VOLUNTARY AND INVOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS

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VOLUNTARY AND INVOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS: THE JOYS OF OTHERHOOD?

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Beth Turnbull is a PhD Candidate in the School of Health and Social Development, Faculty of Health, Deakin University, Australia. Her research takes quantitative and qualitative approaches to understand the social connection and exclusion in different areas of life of women and men with no children. Beth's PhD seeks to explore the extent and quality of women's and men's resources and participation in employment based on whether they have children.

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Introduction: Childlessness through a Feminist Lens

Natalie Sappleton

Childlessness and Feminism

The issue of childlessness is now firmly on the academic agenda and is receiving equally intense scrutiny in media commentary. Doubtless, this unprecedented level of focus is being driven by the remarkable upsurge in childlessness, and especially voluntary childlessness, that has been witnessed virtually across the globe since around the 1980s (Kreyenfeld & Konietzka, 2017). In the United States, there has been an increase in childlessness among women aged between 40 and 44 from 10.2% in 1976 to 15.1% in 2012 (Monte & Mykyta, 2016). In Spain, Austria and the United Kingdom, more than one-fifth of women aged between 40 and 44 are childless (OECD, 2015). In India, the proportion of women between the ages of 35 and 39 that are not mothers doubled from 3.86% in 1981 to 7.28% in 2011 (Sarkar, 2016). It has been predicted that the next Russian census, due to be undertaken in 2020, will reveal that the proportion of women passing reproductive age without bearing children will reach 10% for the first time (Fakhrislamova, 2016). In fact, one analysis of childlessness trends in 35 OECD countries between the mid-1990s and 2010 revealed that only four countries – Slovenia, Turkey, Chile and Luxembourg – had witnessed a fall in childlessness rates over that time period (OECD, 2015).

Yet childlessness is far from a new phenomenon. For instance, Sobotka's (2017) European-wide cohort analysis reveals that childlessness levels have been as high as 25% among French women born around the turn of the twentieth century, Belgian woman born around 1910 and Irish women born during the inter-war period. May reports that childfree lifestyles were more common in the 1930s in North America than they are today (May, 1997). Fakhrislamova's (2016) historical analysis of patterns of childlessness in Russia reveal that in spite of the enforcement of the steep *nalog na bezdetnost* ('childlessness tax') in the Soviet Era, many women of childbearing age still opted to remain

childfree. The media and scholarly attention that childlessness is currently attracting can therefore not entirely be attributable to the escalation in the numbers and proportions of the childfree, but perhaps to their increased visibility (Furstenberg, 2014).

Feminism and its adherents have undoubtedly played a key role in illuminating the childfree from the societal shadows. Second wave (largely white, colonial) feminists, whose campaigns intensified in the 1960s and 1970s, placed reproductive rights and sexual freedom at the heart of their crusade, and associated with the subjugation of women with domestic roles and normative heterosexuality carved out within a patriarchal order. Consciousness-raising and grassroots-level campaign groups were established to theorise their ideologies, promote and solicit support for their ideas, and to defend individual rights. For example, the National Organization for Non-Parents (NON), America's first childfree activist group was established in 1972 (Healey, 2016). From the 1990s onwards, third-wave feminists (even those that reject the label), informed by post-modern ideologies, sought to subvert sexist cultures and to destabilise constructs of heteronormativity and universal womanhood and to transverse and celebrate differences across multiple lines of identity – class, sexual orientation and ethnicity, as well as gender. In this, the decision (or not) to remain childless should be seen as a form of empowerment and a means for women to reify themselves as active subjects.

It is perhaps unsurprising then, that a recent cacophony of calls to address growing levels of childlessness, lays the blame for the phenomenon squarely on the shoulders of those that promote and adhere to the feminist project. In the American conservative news portal, *The Daily Wire*, and under the headline, 'Feminism Is Leaving a Wake of Unhappy, Unmarried, and Childless Women in Its Path', for instance, Amanda Prestigiacomo writes that modern, childless women are 'unhappy and alone' and in 'sadness and isolation', and suggests that feminism 'is to blame for this onslaught of college-educated yet terribly empty women'. Such viewpoints are not restricted to the right-wing press, however. Several recent tomes and critics have propagated this blame narrative, attributing the alleged growing unhappiness of women, the fertility crisis and the denigration of motherhood on feminists who told young women that they could 'have it all' (see e.g. Dux & Simic, 2008; Szalai, 2015). Wood and Newton (2006, p. 347), for instance, contend that 'of perhaps most import is the failure of feminist approaches to really challenge motherhood, and in fact their tendency to valorize women's procreative potential and mothering practices'. As Campo

(2005) has argued, this narrative has become so dominant in public and scientific discourse to the extent that alternative explanations have been overlooked.

Also sidelined is the theoretical and empirical work being undertaken by researchers of different stripes who are using feminist epistemology, feminist theories and feminist frameworks to explain, account for, and understand the consequences of childlessness. Researchers from a wide range of scholarly disciplines, including, but not limited to, psychology, sociology, gender studies, social work and social policy have concerned themselves with a range of issues relevant to childlessness, such as the impact it has on lives and emotional states, the implications for personal and relational networks and occupational mobility, and the way in which it is represented and depicted in popular culture. This volume brings together these myriad perspectives under the unifying umbrella of a feminist perspective. By providing an in-depth and interdisciplinary overview of the state-of-the-art of the field, the tome hopes to illuminate how feminism as a method of scientific enquiry, rather than a mere political movement, is contributing to knowledge production in the area of childlessness.

This Volume

Fifteen original chapters make up this volume. The collection is structured around five key principles of feminist enquiry: the pursuit of the theoretical; consideration to the intertwining of processes of structure and agency; intersectionality; a concern for understanding lived experiences and efforts to 'unsilence' the marginalised.

