

Other than Mother: The Impact of Voluntary Childlessness on Meaning in Life, and the Potential for Positive Childfree Living

Lynne Corbett, M.Sc.¹

Abstract

Parenthood is the normative path for adult human beings—reproduction is the survival of the species—and, historically, to be a woman has meant to be a mother (Gillespie, 2003). Childlessness, on the rise in the developed world, has not been adequately served in the social sciences (Chancey & Dumais, 2009) nor is it entirely accepted by society (Avison & Furnham, 2015). Whether childless by chance (involuntarily) or by choice (voluntarily or childfree), non-mothers are often stigmatized and misunderstood (Shaw, 2011). Childfree women, in particular, may be perceived as less deserving of acceptance than those who are unable to have children due to infertility or other medical conditions (Peterson & Engwall, 2013), though public opinion is shifting toward greater inclusion (Kanazawa, 2014). Research on the subject delineates a variety of reasons for a woman's choice to remain childless: freedom and autonomy encompass the overarching themes (Peterson, 2015). Motherhood is demanding and, in raising a family, a woman may sacrifice personal identity to parenting (Gillespie, 2003). Motherhood is meaningful, yet childfree women seek liberation from such predetermined life meaning and purpose (Peterson, 2015)—they are not so much anti-parenting as they may be pro-self (Kelly, 2009). Meaning in life is a central topic in positive psychology and in its second wave, PP 2.0 (Wong, 2011): meaning is an indicator of psychological well-being (Steger & Kashdan, 2007) and a function of eudaimonic living (Ryff, 1989). Childfree women, having not complied with the expectation of motherhood (Glenn, 1994), cultivate other sources of life meaning, which results in fulfillment, personal growth, and the flourishing that positive psychology endeavors to promote (Avison & Furnham, 2015; Tucker, 2006).

Introduction

“I’m completely happy not having children. I mean, everybody does not have to live in the same way. And as it’s been said, ‘Everybody with a womb doesn’t have to have a child any more than everybody with vocal cords has to be an opera singer.’”

— Gloria Steinem

The purpose of this paper is to explore voluntary childlessness as a meaningful life choice and, in so doing, to highlight non-motherhood as a valuable construct worthy of increased attention in the social sciences, as well as in society and culture in general. Childlessness is a complicated construct (Roy, Schumm, & Britt, 2014; Sundby, 1999). Despite shifts in societal and cultural norms, women worldwide are still held to a central, and traditional, gendered expectation of marriage and motherhood (McQuillan, Greil, Shreffler, & Tichenor, 2008). So inextricably linked are motherhood and womanhood, it has been argued that being a woman means being a

¹ School of Psychology, University of East London

mother (Gillespie, 2003; Ireland, 1993). However, not every woman is able, nor feels the need, to reproduce. Increasingly, women are choosing not to have children (Chancey & Dumais, 2009; Hoffman & Levant, 1985). This state of being childless-by-choice is deemed “voluntary childlessness” or “childfree”, in contrast to “involuntary childlessness”, also referred to as “childless by chance”, or childless by circumstance, that which results from an inability to reproduce (Basten, 2009; Peterson, 2015).

Childlessness—by choice or by circumstance—on the rise in the United States, Canada, and Europe (Abma & Martinez, 2006; Avison & Furnham, 2015; Kelly, 2009), continues to be stigmatized in developed countries (Chancey & Dumais, 2009; Miall, 1986; Park, 2002), and punished in developing ones (Unisa, 1999). Misunderstood, misrepresented, and potentially mistreated (Koropecj-Cox, Copur, Romano, & Cody-Rydzewski, 2018; Park, 2002), childless women are challenged to find positive life meaning, to understand their purpose in a society and culture that is accustomed to rewarding them, primarily, for procreating and parenting (Baumeister, 1991; Peterson, 2015). Meaning and purpose, amongst the most researched topics in psychology, are highly correlational (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002), and are associated in the context of positive psychology (PP) with eudaimonic living (Ryff & Keyes, 1995) and psychological well-being (PWB). Though childfree women may be perceived as maladjusted (Koropecj-Cox et al., 2018; Pohlman, 1970), they tend to have high levels of PWB, on par with mothers (Jeffries & Konnert, 2002). Further, according to theory and research on the subject, childfree women experience life as being replete with opportunities for personal growth (Houseknecht, 1987; Gillespie, 2003; Peterson, 2015). With its focus on human flourishing (Biswas-Diener, Linley, Govindji, & Woolston, 2011), PP may be particularly equipped to address the possibilities inherent in living childfree.

Other Than Mother

A Brief Survey of Childlessness

For as long as there has been history, motherhood has been considered a woman’s primary purpose (Erikson, 1964; Glenn, 1994; Medina & Magnuson, 2009), of crucial importance for her feminine identity, self-esteem, and well-being: to be a woman has meant to be a mother, and vice versa (Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Peterson & Engwall, 2013), the link between motherhood and womanhood remaining a pervasive and deeply ingrained social and cultural assumption (Gillespie, 1999; Glenn, 1994; Shaw, 2011). Further, parenthood is relatively unchallenged as the normative lifestyle (Rothrauff & Cooney, 2008), while childless or childfree tends to be considered an alternative one (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Hoffman & Levant, 1985; Sundby, 1999).

