer up suggestions on how they would like to be portrayed in the media. These suggestions varied, but were not too unrealistic.

*Any Representation Would be Nice*

To begin with, some participants proposed that it would be comforting and reassuring if the voluntarily childfree were portrayed at all. Sara said “It would be nice to be represented period.”

I would like to see us there period. Just so other people figure our side of the coin. So there can be some dialogue about it. So it's not always so selfish. It's all about you. If the media portrayed childfree couples more, I think that there are more people out there who maybe they didn't want to have kids so much but they went ahead and did it because that's what everybody does, but if they knew that there were more of us out there then that might give them the courage to stand up to their parents and their friends who are saying you should do it. So, I think if there would be more and more people who realize that they don't have to have the kid and it's o.k. – Penny, age 33

*“A Free Choice”*

Others would like the childfree lifestyle depicted as a choice. They feel the decision to not have a child should be presented as a viable and positive option. Bob commented “Competent adults that made a free choice not to have children that are not incomplete. That it's not portrayed as a failure on your part. It's a choice just like any other choice you make.”

Sometimes there was a tragedy. It was never an issue of her choosing not to have kids. It's her ability. She never married. It's never acknowledged as a choice. There's nothing wrong with me. It's never a choice. It's never portrayed as a choice to have children. It's a tragic association. Lost love. Biology. - Scott, age 36

From the standpoint of being female. Here I am married to this guy. We both have very successful careers and look at how this can work and look at how good this can be. This is an option and a viable option. And if you're leaning that way. Don't have kids because everyone else is doing it. This is a decision that is very far reaching and you should be thinking about it a little more clearly than you do. -Sally, age 37

For even the ones where it wasn't a free choice. Where it was a matter of medical. That you can have a perfectly satisfying fulfilling life. If that is not the role that is not going to happen for you, then you take the role that you have. Even when it isn't a choice, it can be a positive thing. It is not necessarily a life altering disaster. – Ellen, age 55



### *A Typical Adult*

Many of the participants would like for the voluntarily childless to be portrayed like everyone else. The representation most often cited would be a typical happy adult individual. Pam said “Just a part of life like everyone else and there just there and they’re people. The way we actually are.”

As being happy, well-adjusted, normal, contributing members of society. I don’t think that’s too much to ask. We work hard. We pay taxes. We help out in the community. And it would be nice if we were depicted somehow. Not as a small slice of the demographic pie. We’re not emotional cripples. We’re not irresponsible. And it would be nice if we were portrayed in a more realistic light. - Tom, age 37

Just as equal and respected as anyone else. I would like to see people without kids portrayed as whatever they are. We are complicated interesting individuals. As much a human being as anyone else and equally respected. Just as much fun to be around. - Sam, age 44

### *“We’re Normal People”*

Other participants frequently used the adjective normal to describe their ideal media portrayal. In addition to being portrayed as normal, several participants suggested other upbeat characteristics should be conveyed. Mary said “We do the same things, we buy the same things, we volunteer, we do charity work, we go to church, we do everything that normal people do.” Ann added “Like normal people. Like the *King of Queens*. They have a good time together.”

I would like see us portrayed as normal everyday human beings. We just don’t have kids. We don’t have to have kids to feel more complete and fulfilled and I hear that all the time, honestly, outside the media, you know, personal friends, oh, I want to have one of him running around, you

know and I won't be fulfilled until I have a kid. I grew up with friends like that and it made me sick. - Tracy, age 37

As we are. Normal. We're normal people who just don't have children. We like to go to amusement parks and have fun. How often do you see a commercial or an advertisement say, couples night at Disneyland or something like that. No, never, nothing like that. - David, age 38

### *Positive Role Models*

Other participants even offered up a more constructive way for the childless by choice to be portrayed. This viewpoint casts the childfree image in a more positive spotlight and constructs the lifestyle as a more attractive choice.

Maybe a positive couple where they're a positive role model. And they don't have kids and in the end they don't wrap it up saying now they're going to be happy cause they figured out they needed to have a kid. Where's its ok. Bottom line is to portray it as a positive, its o.k., it's another alternative. – Sara, age 35

I think one thing also I would like to see portrayed if you have a couple in a show that they got the point across that their lives are better by their choice not to have kids. And I think that's how our society in general does feel like a little bit of jealousy towards those couples because they made their own choice in their lives. They can travel and they got the money and can do all things that we can't do. And that's portrayed as a negative. When really it should be a positive. And it should be portrayed as we made a decision in our lives and that's why we get to enjoy this. - Chris, age 35

### Member Checks

Validity in qualitative research seeks to determine if the explanation is credible. A method to cross check the validity of the findings is to perform member checks (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). To verify the validity of these findings, an e-mail containing a summary of the findings was sent to the participants to confirm the accuracy of the data

obtained from the study. Three of the couples responded to the email to attest to their agreement of the correctness of the summary of findings. Ann said, “I think that the summary is spot on,” while Brian stated, “A good deal of what you wrote is dead-on with some of the things I’ve heard.” Tom responded with, “Sally and I thought your conclusions summed up our feelings exactly. We agree with your findings.” These replies from the participants assist in confirming the discoveries made in this study.

### Summary

In summary, the voluntarily childfree watched the sit-com *Yes Dear* and most of them waited until the end to convey their comments. Most of the participants acted as if they did not like the show. The participants described the show as predictable, simplistic and unrealistic. The three most popular attributes related to the show were sex, violence and stereotypes. In addition, two participants were interested in the commercials aired during the show and postulated whether or not the ads were targeted at mothers, children or families.

In regards to the media portrayals of having children, the participants felt that the idea of having children is portrayed in the media as normal and expected. It is the natural progression of life. A number of the childfree reported feeling abnormal due to this portrayal of parenthood. Some participants intimated that the media glamorized parenthood in its positive portrayal of child bearing. Also, the childfree reported that there is a lack of representation of the voluntarily childfree in mainstream media and if the childfree are portrayed it is often in an unrealistic or negative light.