Section 1: Theoretical Perspectives on Voluntary and Involuntary Childlessness

The three chapters in the opening section of the book serve as an introduction to key theories and concepts within the broader topic of childlessness. In Chapter 1, Ingrid Lynch and colleagues trace developments in research in the field of voluntary childlessness from 1920 to 2013. The chapter highlights the transdisciplinary nature of research enquiry, as well as methodological diversity, but points out the dominance of the Global North as a site of enquiry. In Chapter 2, Megumi Fieldsend offers a similar analysis of the field of knowledge

production, but this time pertaining to involuntary childlessness and focusing on the psychological and psychosocial perspectives. Aspects examined include the competing psychological emotions of desire and regret, as well as the impact that involuntary childlessness has on self and identity and personal relationships. Drawing on a philosophical feminist value theory, Anna Gotlib philosophises on the concept of free will in Chapter 3, exploring the way in which voluntarily childless women grapple with internal narratives of desiring their choices to remain childfree.

Section 2: Structure, Agency and Childlessness

A tension exists in the feminist literature between those that highlight the importance of social structures in constraining and shaping action, opportunity and choice and those that emphasise the importance of individual agency in the struggle against dominant societal forces (Clegg, 2006). It is, of course, beyond the scope of this collection to seek to resolve that debate. Rather, the chapters that are presented in Section 2 are designed to reflect the complex overlappings of structure and agency in determining outcomes of motherhood and 'otherhood'. First, taking a Bourdeuisian approach, in Chapter 4, Alyssa Mullins constructs pronatalism as a field in which the habitus of childbearing is driven by consideration to Bourdieu's four forms of capitalism. Continuing the theme of pronatalism, and focusing on one particular type of capital – social capital – in Chapter 5, Melissa Graham and colleagues examine how childfree women experience social networks, social connectedness and support. Chapter 6, also by Alyssa Mullins, emphasises the contradictions that women face in pronatalist societies.

Section 3: Intersectional Perspectives on Childlessness

Gender is not the only source of individuals' social identities. Intersectionalist feminist scholars are united by their rejection of the feminist metonymic fallacy; their belief that the category 'woman' does not adequately describe a common experience of oppression, and the need to include multiple axes of identity and experience in order to develop a fuller understanding of women's lived experiences (McCall, 2005). The two chapters in this section represent a response to that call, by examining how gender and age intersect in the production of narratives and outcomes relating to childlessness. In Chapter 7, Rose

O'Driscoll and Jenny Mercer report on the perceptions and insights of women in Britain, over the age of 45, who have made the decision not to have children. In Chapter 8, Kate de Medeiros and Robert L. Rubinstein adopt a similar focus, exploring narratives of ageing among American women and including race and ethnicity as a specific intersection.

Section 4: Lived Experiences of Childlessness

Lived realities and everyday experiences play a crucial role in shaping individuals' multiplex, complex and layered personal and social identities. Therefore, investigating and accounting for individuals' lived experiences is critical for feminist research. This is reflected in Stanley and Wise's (1993, p. 146) argument that knowledge can be progressed by developing a language of experience, and 'this must come from our exploration of the personal, and the everyday, and what we experience – women's lived experiences'. In that spirit, the four chapters in Section 4 present accounts of the experiences of the childfree within structural and institutional frameworks such as marriage, employment and entrepreneurship. In Chapter 9, Laura Carroll reflects on agency and decision-making processes within the context of the voluntary childless marriage. The chapter exposes how voluntarily childless heterosexual couples arrive at the decision to not have children, and the response that they receive from society. Chapter 10, authored by Helen Peterson, and referring to the Swedish context, looks at a hitherto under-investigated decision-making process – the way in which women who would prefer to remain childfree seek out partners for love, companionship and marriage. The employment arena is the focus of the next two chapters. In Chapter 11, Beth Turnbull and colleagues explore how women who have no children navigate employment and occupational arenas. In Chapter 12, the focus of attention turns to entrepreneurship. Natalie Sappleton explores how remaining childfree is a way for gender-role violating women entrepreneurs to gain access to the resources that they need for business survival and success.

Section 5: National Perspectives on Childlessness

Feminists espousing an intersectionalist epistemology emphasise the importance of privileging the voice of the 'subaltern' (Spivak, 1988). It

is important to adopt the discourse and experiences of the marginalised 'other', especially those beyond the current dominant geopolitical structures of knowledge production. Therefore, the final section of the book presents three chapters that examine childlessness within specific national contexts. In Chapter 13, Ivett Szalma and Judit Takács examine childlessness in the context of Hungary, which has a curiously low fertility rate. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative sources of data, and with specific reference to men and women, the authors explore the extent to which there is a voluntary dimension to childlessness in that geographical context, and what the drivers of that choice might be. A different approach is adopted by Kimiko Tanaka and Deborah Lowry in Chapter 14. This chapter presents a theoretical and historical chronicle of childlessness in Japan, beginning in the Tokugawa period, and concluding with a discussion of the contemporary period. Although the stigma that often accompanies childlessness is found in Japan as in many other regions of the world, this chapter demonstrates historical flux and development in terms of social expectations placed upon the Japanese woman. In Chapter 15, Nazli Kazanoglu explores developments in childcare welfare policy in Germany, examining the link between public policy and Germany's high rate of childlessness. This chapter explores how ideology-driven policy produces and reinforces processes of de-familialisation as well as familialisation.

This book represents the start of a transdisciplinary conversation on an issue that has wide implications and ramifications for individual lives, societies and economies. Since it is only possible to touch upon just a small subset of the research questions childlessness creates, we end this book with a call to action for feminist researcher and scholars.

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