Historically, childlessness has been stigmatized as a state of less-than, an inadequacy (Letherby, 1999; Miall, 1986); while involuntary childlessness has been widely experienced as “a cataclysmic role failure” (Greil, Leitko, & Porter, 1988, p. 172). As far back as the ancient world, having no children, being barren, constituted a tragedy (Wretmark, 1999). In certain religious traditions, an inability to have children is considered a curse (Miall, 1986; Tabong & Adongo, 2013). The pro-life movement has its roots in an inflexible ideology: that a woman’s only mission or source of fulfillment is mothering (Glenn, 1994). Currently, in the United States, a woman’s right to choose is under siege: an increasingly conservative political climate and justice system pose a threat to the abortion rights protection determined in 1973 by *Roe v. Wade* (Hull, Hoffer, & Hoffer, 2018), a landmark Supreme Court decision establishing the legal right

to abortion (Ginsburg, 1984). In contemporary Western culture, childlessness often has psychosocial consequences (Greil, 1997; Koropecykj-Cox, 2002): infertility is associated with being empty, lonely, and sad (Basten, 2009); and those who are childless by choice have been perceived as emotionally unstable, disturbed (Pohlman, 1970), deviant (Avison & Furnham, 2015; Kelly, 2009; Veevers, 1973a), and even “sinister” (Bartlett, 1995, p. 4). The idea of consciously choosing not to procreate, in many non-Western societies is, itself, inconceivable (Inhorn & van Balen, 2002). In India, a woman’s infertility is considered a legal reason for divorce (Unisa, 1999). For the childless woman—whether she chose non-motherhood or is unable to reproduce—regardless of her ethnicity or socioeconomic milieu, such pervasive negative perceptions and attitudes (Chancey & Dumais, 2009; Shaw, 2011) are likely to cause personal distress, and can undermine her sense of self (Hirsch & Hirsch, 1989; Ireland, 1993; Pelton & Hertlein, 2011; Sundby, 1999).

In the 45 years since Veevers (1973a) recognized that the voluntarily childless population had been the subject of what Dexter (1958) termed “selective inattention” (Basten, 2009), the perception of childlessness has evolved (Avison & Furnham, 2015; Koropecykj-Cox, 2002; Thornton & DeMarco, 2001). Still, there exists a paucity of research and literature on the subject of voluntary childlessness, and on childlessness in general. The early, 1970s and 1980s, literature on voluntary childlessness was focused on the causality of feminism and a woman’s bid for freedom (Shaw, 2011; Simons, 1984). Chancey and Dumais (2009), in reviewing the academic literature on the subject, found: “recent media attention has made the phenomenon more known, but it remains largely misunderstood, and the voluntarily childless themselves suffer from the resulting misperceptions of the public” (p. 207).

Negative stereotypes persist (Basten, 2009; Letherby & Williams, 1999; Shaw, 2011)—i.e., married childless women are less warm than mothers, and childless husbands and wives are more emotionally troubled than their parenting peers (Koropecykj-Cox et al., 2018)—however, there is evidence indicating that societal acceptance of childless and childfree adults is on the rise (Avison & Furnham, 2015; Basten, 2009; Koropecykj-Cox et al., 2018; Thornton & DeMarco, 2001). The childfree may be perceived as more individualistic or liberated than parents; while the involuntarily childless tend to garner sympathy, which in turn may make them more socially desirable than the childfree (Chancey & Dumais, 2009). In general, involuntarily childless women are viewed more favorably than those who are childless by choice (Chancey & Dumais, 2009), and women tend to be more supportive of voluntary childlessness than men (Koropecykj-Cox & Pendell, 2007). In the Netherlands, a country that has been known for a socially progressive culture (Cox, 2001), the public’s acceptance of voluntary childlessness grew from 20 to 90 percent in the 30 years between 1960 and 1990 (Noordhuizen, de Graaf, & Sieben, 2010). Still, even in the developed world, it is common for non-parents, and non-mothers in particular, to be stigmatized, having to face feeling ostracized or marginalized (Chancey & Dumais, 2009; Park, 2002) because of infertility on the one hand (Abbey, Andrews, & Halman, 1992; Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Miall, 1986) or a choice to remain childless on the other (Bartlett, 1995; Peterson & Engwall, 2013; Shaw, 2011).

Since the 1970s, there has been a buildup of research on voluntary childlessness and the childfree lifestyle (Hoffman & Levant, 1985; Houseknecht, 1987; Mätzke & Ostner 2010; Movius, 1976; Umberson, Pudrovska, & Reczek, 2010), most of which has been conducted in Anglo-Saxon countries (Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008) and the developed world (Basten, 2009). Early studies looked at both Depression era and baby-boom female cohorts (Blake, 1979; Bloom & Pebley, 1982): in particular, Bloom and Pebley (1982), in reviewing evidence of voluntary

childlessness in the United States in the early 1980s, predicted that up to 30% of then-recent cohorts of American women would remain permanently childless, by choice or by circumstance. More recent statistics put the figure lower, estimating that approximately 20% to a high of 30% of women in several areas of the developed world—North America, the United Kingdom, and Germany—nearing the end of their childbearing years, did not have children, for various reasons (Avison & Furnham, 2015; Cannold, 2004; Dye, 2008). Infertility has been said to consistently account for an approximate median of 9% in the developed world (Boivin, Bunting, Collins, & Nygren, 2007). It is notoriously difficult to determine exact figures for the childfree population as being childless by choice is itself difficult to determine (Abma & Martinez, 2006), and is often arrived at through a combination of voluntary and involuntary circumstances—for instance, postponing pregnancy too long (Chancey & Dumais, 2009; DeVellis, Wallston, & Acker, 1984). The term voluntary childlessness may best be summarized as a “combination of choice and permanence” (Houseknecht, 1987, p. 370) encompassing two types: “early articulators” and “postponers” (Houseknecht, 1978). Keizer, Dykstra, and Jansen (2008) theorized that childlessness is rarely the consequence of a single decision but is rather more often the outcome of not having specifically decided to procreate².