Many of the childless by choice reported detecting the presence of the “children equal happily ever after” theme in the media, and some went as far as saying that this storyline influences individuals’ real world decisions concerning parenthood. Most of the childfree stated that the media had little if any influence on their decision to remain childless. Many of the participants reported feeling pressure from the media to alter their choice. Others reported pressure from peers that were influenced by the media.

The majority of the participants felt that the media were attempting to socialize individuals into adopting the pro-natalist ideology. Moreover, the socialization process was associated with the media’s attempt to encourage the consumption of goods. This consumption was encouraged through the use of family-oriented imagery, target marketing of mothers and children, and pro-natalist ideology.

The positive impact of this perceived relationship is relatively minor, as the media had no direct influence on the participants’ reproductive choices. The perceived media relationship did have an indirect impact in two instances, where by the persuasion was facilitated through the use of positive cultural imagery. The discovery of negative aspects of the media-childfree relationship was most disturbing. The media assisted in contributing to the stigmatization and negative stereotypes of the voluntarily childfree. This stigmatization led some participants feeling abnormal and isolated. Moreover, this relationship was believed to contribute to complex identity issues within some of the participants.

The majority of the participants believed that the media contributed to the negative stereotyping they experienced. Many participants reported that the media portray the voluntarily childfree as selfish and immature. Some felt stigmatized by the

overall lack of representation of their sub-culture. These negative stereotypes can often lead to identity issues, with three couples reporting minor identity situations.

Over half of the participants reported that the voluntarily childfree are only minimally represented in the mainstream media, if at all. A number of participants felt that the media were generating harmful depictions of the voluntarily childless. Many of the childless by choice would be happy if their sub-culture were represented at all in the media. Others would prefer the childfree lifestyle depicted as a choice, while still others would like the voluntarily childfree to be portrayed in a more realistic and positive light.

In conclusion, a perceived relationship tended to exist between the media and childless by choice sub-culture. This perceived relationship is generally negative and is further complicated by the media's apparent lack of knowledge about this particular demographic. The suggested role the media play, in this relationship, is one of enforcer. It perpetuates the dominant pro-natalist ideology and reinforces the status quo. It exerts pressure on the voluntarily childfree to alter their choice and/or defend their stance. The media indirectly influence the childless by choice by appealing to the dominant child-centric belief structure adopted by most individuals, and these individuals, in turn, attempt to persuade the voluntarily childfree's reproductive choices. The depth and breadth of the data will require some interpretation to make it useful in answering the original research questions. Chapter five will shed some light on this study's findings and offer up some interpretations of the data, while also providing suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In reviewing the data collected from the observations and interviews, the findings of this study highlight discoveries which merit in-depth discussion and interpretation and provide suggestions for future research. The interpretations of the findings are based on the researcher's perceptions of the participants' perceptions. This chapter includes three major sections. The first section contains a discussion of the observation portion of the study. This portion will assist in providing a well-rounded picture of a typical media portrayal and its association with the childless by choice. The second part of this chapter focuses on the data collected from the in-depth interviews. This second section will offer up a discussion of the more salient findings and provide an interpretation of the study's discoveries. The final section of this chapter is concerned with the study's findings and their relationship to the original three research questions. This section will address the three original guiding questions and also provide a summary of the interpretations of the interviews.

### Sit-Com Observation Discussion

First, one interesting discovery from the observation portion of the study was the interest of two participants towards the commercials that aired during the episode. They postulated that the commercials that were edited out were targeted at families or marketing a family-friendly image to facilitate the sale of goods. Upon reviewing the unedited episode, it was discovered that only one of all of the commercials contained in

the program's time slot was target towards children, and it was a commercial for a Disney sing-a-long product. This facet was most surprising, considering that many of the voluntarily childfree believe in a relationship between the commercialized endeavors of the media and the pro-natalist ideology present in society.

Considering that *Yes Dear* was the only television show observed for this study, the near absence of advertisements directed at families and children is puzzling, given that the shows content focuses on family and children as its central theme. Either the show, along with its commercials, represents an anomaly within current television packaging or perhaps it is more of an indicator of the clearer relationship between the media and pro-natalist ideology. An answer to this commercialized media quandary is beyond the scope of the current study, but would present an excellent area of research for future mass communication studies.

Second, all of the voluntarily childfree participated in the observation segment of the study, but most of them felt that *Yes Dear* was a poor quality show to use as an example. Most of the participants appeared not to enjoy this portion of the study. The participants conveyed negative signs, either verbally or physically, to their distaste for the show. For example, some participants would shake their heads in disgust, while others made motions like they were nauseated. Their disappointment was apparently linked to the characters, the plot and the show's premise. This could be explained by the very nature of the show being a situation comedy and only having a finite amount of time to provide a problem and a solution, along with moments of jokes and a occasionally message.

Now, aside from the time constraints and general premise of a television sit-com, the show's quality did not hinder its ability to portray two nuclear families living under one roof and provide contemporary representations of family and parenthood. These representations did give way to the participants' feelings of broad stereotyping of the characters and the roles they should assume. One example cited by some of the participants was the "macho" dad and the "geek" dad stereotypes and how based on how their characters were constructed that would dictate how the characters would act. These actions were translated into their fictitious relationships with their children and ultimately influenced the parent/child interactions. Furthermore, the parent/child interactions were also manipulated in a stereotypical fashion, where by one father expressed that it was acceptable for his child to play sports, yet unacceptable for the other child to be interested in musicals.

Third, in addition to the stereotyping of characters, the voluntarily childfree also felt that the plot portrayals were too predictable, simplistic and unrealistic. The predictable plot portrayals of sex and violence combined with the stereotypical fashion in which the central problem is solved, prompted some of the participants to suggest that television is not providing parents or individuals in the same situation with viable alternatives or positive role representations. One example cited by the some of the participants is the manner in which violence is portrayed as a viable solution and at times, the only solution offered to the central child characters.