Overall, permanent childlessness is on the rise around the world (Peterson, 2015), with Western, industrialized countries like Sweden, Italy, and the U.S. particularly notable in this uptick (Frejka & Sardon, 2004; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008, Umberson et al., 2010). The overall childless rate for women 40-44 years of age was approximately 10% in 1980, compared with almost 19% in 2010 (Roy et al., 2014). In the United States, voluntary childlessness is estimated to have grown from nearly 5% in the 1970s to approximately 7% in the 1980s, with a high of 9% in 1995 (Abma & Martinez, 2006; Basten, 2009). In the United Kingdom, the number of women who stated an intention to remain childless doubled between 1986 and 1991 (Gillespie, 1999). Gillespie (2003) has noted that voluntary childlessness is “predominantly an affluent Western phenomenon” (p. 123): childfree women tend to have more work experience, a higher income, and lower adherence to religion, as compared to other women (Abma & Martinez, 2006; Kanazawa, 2014). Estimates suggest that by 2030, approximately 25% of elderly persons worldwide, having remained childless, will thus be without a child or a grandchild (Wachter, 1997; Zhang & Hayward, 2001). If childlessness is trending upward (Kelly, 2009; Letherby & Williams, 1999; Roy et al., 2014), and infertility rates remain somewhat steady at 10-14%, then it would appear to be the childfree who constitute the growing demographic (Basten, 2009; Gillespie, 2003; Roy et al., 2014).

The Choice to Remain Childless

“Humans, like all other species in nature, are evolutionarily designed to reproduce” (Kanazawa, 2014, p. 157) and the vast majority of women will bear children (McQuillan et al., 2008; Miall, 1986). Motherhood is the heteronormative ideal (Gillespie, 2003), a foregone conclusion—a “fact” of life (Gillespie, 1999, p. 43). Pronatalism—a position or belief which promotes human reproduction in the form of parenthood and procreation (Carroll, 2012)—is tightly woven into the cultural fabric of a Western, individualist society, i.e., North American and Western European (Carroll, 2012; Peterson & Engwall, 2013). Children are generally perceived as an asset, and with good reason—parenthood brings fulfillment and psychological benefit, and to

² “Voluntary childlessness is defined as an individual or couple’s choice not to have children and their participation in taking measures to ensure they do not conceive a child.” (Roy et al., 2014, p. 53)

raise children well means to have achieved a certain success (Margolis & Myrskylä, 2011). Thus, parenthood, widely perceived as the normative path, holds great value, while childlessness, regardless of the cause, continues to be considered the untraditional lifestyle (Koropeckyj-Cox, 2002; Pollet, Kuppens, & Dunbar, 2006; Sundby, 1999), arguably less worthwhile or valuable to society (Letherby & Williams, 1999; McQuillan et al., 2008). It is for this reason that non-childbearing adults may be regarded with suspicion or doubt (Peterson & Engwall, 2013), labeled unorthodox or even abnormal (Peterson, 2015; Shea, 1983). Women, as opposed to men, who do not have children may be especially affected by such a perception (Chancey & Dumais, 2006; Waren & Pals, 2013), though married childless men, too, may experience negative stereotyping (Gannon, Glover, & Abel, 2004; Jamison, Franzini, & Kaplan, 1979). Hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender have the effect of creating dominant, institutionalized stereotypes (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004)—i.e., men think, women feel; men are powerful, women are nurturing (Worell & Todd, 1996). Rigid gender beliefs and pervasive pronatalism would seem to be conjoined, the former fortifying the latter. Thus, the female identity is constructed as a *feminine* identity (Hird & Abshoff, 2000); and femininity has been most obviously, or perhaps most conventionally, expressed by motherhood (Gillespie, 1999; Worell & Todd, 1996). The involuntarily childless woman—unable to reproduce, but desirous of doing so—tends to corroborate mainstream society's pronouncement: the role of parent is an essential one (Park, 2002). Indeed, becoming a mother may be so central to her gender identity (Gillespie, 2003; Peterson & Engwall, 2013), that biological childlessness could result in “identity shock” (Matthews & Matthews, 1986a, p. 645). She has failed to conceive, and thereby feels she will undergo a damaging status shift: from feminine potential mother to defeminized infertile person (Matthews & Matthews, 1986a). She may fear social isolation (Ornstein, 2000). She may feel bereft (Chancey & Dumais, 2009; Roy et al., 2014). Accordingly, involuntary childlessness is often the cause of anxiety, guilt, fear, and depression (Letherby & Williams, 1999; Umberson et al., 2010).