Finally, the participants referenced older television sit-coms, such as *Leave it to Beaver* and formulated comparisons to *Yes Dear's* contemporary nuclear family iteration. To most of the participants, the images conveyed by current television offerings have not



differed from previous generations' offerings. As *Yes Dear* illustrates, the central theme of many contemporary prime-time sit-coms focuses on the white middle class nuclear family. As Taylor (1989) suggested, the majority of the 1950s television sit-coms portrayed white middle class families in search of contentment in vast sprawls of the suburbs. *Yes Dear*, like many of its predecessors, represents the homogenized television offerings, which portray individuals exploring a post-modern world, yet possessing and conveying traditional pro-natalist ideologies. *Yes Dear*, along with other current television offerings, appeals to the heterogeneity of its viewers, while marginalizing the views of voluntarily childfree minority. By focusing on the family and children as its central tenets, *Yes Dear*, like other similar television offerings, assist in the perpetuation of common stereotypes and the reinforcement of the status quo, while not addressing more compelling issues.

#### In-Depth Interview Discussion

While the observation portion of this study yielded some interesting findings, the in-depth interviews provided rich data full of insight. From the in-depth interviews, the childless by choice believe that the media portray having children as a normal and expected part of life, while assisting in the formation of feelings of abnormality in some of the childfree for not following the parenthood mandate. As Chambers (2001) suggested, the media mythologize the nuclear family as being normal and universal.

This construct can then become an “ideal” and a natural real entity. If individuals choose not to aspire to this “ideal”, it may lead to feelings of abnormality or isolation.

The feelings of abnormality are to be expected considering that the voluntarily childfree sub-culture is a minority demographic.

Furthermore, the voluntarily childfree feel that the media portray having children in a positive light, while glossing over the negative characteristics of parenthood. The glamorized mediated iterations of parenthood assist in perpetuating the mythologized “ideal”, while helping to create a falsely constructed reality in which the childless by choice are overlooked or invisible. This complements the finding that some of the childless by choice cited about how the media do not or only minimally portray not having children and when the media do portray it, it is often in a negative light. With a minority demographic, it can be expected that the media portrayals would also be less frequent than dominant representations, but what is alarming is the reference to the negative portrayals in the media. The idea that the childfree are the selfish immature individuals still resides in the minds of the participants and translates into a construction of a less than accurate representation of reality.

In addition to the media portrayals, many of the childless by choice agreed with the idea that a “pregnancy=happily ever after” theme is sometimes displayed in the media. Only two of the 16 individuals did not notice this story line portrayed in the media. This common theme of “have a baby and everything will turn out fine” has been recurring in the media since the 1970s and apparently still continues today. According to Peterson (1983), this narrative surfaced in real world instances. Surprisingly, some of the current study’s participants, who reported noticing it, believed that this media-induced story line influenced other individuals’ real world reproductive decisions. This implies

that the age-old story line is still prevalent in contemporary culture and some individuals might continue to subscribe to this thought process.

Although the childfree noted that the media could influence other individuals' reproductive decisions, most of the voluntarily childfree reported that the media had little, if any, direct influence on their decision to remain childless. This would suggest that the media do not possess any direct power of persuasion over the childless by choice individuals' decision to forego the parenting route. Most of the participants cited personal reasons, such as freedom and security, for remaining childfree. This finding tends to support Campbell's (1983) research about the factors, such as the avoidance of the penalties of parenthood or the protection of the rewards of childlessness, that influence a person's decision to remain childfree.

Only two of the 16 participants reported that they had intentionally kept postponing pregnancy, until finally, they had reached a point in their lives, where they realized they would not become parents. This discovery complements the earlier typology of the "postponer," which was first unearthed by Lunneborg's (1999) discovery of two primary types of decision makers in regards to reproduction. The discovery of "postponers" in this study helps lend credence to deferral as a viable route to non-parenthood.

Surprisingly, an indirect relationship between the media and participants' reproductive decisions was discovered. Two of the participants believed that the media had an indirect positive influence on their reproductive decisions. These two males reported that the positive portrayals of success in the media lead them to pursue a different route in life that did not include children. Similar to Lunneborg's (1999) data,

these two men opted for childlessness in order to attain personal and financial success. This suggests that the media assist in reinforcing certain accepted cultural values, i.e. success, which in turn impacts a person's reproductive choices.

Even though the media may not have had much influence on the participants' initial decision to remain childfree, many of them had reported that they experienced pressure from the media to alter their choice. They referenced the positive portrayals of families as a source of happiness as mechanism the media use to reinforce the parenthood mandate. This discovery supports Albada's (2000) belief that individuals form a relationship between mediated family representations and real world behaviors, with people creating an association between traditional family structures or images and positive real life traits. Those who did not experience this pressure, felt so because they believed that the voluntarily childfree were not represented in the mainstream media and therefore no sub-culture exists to exert pressure on. With the demographic invisible, it is quite difficult to influence it.

In addition to pressure from the media, some participants stated that they receive pressure from family and friends, with this pressure caused by their peers being exposed to the media. To the participants, the media exposure influences their peers by perpetuating the norm and then the peers attempt to exert pressure on the voluntarily childfree to assist in reinforcing the status quo. Almost half of the participants reported feeling pressure from their peers that they attributed to their peers' media-related influence. This indirect coercion is similar to the expressed intimidation experienced by other participants in previous research studies. Comparable to Park's (2002) findings that the childless by choice often experience pressure from others to alter their choice or

defend their stance. From this study's findings, the media appear to function as a catalyst, encouraging peer groups to reinforce societal norms. In mass communications research, this belief that the media affect others more than ones self is known as the "3<sup>rd</sup> person effect" (Heath & Bryant, 2000). This discovery of a "3<sup>rd</sup> person effect" was not originally part of the interview process, but its appearance within the first two interviews lead to its inclusion in subsequent interview questioning.

Along with this influence, the media act as a socializing agent preparing and molding individuals into nicely constructed parents. Only two of the participants believed that the media do not attempt to socialize individuals into becoming parents. They felt that the media utilize formulaic comedy that appeals to the masses, which happen to be the typical nuclear family. To theses two individuals, no association exists between the media and the socialization process. The other remaining participants felt that the media attempt to persuade individuals into becoming parents by the use of specific media-related mechanisms. Similar to the idea of cultivation proposed by Signorielli and Morgan (2001), these participants felt that individuals are influenced to adopt certain belief structures, such as parenting and family, through the mediated images in the media. Some participants suggested that the media attempted to make people feel guilty by not having children. Others also reported that the media glamorize parenthood and creates family-friendly imagery in order to assist in the socialization process. These methods of coercion, along with the positive family portrayals, assist in facilitating the parenthood mandate and reinforcing the pro-natalist ideology.

According to most of the participants, this socialization process is directly associated with the consumption of goods and the creation of markets. All but one of the

participants felt that the media used the concept of parenthood to sell more products. This finding directly supports Peck's (1971) belief of the "baby sell." This concept posits that corporations and advertises sell the positive image of parenthood in order to encourage the consumption of more goods and services. This "baby sell" concept is rational and logical considering that advertising revenue is an integrated part of the media. One of the more popular ideas was that the media were directly targeting mothers and children in their broadcasts. In addition to this target marketing, other participants felt that the media were utilizing family-friendly imagery to sell goods associated with the parenting lifestyle. This discovery coincides with Chambers (2001) conviction that the media attempt to maintain the traditional family structure in order to sell family-centric items and services. A by-product of using family-friendly imagery to sell products is that it in turn reinforces the traditional family structure and hinders some alternative iterations of what is an acceptable household. Finally, two participants offered up their thoughts on how the media, the economy and parenthood are all inter-related, with the media's goal of encouraging more children to spur more consumption to help the economy. Although these two participants did not possess any tangible evidence to support their ideas, their theories were still well thought out and logical.

In addition to the socializing agenda of the media, all but one couple felt that the media contribute to the stigmatization and stereotypes of the voluntarily childfree. This couple did not feel stigmatized by the media because it was their belief that the media did not even acknowledge the childfree demographic, therefore there was no minority to stereotype. All of the remaining participants felt that the media assisted in the stereotyping of voluntarily childfree, either by the lack of representation or the use of

negative representation. Some participants felt stereotyped by omission. By not having a prominent neutral or positive representation of the voluntarily childfree in the mainstream media, the general public is not provided a reference point to assist them in formulating their opinions about this demographic. The general populous is left to their own devices on how to interpret this sub-culture, and unfortunately, as demonstrated by Callan (1985) and Jamison, Franzini, and Kaplan (1979), the common perception individuals possess about the childfree is one of a less sensitive and less well adjusted adult. This is why it is important to have an accurate image of the voluntarily childfree portrayed in the mainstream media. Many of the participants also felt that the stereotypes of the voluntarily childfree portrayed in the media were negative in nature. Although few cited specific media titles, the general consensus among these participants was one of stigmatization based on a less than accurate representation in the media. This feeling can be attributed to certain ways in which the childfree are portrayed in the media, such as the *Nine Months* example used by Chambers (2001) and the manner in which that principle character was portrayed.

These negative stereotypes often lead to complicated identity issues within people. Unfortunately, six participants reported experiencing identity issues, which were related to the media and their choice of remaining voluntarily childfree. A common conception felt by these individuals was the idea that their opinion or thoughts concerning children or parenting possessed no validation. This suggests that the media-induced socialization process posits that in order to be a positive parenting role model, a prerequisite is that the individual must first be a parent. This type of conception could discourage fully capable childfree individuals of assuming a positive role model position for children that is open

to all “real” parents. Another internal quandary expressed by one of the participants was the struggle with self-definition. Akin to the findings of Hird (2000) and Gillespie (2000), this participant expressed individuality concerns relating to the construction of the female identity and its inter-relatedness with motherhood. The remainder of the participants were comfortable with their reproductive decision.

The main concern of the voluntarily childfree was the way they are represented in the mainstream media. Aside from the isolated responses, the majority of the participants reported that they thought that the childless by choice demographic was only minimally being represented in the media, if at all. This is supported by the previous findings of Robinson and Skill (2001) which suggested that the portrayal of childless couples on television had steadily decreased over a 20 year period. Now, although this does not take into account other forms of media, it is a good key indicator of the presence of childfree imagery in American culture. Other participants felt more strongly about how the media portray the voluntarily childless. These participants suggested that the media portray the childfree in a negative light and at times even derogatory, although no specific shows or characters were mentioned.

Contrary to the contemporary representations of the childfree, all but one of the participants offered up some suggestions on how they would prefer to be represented in the mainstream media. Some of the participants would be happy if the voluntarily childfree subculture were represented at all. These participants felt that the voluntarily childfree subculture was being completely overlooked by the media and thus, invisible to the remainder of society. Others would prefer that the idea of having a child was presented as a choice and not a mandatory requirement of adulthood. The idea of



portraying parenthood as a choice was also seen as a way to present the childfree lifestyle as a positive and viable option. By presenting parenting as an alternative, instead of a suggested requirement of life, new discourse could be generated on the topics of adulthood, family and reproduction. Most of the participants would like the media to portray the childless by choice as a typical adult individual that is just like everyone else. Some participants would like the childfree to be presented as normal people possessing many upbeat qualities and part of an attractive lifestyle choice that offers various positive benefits. This would suggest that, currently, there is a feeling among many of the childless by choice that the mainstream media are not doing an adequate job of portraying this particular sub-culture in an accurate manner.

## Research Questions and Summary

### *Research Question #1*

1. What is the relationship between pro-natalist media framing and the voluntarily childfree?

In responding to the first question about what type of relationship exists between the childless by choice and the pro-natalist media framing, a perceived relationship tended to exist between this sub-culture and the mainstream media and was determined quite complex in nature. Its complexity originates from the perceived lack of understanding by the mainstream media of the attributes and interests of this particular sub-culture. Based upon this apparent lack of knowledge, it presents the mainstream media with an enormous challenge, of ways in which to communicate and/or associate with this demographic. Therefore, instead of attempting to gain insight into this minority

of individuals, the mainstream media choose to appeal to the majority of the public and its subscription to the pro-natalist ideology, which in turn contributes to the marginalization of the childless by choice.