The voluntarily childless woman, though subjected to negative stereotypes and prejudice (Ganong, Coleman, & Mapes, 1990; Movius, 1976; Park, 2002; Peterson & Engwall 2013), has ostensibly chosen her fate. Though motherhood's status as an assumed destiny may be slowly diminishing (Shaw, 2011), the childfree woman has voluntarily bucked traditional expectation (Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Peterson, 2015; Veevers, 1973a). As such, her feminine identity may be called into question (McQuillan et al., 2008)—is she a real woman? (Peterson & Engwall, 2013)—as may be her mental health (DeVellis et al., 1984). She could be perceived as dysfunctional, immature, unfulfilled, a failure (Avison & Furnham, 2015); destined to have an unsatisfying marriage (Gillespie, 1999); certain to live out her final years in loneliness and regret (Rothrauff & Cooney, 2008). In essence, it may be assumed that she is now, or at some point will be, unhappy. These assumptions may be specious (McLanahan & Adams, 1987; Rothrauff & Cooney, 2008), but they could still have the power to influence her self-identity (Movius, 1976; Shaw, 2011): her “who am I?” (Ornstein, 2000; Park, 2002). According to statistics, however, it is likely that, in comparison to both childless women and mothers, the childfree woman is likely to have an equally or more fulfilling marriage (Hoffman & Levant, 1985; Koropeckyj-Cox, Pienta, & Brown, 2007), a higher level of career satisfaction (Movius, 1976; Peterson, 2015), and her life, less dictated by gender role stereotypes, may be experienced as adventurous or free (Callan, 1987; Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Peterson & Engwall, 2013). In their later years, the childless tend to be more financially secure and physically healthy than parents (Rempel, 1985; Roy et al., 2014; Zhang & Hayward, 2001). The childfree woman is not so much rejecting

motherhood and its duties or responsibilities as she is accepting the possibility of an alternative means of personal fulfillment (Gillespie, 2003; Kanazawa, 2014; Movius, 1976; Peterson, 2015)—equally valid, if not yet universally understood or accepted.

Much has changed in the 45 years since Veevers (1973a) first discerned a notable lack of focus in the social sciences on the construct of voluntary childlessness. Social change—the rise of feminism (Shaw, 2011), combined with wider access to reproductive choice (Gillespie, 2003; Kanazawa, 2014) and other socioeconomic factors (Roy et al., 2014)—has played a key role in the growing adherence to, and greater acceptance of, a childfree lifestyle (Bartlett, 1995; Pollet et al., 2006). The rapid growth of the childfree population challenges long-held assumptions about parenthood and non-parenthood (Avison & Furnham, 2015; Gillespie, 2003): permanent childlessness does not necessarily cause diminished well-being (Hansen, 2012; Umberson et al., 2010), nor does it have to entail social disadvantage (Koropecj-Cox, 2002; Peterson, 2015); while having children may in some instances result in diminished marital satisfaction (Margolis & Myrskylä, 2011; Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003; White, Booth, & Edwards, 1986) and higher levels of anxiety and depression (Bures, Koropecj-Cox, & Loree, 2009; McLanahan & Adams, 1987). Umberson (1989) theorized that since studies on the effects of parenthood versus childlessness yielded inconsistent results—which group has more or less PWB—there was reason to look instead at the quality of parent-child relationships, and the demands thereof: motherhood, it was proposed, is more demanding than fatherhood, and this is reflected in the oft diminished PWB of mothers. Motherhood is time-consuming (Umberson, 1989) and children are expensive (Roy et al., 2014). It is common for a mother to feel that, in raising children, she has lost a sense of personal identity (Gillespie, 2003; Peterson, 2015; Shelton & Johnson, 2006): she is restricted by motherhood.

Statistically, freedom—autonomy, independence, liberation—is given as the primary motivation for remaining childfree (Abma & Martinez, 2006; Avison & Furnham, 2015; Bartlett, 1995; Berer, 1999; Gillespie, 2003; Houseknecht, 1987). Women who choose not to procreate are attracted to the promise of freedom; specifically, greater opportunities (Gillespie, 2003; Shaw, 2011); a wider range of professional choices (Gillespie, 1999; Kanazawa, 2014; Movius, 1976); social and economic independence (Peterson, 2015); increased autonomy (Abma & Martinez, 2006; Meyers, 2001), which extends to a woman's sense of autonomy over her own body (Beck & Beck-Gersheim, 2002); geographical mobility (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007); equal sex role status (Movius, 1976; Peterson & Engwall, 2013); and an expanded life purpose (Gillespie, 1999; Kanazawa, 2014). The appeal is independence and the option to keep life focus on one's own development (Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Roy et al., 2014): from “living for others” to “living for one's self” (Beck & Beck-Gersheim, 2002, p. 22), to having a rewarding “life of one's own” (Movius, 1976, p. 62). Peterson (2015) found that freedom, for childfree women, is “described as a part of their deep-rooted identity and as an important part of their personal identity construct” (p. 5).

However, the freedom discourse itself may reinforce the stereotype of a childfree woman as selfish and self-serving (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Hansen, 2012)—she could even be mistaken as a “childhater” (Mitchell & Gray, 2007). Though a dislike of children is rarely a woman's reason for not wanting them (Mitchell & Gray, 2007), children have been identified as a possible impediment to a woman's self-focus (Frisén, Carlsson, & Wängqvist, 2014), constituting a reason not to procreate. An early study by DeVellis et al. (1984) found that the majority of childfree women associated mothering with having relatively few rewards, as opposed to any perception of parenthood as a negative experience. Rather, those women who

actively decide to remain childless desire a positive experience (Gillespie, 2003); that is, a life liberated from the limiting societal and cultural construct of motherhood (Hird & Abshoff, 2000); that which has been always been understood as the priority means of expressing femininity and of cultivating overall well-being (Gillespie, 1999; Movius, 1976; Peterson, 2015; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004).

Meaning in Life

A Brief Survey of Meaning

Meaning in life (MIL) is a primary topic in both humanistic psychology and positive psychology, the latter of which is proposed to have its roots in the former (Resnick, Warmoth, & Serlin, 2001). Victor Frankl's (1985) seminal work, *Man's Search for Meaning*, first published in 1946, pioneered a subsequent profusion of meaning studies and theories (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). "Meaning in life" and "purpose"—purpose confers meaning (Klinger, 1977); purpose defined as either an aim or a function (Baier, 1992)—are concepts, pertaining to the significance of life in general from the perspective of the individual experiencing that particular life (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964). Thus, MIL is a perception and a personal evaluation—"what is the meaning of my life?"—which may be assessed: one such evaluative tool is the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006), in which participants are asked to rate their agreement with various statements, i.e., "My life has a clear sense of purpose" (p. 93). Life meaning, as a construct, would seem to be a complex combination of social science and philosophy (Ventegodt, Andersen, & Merrick, 2003).

Baumeister (1991) created "a kind of checklist" (p. 30) by delineating four distinct needs of meaning: purpose, comprised of goals and fulfillment; value; efficacy; and self-worth—one or more of these needs would have to be met for an individual to experience life as meaningful. Further, Baumeister proposed meaning as a way to both "discern patterns in the environment" and "control oneself, including ones internal states" (p. 17): that is, meaning helps people negotiate societal and cultural values and it also serves the process of self-regulation—literally, regulation by the self, as opposed to heteronomy, or controlled regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2006). Self-regulation is closely associated with the concept of autonomy—will, choice, freedom—and autonomy is central to Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000): "an empirically based approach to development and motivation" (Ryan & Deci, 2006, p. 1558). Autonomy is linked to engagement, productivity, and well-being (Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & LaGuardia, 2006).

"The more life seems purposeful and meaningful, the better one's well-being" (Thoits, 2012, p. 360). MIL is considered a prime indicator of PWB (Steger & Kashdan, 2007)—"living a life rich in purpose and meaning, continued growth, and quality ties to others" (Ryff & Singer, 2008, p. 13). It follows, then, that living a meaningful life is associated with positive functioning (Stillman et al., 2009). A strong indicator of positive psychological functioning may be the conceptualization of well-being in eudaimonic, rather than hedonic, terms (McMahan & Estes, 2011). The two primary processes, or experiences, of well-being espoused in positive psychology (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009) are hedonic and eudaimonic, (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Steger & Kashdan, 2007): respectively, the experience of pleasure and the experience of meaning (McMahan & Estes, 2011). Eudaimonia is associated with authentic living, which is in turn associated with meaningfulness (Steger et al., 2006). Cultivating eudaimonia is connected to the development of well-being (Ryff, 1989)—well-being as distinct from happiness (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Hedonia, happiness, or SWB would seem to be a desirable state (Diener, 1984),

while eudaimonia, or PWB, is arguably requisite for the experience of a meaningful life (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Ryff, 1989).

Meaning is notoriously difficult to measure, and there remain essential questions about the MIL construct (Steger et al., 2006), though it is widely considered a positive and highly significant variable in well-being theory (Steger, 2012; Wong & Fry, 1998). Perhaps meaning is a challenge to measure and to identify as there is no one-size-fits-all “meaning”, no universal definition (Frankl, 1985). Meaning in life is self-constructed (Ventegodt et al., 2003), albeit in consideration of the various meanings on offer from society and culture—what one acquires from people, institutions, broad systems, and widespread ideology (Baumeister, 1991). Ideally, meaning is not imposed by external conditions and conditioning. Rather, meaning is made up of the choices one makes from the vast choices on offer.

(M)otherhood and Meaning

An attempt to reduce meaning to a singular or conclusive definition inevitably proves futile—not so much elusive as specific to the individual in search of it. Frankl (1985) theorized meaning as impossible to universalize: to each his/her own. Meaning may satisfy both the basic human need to impose stability on a constantly changing life—making fixed what is inherently in flux (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002)—and the need to strive toward future goals, which often involves a shift in the status quo (Steger et al., 2006). To search for meaning is to strive for self-understanding; it is a quest for identity (Singer, 2004). Parenthood confers life meaning; to mother is meaningful (Medina & Magnuson, 2009). Pronatalist ideals, those which further concretize the significance and even necessity of having children, are ever-present in the vast majority of cultures (Meyers, 2001). Pardoning the pun: Motherhood is expected. Motherhood is assumed to endow life with meaning; it challenges neither the status quo nor conventional ideas about gender behavior (Taylor & Whittier, 1995). Childfree women may even be perceived as a threat to institutionalized thinking (Bartlett, 1995).

Motherhood is widely considered the core of a woman’s healthy identity (Gillespie, 2003). However, motherhood, like childlessness or non-motherhood, is complicated (Letherby, 2002; Letherby & Williams, 1999). Statistics suggest that parenting does not necessarily make a woman happy (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003)—it is of no specific or absolute consequence to affective well-being (Hansen, Slagsvold, & Moum, 2009). No matter: In essence, to be a woman is to be a mother (Glenn, 1994), and to be a mother is to be feminine (Ireland, 1993). The childless woman, stripped of “mother”, is also potentially stripped of “feminine”: in terms of cultural, gendered expectations (Glenn, 1994), bearing children is fundamental to her femininity (McQuillan et al., 2008). As non-mother, she may be perceived as “un-womanly”, or as “other” than normal (Letherby, 1999): but this otherness—to mean odd, deviant, even substandard—contributes to the omnipresent pronatalism which is responsible for stigmatizing childlessness, and childfree living in particular (Ireland, 1993; Peterson, 2015; Snitow, 1992). Even in progressive, Western cultures, to not want to breed, to choose to remain childless, to be “able to imagine a full and deeply meaningful life without motherhood” (Snitow, 1992, p. 33) remains in the realm of taboo (Agonito, 2014).