By focusing its messages on the majority of the populous and its dominant ideology, the media play a role in the facilitation of social norms. This facilitation reaches its pinnacle by the reinforcement of the pro-natalist mindset and its accompanying behaviors. This translates into direct and indirect pressure being placed on the voluntarily childfree minority. The direct pressure felt by the childless by choice is one of coercion to physically alter their reproductive decision or verbally defend their lifestyle choice. Furthermore, the voluntarily childfree reported feeling pressure indirectly from the media through the coercion felt from family and friends, who were influenced by family-friendly images. The childless by choice attribute this indirect pressure to the media's ability to influence the majority, who subscribe to the parenthood mandate, and these individuals, in turn, would attempt to coerce the voluntarily childfree to alter their choice. In addition to this pressure, the media also attempt to socialize most individuals into adopting the parenthood belief structure. This adoption is facilitated through the use of certain media generated mechanisms that could possibly influence an individual's reproductive decision.

The perceived relationship that currently exists between the pro-natalist media framing and the voluntarily childfree is a multifaceted one at best. The very complicated nature of the interaction between mass media and personal ideologies is often difficult to discern. What is apparent with this particular relationship is that the media utilize their

power to perpetuate the dominant pro-natalist mindset and reinforce the status quo, all the while marginalizing the voluntarily childfree minority.

### *Research Question #2*

2. If a relationship exists, what impact does this relationship have on the individual?

Now that a perceived association is believed to exist between the media and the childless by choice, the extent of second question about the impact of this relationship on the childless individual can now be determined. The findings from the study suggest that the media did not influence the childfree individual's reproductive decision. Apparently, the media had no bearing on the persons' choice to remain childfree. In two instances, the media did have a positive indirect impact on people's reproductive decisions and these instances were where the individual was influenced by positive cultural imagery and this imagery led them to refrain from having children.

The negative by-products of the media relationship were where it had its greatest impression on the voluntarily childfree. The pro-natalist media association assisted in the contribution to the stigmatization and negative stereotypes of the childless by choice. These stereotypes were facilitated through the use of negative media portrayals of the voluntarily childfree and the positive family-friendly representations of the pro-natalist norm. These stigmas and stereotypes, induced by this particular imagery, often led some of the voluntarily childfree to come to grips with feelings of isolation and abnormality. In addition, these negative pro-natalist by-products often generated complex identity issues within some individuals. Although the media portrayal did appear to have some

minor positive impression on the voluntarily childfree, it was the negative contributions that were more prominent and require more urgent attention from society.

### *Research Question #3*

3. In what ways can the pro-natalist media portrayals be altered to provide a more accurate representation of the voluntarily childfree?

Third, the pro-natalist media portrayals can be altered in a variety of ways to provide a more accurate representation of the childless by choice. Initially, the media can modify the manner in which it portrays the process of having and/or raising children.

The current iteration of parenting in the media is most often portrayed in a positive light with no indication of the perils and pitfalls that are realistically included in the institution of parenthood. By altering these particular portrayals, this process would indirectly cast some positive light on the voluntarily childfree individuals' decision to remain childfree. Furthermore, the actual construct of having a child can be portrayed as a lifestyle choice, rather than an obligatory requirement of adulthood. By changing the perception of pregnancy from "an expected and an ideal" to "a positive and a viable" option, some of the stigmatization associated with challenging the pro-natalist ideology could be reduced.

In addition to altering the portrayals of the institution of parenthood, the media can also directly alter its representation of the actual childless by choice individuals. By allowing more frequent portrayals of this minority demographic in the mainstream media, a greater understanding could be gained about this relatively unknown sub-culture. By making the sub-culture more accessible to the general public, some of the negative stereotypes linked to these individuals could be diminished. Furthermore, the mainstream

media can alter the manner in which the voluntarily childfree are portrayed. By presenting the childless by choice as a normal average adult individual, who just happened to choose not to have children, a more accurate representation could be provided to the public and a more realistic image could be perpetuated within society.

### Conclusion

There is hope for the image of the voluntarily childfree and the fashion in which they are portrayed in the mainstream media. By altering the manner in which the act of having children is portrayed into a more realistic image, positive characteristics of the childfree lifestyle are allowed to surface. In addition, some of the stigma associated with remaining childfree could be reduced if the media portrayed having children as a viable option and not a requirement of adulthood. These efforts, combined with a concerted effort on the media's part to include more frequent and positive representations of this demographic, can be most beneficial to the childless by choice subculture.

In conducting this research, many new questions were generated that would provide multiple avenues of future investigation. First, one area of future discussion pertains to the commercials that air during family-oriented sit-coms and whether or not they are facilitating the "baby sell." Second, many participants cited shows from their childhood as examples of pro-natalist media portrayals, which begs the question of whether individual ideology forms at childhood and how does it shape people's adulthood. Third, there did not appear to be any significant difference in the amount of influence felt between the male and female participants or their responses. This provides an arena for further investigation to the degree each sex experiences mediated and

unmediated pressure. Finally, another area of future research lies in fully understanding the wants and needs of the childless by choice demographic, in the attempt to better understand this multi-faceted sub-culture. By devoting more research to this often overlooked group, a better understanding of their role in society can be attained.

Although this research was limiting by the small sample size, which is to be expected when dealing with a minority population, this study did shed some light on this often over-looked minority of the voluntarily childfree in the hopes of creating a better understanding of this subculture and its relationship to pro-natalistic media portrayals. Through a deeper understanding of this relationship, a more accurate representation of this demographic was allowed to surface. In the end, much information was uncovered about media portrayals and this minority, but much more information is still required to fully understand the complex social reality that is created at the intersection of mass media and the world of the voluntarily childfree.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Participant Personal Data

Wife's Name:

Wife's Age:

Wife's Education Level:

Husband's Name:

Husband's Age:

Husband's Education Level:

Length of Marriage:

Do you currently have any biological children?

Do you currently have any adopted children?

Do you plan or foresee yourself as having children eventually?

Have you or your spouse been voluntarily sterilized?