More than two decades after Snitow (1992) argued that feminism had chronically acquiesced to pronatalism, reinforcing reproduction as a woman’s required role, voluntary childlessness remains a marginal life path (Agonito, 2014; Letherby, 2002). Still, voluntary childlessness is on the rise (Zhang & Hayward, 2001)—more literature is being generated as a result (Bartlett, 1995; Basten, 2009)—however, the cultural conversation around childlessness,

though increasingly open, is still lacking (Letherby & Williams, 1999; Peterson, 2015); as if, in showing enthusiasm for a childfree lifestyle, one might be inherently challenging the value of parenting as a life purpose, placing in doubt the meaning of motherhood (Snitow, 1992). Though most people endow having their own biological children as a central source of meaning in life, there may be satisfying compensations for remaining childless or childfree (Avison & Furnham, 2015; Callan, 1987; Pollet et al., 2006). Baumeister (1991) in theorizing that there is some interchangeability, or substitution, in regard to meaning in life, suggested: “Parenthood, like religion, appears to be a powerful but replaceable source of meaning in life” (p. 32). Social inclusion seems to be one such replacement: Studies of elderly childless persons yielded evidence suggesting that PWB does not differ greatly between the childless elderly and elderly parents (Koropecj-Cox, 2002; Zhang & Hayward, 2001). Rather, the diminishment of well-being in the elderly is more attributable to a lack of close social support: elderly widowed and divorced persons were lonelier and more depressed than their married counterparts—in essence, “marital status influenced psychological well-being” (Zhang & Hayward, 2001, p. S311). Rempel (1985) found in her research that elderly childless persons tend not to be lonely, as they are more likely to engage in meaningful social interactions, in the form of both relationships and experiences.³ Baumeister proposed that a need to belong is a significant and central human motivation; certainly, it is connected to the biological instinct to reproduce (Baumeister & Tice, 1990), though not exclusively. Emmons (2003) proposed that relationships, of all kinds, are amongst the most important sources of meaning—friends, colleagues, family. Having children may not necessarily bring fulfillment (Alesina, Di Tella, & MacCulloch, 2004; McLanahan & Adams, 1987), while close bonds, such as supportive friendships and strong marriages, may deeply satisfy one’s need to belong (Myers, 1999). The concept of what constitutes a family is becoming increasingly fluid (Bumpass, 1990; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2012). It is often said anecdotally that we choose our family: that, increasingly, people are self-dependent in making choices and decisions, especially as concerns family formation (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Healthy friendships are central to well-being, and the need to belong is a great motivator for interpersonal behavior (Baumeister, Brewer, Tice, & Twenge, 2007). Moreover, social exclusion is damaging to PWB and diminishes one’s perception of life as meaningful (Stillman et al., 2009). Belonging, it would seem, is the seed from which meaning in life grows (Lechner, Bolman, & Van Dalen, 2007).

Positive Childfree Living

Positive psychology, a relatively new field (Seligman, 1998), has grown rapidly in teaching, research, and application (Lopez & Gallagher, 2009) over the past 20 years, effectively altering the landscape of modern psychology (Wong, 2011). The original aim of PP was to look beyond mainstream “psychology as usual”, and to research and promote human flourishing (Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). PP’s critics argued that it was too narrowly focused on what Seligman (2002) referred to as the “pillars of a worthwhile life”: positive emotions and experiences (Harvey, 2001; Linley, Joseph, Harrington, & Wood, 2006), that it ignored life’s

³ Rempel (1985) is referenced herein due to the significant lack of recent research available on the subject of older childless adults. In 2007, Dykstra and Hagestad wrote: “Even though 30% of the U.S. population age 70-85 years in 2013 will be without a spouse and without children” (p. 1275) “the topic of *childlessness* is conspicuously absent in major publications on families of later life. When we surveyed volumes and overviews published in the past 30 years, we found a general lack of consideration for childless older adults” (p. 1282).

harsher realities and negative emotions and experiences (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Held, 2004). Later, as the field evolved, its second wave, PP 2.0, was introduced, offering a repair to any imbalances (Wong, 2011), positing an evolution of Seligman's original conception (Wong, 2011). In effect, PP 2.0 brings together the positive and negative aspects of life to negotiate the attainment of a meaningful existence in an imperfect world (Ryff & Singer, 2008; Wong, 2011, 2012). In particular, the dual-systems model proposed by Wong (2012) is a bridge between existential psychology's dark side and the light of PP: recognizing the unavoidable discomforts and disappointments in life while identifying mechanisms for converting negatives into positives. The dual-systems model highlights the potential for an increasingly balanced PP (Wong, 2012), one that would necessarily recognize weakness, pain, struggle, and even suffering (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Snyder, Lopez, & Pedrotti, 2010). Frustration, anger, guilt, and regret: all are potential motivators for positive life change (Wong, 2011).