If not, why?

What form of birth control do you use?

## Appendix B: Interview Guide

What are your general feelings about how the media portray having children?

Do you feel that the media attempt to socialize individuals into becoming parents?

If so, how?

Do you think that this socialization has any relationship to buying products?

If so, please explain?

Did the media have any influence on your decision not to have kids?

If so, how?

Do you think that the media exert pressure on the childfree to become parents?

If so, how?

Do you think that the media contribute to the stigmatization of the voluntarily childfree?

If so, how?

If you feel stigmatized by the media, has this created any identity issues for you?

If so, what have they been?

How do you feel about how the media represent the voluntarily childfree?

How would you like to see the voluntarily childfree portrayed in the media?

## Appendix C: Informed Consent Release Form

Hello, my name is Eddy Sass. I am a researcher on the project entitled Re-constructing the Image of the Voluntarily Childfree: An Ethnographic Exploration of Media Representation and the Childless by Choice. This research focuses on the relationship between media representation and the voluntarily childfree. You are being asked to participate in this study based on your affirmation that you are voluntarily childfree and intend to remain so. The risks associated with this research are very minimal, as this project will consist entirely of open-ended interview questions. The interview will be recorded on to audio micro-cassette. The interview should last about 45 minutes. One of the benefits of this research is the ability to assist in creating a more accurate representation of the voluntarily childfree. This project is part of my graduate thesis work in the School of Mass Communications at the University of South Florida. I, Eddy Sass, am the principal investigator of the project and may be contacted at 813-832-5876 should you have any questions.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research project. Your participation is very much appreciated. Just before we start the interview, I would like to reassure you that as a participant in this project you have several very definite rights.

1. Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary.
2. You are free to refuse to answer any question at any time.
3. You are free to withdraw from the interview at any time.


### Appendix C: (Continued)

This interview will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to the members of the research team. Your privacy and research records will be kept confidential to the extent of the law. Authorized research personnel, employees of the Department of Health and Human Services, the USF Institutional Review Board and its staff, and other individuals, acting on behalf of USF, may inspect the records from this research project. If you have questions about your rights as a person who is taking part in a research study, you may contact the Division of Research Compliance of the University of South Florida at (813) 974-5638. Excerpts of this interview may be made part of the final research report, but under no circumstances will your name or identifying characteristics be included in this report. I will also provide you a copy of this form that I am now reading to you for your records.



## Appendix D: N.I.H. Certification

Human Participant Protections Education for Research Teams <http://cme.cancer.gov/cgi-bin/cms/cts-cert5.pl>



**Human Participant Protections Education for Research Teams**

**Completion Certificate**

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This is to certify that

**Eddy Sass**

has completed the **Human Participants Protection Education for Research Teams** online course, sponsored by the National Institutes of Health (NIH), on 02/29/2004.

This course included the following:

- key historical events and current issues that impact guidelines and legislation on human participant protection in research.
- ethical principles and guidelines that should assist in resolving the ethical issues inherent in the conduct of research with human participants.
- the use of key ethical principles and federal regulations to protect human participants at various stages in the research process.
- a description of guidelines for the protection of special populations in research.
- a definition of informed consent and components necessary for a valid consent.
- a description of the role of the IRB in the research process.
- the roles, responsibilities, and interactions of federal agencies, institutions, and researchers in conducting research with human participants.

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<http://www.nih.gov>

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## Appendix E: Participant Background Information

### Age and Length of Marriage:

Total number of participants: 16

Total number of participants under the age of 40 years: 12

Total number of participants 40 years and older: 4

Average participant age in years: 39.63

Average length of marriage in years: 15

### Highest Education Level Achieved:

Total number of participants possessing a Doctorate: 1

Total number of participants possessing a Medical Degree: 1

Total number of participants possessing a Masters Degree: 3

Total number of participants possessing a Bachelors Degree: 6

Total number of participants possessing a High School Diploma: 5

### Forms of Birth Control Used:

Total number of participants voluntarily sterilized: 4 (3 vasectomies, 1 tubal ligation)

Total number of participants of post-menopausal age: 2

Total number of participants utilizing birth control pills: 2

## Appendix F: In-Depth Coding Outline

- I. Portrayal and Persuasion
  - A. How does the media portray having children?
    - 1. Having children is expected or normal
    - 2. Not having children is not/minimally or negatively portrayed
    - 3. Being childfree is abnormal
    - 4. Having children is portrayed positively
    - 5. N/A- Not Applicable/Not Answered
  - B. Children=Happily Ever After Story Line
    - 1. Have noticed it in the media
    - 2. Believes it influences real world choices
    - 3. Does not notice it in the media
    - 4. N/A- Not Applicable/Not Answered
  - C. Did the media influence your decision?
    - 1. No- Personal/Real World Reasons
    - 2. No- Freedom and Security
    - 3. No- Postponement
    - 4. Yes- Positive Portrayals of Life
    - 5. Yes- Isolated Reasons
    - 6. N/A- Not Applicable/Not Answered
  - D. Does the media pressure the childfree to become parents?
    - 1. Yes- Positive Portrayals of family as a source of happiness
    - 2. No- Childfree are non-existent/not portrayed positively
    - 3. No- Isolated Reasons
    - 4. N/A- Not Applicable/Not Answered
  - E. Does the media influence peers and they pressure you?
    - 1. Yes- They see it or feel it
    - 2. No- They don't see it or feel it
    - 3. N/A- Not Applicable/Not Answered
- II. Socialization and Consumption
  - A. Does the media socialize people into becoming parents?
    - 1. No- Just appealing to the masses
    - 2. Yes- Guilt people into parenting
    - 3. Yes- Glamorized Parenthood
    - 4. Yes- Marketing family-friendly image
    - 5. Yes- Isolated Reasons
    - 6. N/A- Not Applicable/Not Answered
  - B. Is this socialization related to buying products?
    - 1. Yes- Isolated Reasons
    - 2. No- Not related to buying products
    - 3. Yes- Marketing to mothers and children
    - 4. Yes- Family oriented imagery
    - 5. Yes- Consumerism