Childlessness—by circumstance, by choice, or some combination of the two—is a potential source of pain and difficulty (Letherby, 2002; Roy et al., 2014). Whether it is the involuntarily childless (infertile) woman or couple struggling and frustrated at not being able to conceive (McLeod & Ponesse, 2008), or the childfree woman or couple, having chosen not to bear or raise children, facing negative bias and marginalizing stigma (Park, 2002), or even feeling regret (Alexander, Rubinstein, Goodman, & Luborsky, 1992), the path of a non-parent may be challenging. Culture dictates that a woman's primary life purpose is to procreate (Gillespie, 2003); she is told, in one way or another, from a young age, that motherhood is the foundation of her femininity, and that the meaning of life is linked to her ability or desire to breed (Veevers, 1973b). Mainstream psychology may endeavor to successfully treat the crisis of infertility (Deka & Sarma, 2010; Lalos, Lalos, Jacobsson, & Schoultz, 1986), and the childless woman's loneliness, despair, or depression (Lechner et al., 2007); however, the childfree woman has different concerns and, thus, different needs: in choosing not to breed, she may no longer meet the societal ideal (Letherby, 1999; Roy et al., 2014), and could therefore be perceived as less deserving of care and sympathy (Chancey & Dumais, 2009) than the involuntarily childless woman. The childfree woman has chosen her uncharted path and may seem to have rebuffed her life purpose—at once pioneer and pariah (Park, 2002). She will not play the conditioned, or standard, female role of “mother”, arguably making her “who am I?” less easily answered. That is, her life meaning and purpose is perhaps not so much assumed as it is found (Thoits, 1992, 2012). This search for meaning (Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008), or “will to meaning” (Frankl, 1969/2014), is fundamental to the human experience (Thompson & Janigian, 1988); and it is associated with a willingness on the part of the individual to grow and develop (Steger et al., 2006).

Human development is increasingly conceptualized as plastic and guided by agency (Elder Jr., 1994; Rothrauff & Cooney, 2008); and whereas parenting has long been considered the prime promoter of adult development (LeMasters, 1957), or generativity (Erikson, 1950)—“the psychological need to care for and give back to the next generation” (Rothrauff & Cooney, 2008, p. 148)—it is only one of the potential ways to experience growth and maturity (Azar, 2002; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). Generativity provides life with purpose (Keyes & Ryff, 1998), and it is a way of experiencing meaning (de St. Aubin, 2013): through generativity “the adult seeks to benefit future mankind” (p. 242). Rothrauff and Cooney (2008), in examining the connection between generativity and PWB, found that, though PWB and generativity have been positively associated, differences were not evident between parents and childless adults. Non-parental generativity, experienced in a variety of ways—i.e., participation in the lives of nieces

and nephews (Milardo, 2005; Pollet et al., 2006); teaching, mentoring, and volunteering (de St. Aubin, 2013)—has positive benefits and promotes both PWB and healthy adult development (Rothrauff & Cooney, 2008). It has been previously stated in this paper that, statistically, childfree women are not less psychologically well than other women. Specifically using Ryff's (1989) six dimensions of PWB—self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth—Jeffries and Konnert (2002) found that mothers and childfree women reported similar levels of well-being. Thus, it is possible that procreation is not necessary for healthy life span development (Rothrauff & Cooney, 2008), which is itself an argument for a more pervasive and extension inclusion of non-parenting in the social sciences (Ganong et al., 1990; Rubinstein, 1987). The theory of human development is in a process of reconceptualization, evolving to increasingly include a sense of agency (Bandura, 2006; Elder Jr., 1998): “to be an agent is to influence intentionally one’s functioning and life circumstances” (Bandura, 2006, p. 164). According to Bandura (2006), cultivating agency adds tangible substance to theoretical discourses about determinism and freedom. The childfree woman, not bound by the demands of motherhood, is taking that fabled “road less traveled” (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007). She is childfree, and it is freedom to which she is most attracted (Peterson, 2015). Voluntary childlessness implies choice—either a decision not to reproduce, or a decision to make peace with an inability to reproduce—and the choice to be positively childfree (Berer, 1999; Callan, 1987; Gillespie, 2003) intersects with many of PP’s most prevalent themes, all correlational with the overarching MIL construct: amongst them, agency, autonomy, eudaimonia, generativity, and self-determination.

Conclusion

Parenthood, and motherhood in particular, is not only widely researched and studied (Bartlett, 1995; Chancey & Dumais, 2009; Matthews & Matthews, 1986b; Shaw, 2011; Veevers, 1973a) it is also arguably over-represented by a massive consumer industry that seemingly caters to every need of a woman at every stage of her life as a mother (Voice Group, 2010). While there is a growing body of literature in family and marriage textbooks on the subject of infertility (Kelly, 2009), representation of voluntary childlessness remains scant (Chancey & Dumais, 2009). Veevers’ (1973a) assertion that women who choose not to reproduce should be of “intrinsic interest” to the social sciences, due to their non-conformity, still rings true (Letherby & Williams, 1999). With a rising percentage of women positively choosing to remain childless (Berer, 1999; Peterson, 2015), there would seem to be a valuable opportunity for PP—and particularly its second wave, PP 2.0—to further expand its definition of flourishing to consciously include positive childfree living; thereby, reconceiving its understanding of lifespan development, and more progressively asserting its agenda to “make life better” (Lomas, Hefferon, & Ivtzan, 2014). The choice to have children is meaningful, as is the choice not to have children. Perhaps the time has come to untangle the relationship between reproduction and femininity, to accept “childfree” as an active and fulfilling life, definitively removing the imperative of motherhood from the construct of what it means to be a woman.