Appendix F: (Continued)

6. N/A- Not Applicable/Not Answered
- III. Stigmatization and Identity
  - A. Does the media stereotype the childfree?
    1. No- No stereotypes because of no/minimal representation
    2. Yes- Due to lack of representation
    3. Yes- Due to negative representation
    4. Yes- Positive Family Portrayals
    5. N/A- Not Applicable/Not Answered
  - B. Has the media created identity issues for you?
    1. Yes
    2. No
    3. N/A- Not Applicable/Not Answered
- IV. Representation and Reconstruction
  - A. How does the media represent the voluntarily childfree?
    1. No/minimal representation
    2. Negative representation
    3. Other
    4. N/A- Not Applicable/Not Answered
  - B. How would you like to see the childfree represented?
    1. Represented Period
    2. As a choice
    3. Like everyone else
    4. Normal
    5. In a positive light
    6. N/A- Not Applicable/Not Answered
- V. Additional Discoveries
  - A. Isolated Themes
    1. Miscellaneous Findings
    2. N/A- Not Applicable/Not Answered
  - B. Common Themes
    1. Economics/Politics
    2. Marketing to the Childfree
    3. Simplistic/Unrealistic mediated world view
    4. Alternative media support
    5. N/A- Not Applicable/Not Answered

## Appendix G: In-Depth Interview Data Matrix

|       | IA      | IB  | IC  | ID | IE | IIA | IIB | IIIA | IIIB | IVA | IVB   | VA | VB      |
|-------|---------|-----|-----|----|----|-----|-----|------|------|-----|-------|----|---------|
| Penny | 1,2     | 1   | 5   | 2  | 3  | 4   | 3,4 | 1    | 1    | 2   | 1     | 2  | 4       |
| Scott | 1,3,4   | 1   | 5   | 3  | 1  | 4   | 3,4 | 1    | 1    | 1,3 | 6     | 1  | 5       |
| Mary  | 1,2,3   | 1,2 | 1,2 | 1  | 1  | 4   | 4   | 3,4  | 2    | 2   | 3     | 1  | 2,3     |
| David | 1,3     | 4   | 1,2 | 1  | 3  | 4   | 1   | 3,4  | 3    | 1,2 | 4     | 1  | 3       |
| Pam   | 1,2     | 1   | 3   | 2  | 1  | 2   | 1   | 4    | 1    | 1   | 3     | 1  | 1       |
| Sam   | 1       | 4   | 4   | 1  | 1  | 2   | 1   | 3    | 1    | 3   | 3     | 1  | 1,3     |
| Ann   | 4       | 1   | 1   | 1  | 1  | 3   | 3   | 3    | 2    | 3   | 4     | 2  | 5       |
| James | 5       | 4   | 1   | 4  | 3  | 1   | 2   | 5    | 2    | 1   | 3     | 1  | 5       |
| Sally | 1,2,3,4 | 1   | 1   | 4  | 1  | 3   | 3   | 2,3  | 2    | 1   | 2     | 1  | 3       |
| Tom   | 1,3,4   | 4   | 1   | 1  | 2  | 4   | 3   | 2,3  | 2    | 1   | 3,4   | 1  | 1,2,3,4 |
| Ellen | 4       | 3   | 3   | 1  | 2  | 2   | 3   | 3    | 2    | 4   | 2,3   | 1  | 5       |
| Bob   | 3       | 1   | 1,3 | 1  | 3  | 2   | 3   | 3    | 2    | 2   | 2     | 1  | 5       |
| Sara  | 1,2     | 1,2 | 1   | 1  | 3  | 2   | 5   | 2    | 2    | 1,2 | 1,2,5 | 1  | 2,3     |
| Chris | 1,2     | 2   | 4   | 1  | 3  | 1   | 5   | 3    | 2    | 3   | 2,5   | 2  | 3       |
| Tracy | 1       | 1   | 1   | 2  | 2  | 6   | 1,4 | 2,5  | 1    | 1   | 4     | 1  | 5       |
| Brian | 1,2,4   | 1   | 1   | 2  | 1  | 4,5 | 1,4 | 3    | 1    | 1   | 2     | 1  | 2       |

## Appendix H: Sit-Com Observation Data Matrix

|               | Stereotype | Unrealistic | Violence | Sex | Simplistic | Predictable | Commercials | Unrealistic |
|---------------|------------|-------------|----------|-----|------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Penny & Scott | X          | X           | X        |     | X          |             |             |             |
| Mary & David  | X          | X           | X        | X   | X          |             | X           |             |
| Pam & Sam     |            | X           | X        | X   | X          |             | X           | X           |
| Ann & James   | X          |             |          |     |            |             |             |             |
| Sally & Tom   | X          | X           |          |     |            | X           |             |             |
| Ellen & Bob   | X          |             |          |     |            | X           |             |             |
| Sara & Chris  | X          |             |          | X   |            |             |             |             |
| Tracy & Brian | X          | X           | X        |     |            |             |             | X           |

## Appendix I: Concepts Table

| Concept                                                  | Classification | Code    | Description                                  |
|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------|---------|----------------------------------------------|
| Media Portrayal                                          | Open           | Etic    | Media portray having children                |
| "A Certain Sense of Abnormality"                         | Property       | In-vivo | Childfree is not normal                      |
| No Portrayals                                            | Property       | Etic    | No portrayal of not having kids              |
| An Expected Progression of Life                          | Property       | Etic    | A natural part or step of life               |
| "A Very Positive Thing"                                  | Property       | In-vivo | Media portray parenthood positively          |
| Glorification                                            | Property       | Etic    | Media glorify parenthood                     |
| "The Happily Ever After"                                 | Property       | In-vivo | Children equal a happy life                  |
|                                                          |                |         |                                              |
| Reproductive Persuasion                                  | Open           | Etic    | Media influence reproductive decisions       |
| No Representation, No Influence                          | Property       | Etic    | No influence felt due to no representation   |
| Little or No Influence                                   | Property       | Etic    | Very little or no influence on decision      |
| "Postpone It"                                            | Property       | In-vivo | Postpone decision until it is too late       |
| "Indirectly"                                             | Property       | In-vivo | Pressure by peers due to media               |
| Positive Family Portrayals                               | Property       | Etic    | Media portray family in a positive light     |
| Positive Media Influence                                 | Property       | Etic    | Positive media influence on decision         |
| "Brainwashed "                                           | Property       | In-vivo | Media persuade people to have kids           |
|                                                          |                |         |                                              |
| Mediated Socialization                                   | Open           | Etic    | Media socialize people to want kids          |
| Not a Conscious Effort                                   | Property       | Etic    | Media do not socialize child bearing         |
| "Guilt You Into It"                                      | Property       | In-vivo | Media guilt people into wanting kids         |
| Positive Reinforcement                                   | Property       | Etic    | Media use positive imagery to socialize      |
| Marketing the Idea of Family                             | Property       | Etic    | Media portray family as a positive construct |
|                                                          |                |         |                                              |
| Mediated Consumption                                     | Open           | Etic    | Media/Parenthood Relationship to sell goods  |
| "Geared Towards Families"                                | Property       | In-vivo | Focus on the family as a target market       |
| Positive Family Imagery                                  | Property       | Etic    | Use family friendly imagery to sell goods    |
| "The More Babies You Have, The More Consumers They Have" | Property       | In-vivo | Media use idea of family to sell goods       |


Appendix I: (Continued)

|                                      |          |         |                                           |
|--------------------------------------|----------|---------|-------------------------------------------|
| Stigmatization and Stereotypes       | Open     | Etic    | Media creates stereotypes of childfree    |
| No Representation, No Stigmatization | Property | Etic    | No stereotype due to no media portrayal   |
| "Stereotype by Omission"             | Property | In-vivo | Media stereotype by no representation     |
| Media Perpetuate Stereotypes         | Property | Etic    | Media contributes to the stereotypes      |
| Identity Issues                      | Property | Etic    | Media assists in creating identity issues |
|                                      |          |         |                                           |
|                                      |          |         |                                           |
| Childfree Representation             | Open     | Etic    | Current Mainstream Media Representation   |
| "We Don't Even Exist"                | Property | In-vivo | Non-Existent Demographic                  |
| Minimal Representation               | Property | Etic    | Very little media representation          |
| "Evil, Selfish, Vain People"         | Property | In-vivo | Childfree portrayed in a negative light   |
|                                      |          |         |                                           |
| Image Reconstruction                 | Open     | Etic    | Rebuilding the Image of the Childfree     |
| Any Representation Would be Nice     | Property | Etic    | Any media portrayals would be good        |
| "A Free Choice"                      | Property | In-vivo | Child bearing presented as a choice       |
| A Typical Adult                      | Property | Etic    | Childfree are portrayed as average adult  |
| "We're Normal People"                | Property | In-vivo | Childfree portrayed like everyone else    |
| Positive Role Models                 | Property | Etic    | Childfree portrayed in a positive light   |



## Appendix J: IRB Approval

April 6, 2004

  
UNIVERSITY OF  
SOUTH FLORIDA

Eddy Sass  
4715 Bay Vista Ave  
Tampa, FL 33611

Dear Mr. Sass:

Your new protocol (IRB #102385) entitled, “**Re-Constructing the Image of the Voluntary Childfree: An Ethnographic Exploration of Media Representation and the Childless by Choice**” including the informed consent form with waiver of written documentation has been reviewed under expedited review categories six and seven (6,7). Having made any required revisions, the approval period for your protocol is shown on the stamp below. This information shall be presented to the Institutional Review Board-02 at its next convened meeting on May 21, 2004.


You should take special note of the following:

- Unless the requirement has been waived by the IRB, documentation of informed consent/assent must be obtained on copies of the attached stamped informed consent/assent document. Please note the form is valid only during the period stamped on the informed consent/assent document.
- Approval is for up to a twelve-month period, after date of initial review. A Research Progress Report to request renewed approval must be submitted to this office **by the submission deadline in the eleventh month of this approval period**. A final report must be submitted if the study was never initiated, or you or the sponsor closed the study.
- Any changes in the above referenced study may not be initiated without IRB approval except in the event of a life-threatening situation where there has not been sufficient time to obtain IRB approval.
- All changes in the protocol must be reported to the IRB.
- If there are any adverse events, the Chairperson of the IRB must be notified immediately in writing.
- Waiver of written documentation is approved having met the following four criteria: the research will not involve greater than “minimal risk” to the subject; it is not practicable to conduct the research without the waiver; waiving will not adversely affect subjects’ rights; and if appropriate, information will be provided to subjects later

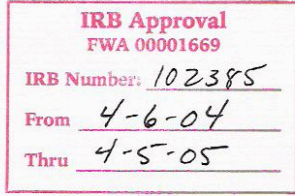
Based on the new HIPAA Privacy Rule, if the study involves generating, collecting, using, or disclosing ‘protected health information’ the subject must be given an appropriately approved Authorization form prior to enrolling them into your research study. If the study involves review of medical charts only, please ensure that you have a Waiver of HIPAA Authorization granted by the Privacy Board, prior to commencing the study.

If you have any questions regarding this matter, please do not hesitate to call Christy Stephens at (813) 974-3216 or myself at (813) 974-9343.

Sincerely,

  
Paul G. Stiles, J.D., Ph.D.  
Chairperson, IRB-02

PGS: cas  
pc: Dr. Bajkiewicz



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University of South Florida • 12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 • Tampa, FL 33612-4799  
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### About the Author

Ed Sass is originally from Dallas, Texas, where he graduated from the University of Texas at Arlington in 1994 with a B.B.A. in marketing. His educational background also includes extensive computer and technology expertise, in addition to website design and video production skills. Since relocating to Tampa, Florida, Ed has been honing his acting and film-making skills in the hopes of producing socially relevant documentaries and feature films. While at the University of South Florida, Ed was the recipient of the Garner Rose O'Brian scholarship . He lives in south Tampa with his wife, Cynthia and their various pets.