References

- Abbey, A., Andrews, F. M., & Halman, L. J. (1992). Infertility and subjective well-being: The mediating roles of self-esteem, internal control, and interpersonal conflict. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 54(2), 408-417.
- Abma, J. C., & Martinez, G. M. (2006). Childlessness among older women in the United States: Trends and profiles. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 68(4), 1045-1056.
- Agonito, R. (2014). *The last taboo: Saying no to motherhood*. New York, NY: Algora.
- Alesina, A., Di Tella, R., & MacCulloch, R. (2004). Inequality and happiness: Are Europeans and Americans different? *Journal of Public Economics*, 88(9), 2009-2042.
- Alexander, B. B., Rubinstein, R. L., Goodman, M., & Luborsky, M. (1992). A path not taken: A cultural analysis of regrets and childlessness in the lives of older women. *The Gerontologist*, 32(5), 618-626.
- Avison, M., & Furnham, A. (2015). Personality and voluntary childlessness. *Journal of Population Research*, 32(1), 45-67.
- Azar, S. T. (2002). Parenting and child maltreatment. In M. H. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of parenting* (Vol. 4; pp. 361-388). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Baier, K. E. M. (1992). *The meaning of life*. New York, NY: Humana Press.
- Bandura, A. (2006). Toward a psychology of human agency. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 1(2), 164-180.
- Bartlett, J. (1995). *Will you be mother? Women who choose to say no*. New York, NY: NYU Press.
- Basten, S. (2009). Voluntary childlessness and being childfree. *The future of human reproduction* (Working paper #5). Oxford, UK: St. John's College.
- Baumeister, R. F. (1991). *Meanings of life*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Baumeister, R. F., Brewer, L. E., Tice, D. M., & Twenge, J. M. (2007). Thwarting the need to belong: Understanding the interpersonal and inner effects of social exclusion. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 1(1), 506-520.
- Baumeister, R. F., & Tice, D. M. (1990). Point-counterpoints: Anxiety and social exclusion. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 9(2), 165-195.
- Baumeister, R. F., & Vohs, K. D. (2002). The pursuit of meaningfulness in life. In C. R. Snyder, & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 608-618). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Beck, U., & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002). *Individualization: Institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Berer, M. (1999). Introduction: Living without children. *Reproductive Health Matters*, 7(13), 7-12.
- Biswas-Diener, R., Linley, P. A., Govindji, R., & Woolston, L. (2011). Positive psychology as a force for social change. In K. M. Sheldon, T. B. Kashdan, & M. F. Steger (Eds.), *Series in positive psychology. Designing positive psychology: Taking stock and moving forward* (pp. 410-418). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Blake, J. (1979). Is zero preferred? American attitudes toward childlessness in the 1970s. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 41(2), 245-257.
- Bloom, D. E., & Pebley, A. R. (1982). Voluntary childlessness: A review of the evidence and implications. *Population Research and Policy Review*, 1(3), 203-224.

- Boivin, J., Bunting, L., Collins, J. A., & Nygren, K. G. (2007). International estimates of infertility prevalence and treatment-seeking: Potential need and demand for infertility medical care. *Human Reproduction*, 22(6), 1506-1512.
- Bumpass, L. L. (1990). What's happening to the family? Interactions between demographic and institutional change. *Demography*, 27(4), 483-498.
- Bures, R. M., Koropecj-Cox, T., & Loree, M. (2009). Childlessness, parenthood, and depressive symptoms among middle-aged and older adults. *Journal of Family Issues*, 30(5), 670-687.
- Callan, V. J. (1987). The personal and marital adjustment of mothers and of voluntarily and involuntarily childless wives. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 49(4), 847-856.
- Cannold, L. (2004). Declining marriage rates and gender inequity in social institutions: towards an adequately complex explanation for childlessness. *People and Place*, 12(4), 1-11.
- Carroll, L. (2012) *The baby matrix: Why freeing our minds from outmoded thinking about parenthood and reproduction will create a better world*. San Francisco, CA: LiveTrue Books.
- Chancey, L., & Dumais, S. A. (2009). Voluntary childlessness in marriage and family textbooks, 1950-2000. *Journal of Family History*, 34(2), 206-223.
- Cox, R. H. (2001). The social construction of an imperative: Why welfare reform happened in Denmark and the Netherlands but not in Germany. *World Politics*, 53(3), 463-498.
- Crumbaugh, J. C., & Maholick, L. T. (1964). An experimental study in existentialism: The psychometric approach to Frankl's concept of noogenic neurosis. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 20(2), 200-207.
- de St. Aubin, E. (2013). Generativity and the meaning of life. In J. Hicks, & C. Routledge (Eds.), *The experience of meaning in life* (pp. 241-255). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.
- Deka, P. K., & Sarma, S. (2010). Psychological aspects of infertility. *British Journal of Medical Practitioners*, 3(3), 336-339.
- DeVellis, B. M., Wallston, B. S., & Acker, D. (1984). Childfree by choice: Attitudes and adjustment of sterilized women. *Population and Environment*, 7(3), 152-162.
- Dexter, L. A. (1958). A note on selective inattention in social science. *Social Problems*, 6(2), 176-182.
- Diener, E. (1984). Subjective well-being. *Psychological Bulletin*, 95(3), 542-575.
- Dye, J. L. (2008). Fertility of American women: 2006. *Current Population Reports (P20-558)*. Suitland, MD: U.S. Census Bureau.
- Dykstra, P. A., & Hagestad, G. O. (2007). roads less taken: Developing a nuanced view of older adults without children. *Journal of Family Issues*, 28(10), 1275-1310.
- Elder Jr., G. H. (1994). Time, human agency, and social change: Perspectives on the life course. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 57(1), 4-15.
- Elder Jr., G. H. (1998). The life course as developmental theory. *Child Development*, 69(1), 1-12.
- Emmons, R. A. (2003). Personal goals, life meaning, and virtue: Wellsprings of a positive life. In C. L. M. Keyes, & J. Haidt (Eds.), *Flourishing: Positive psychology and the life well-lived* (pp. 105-128). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Erikson, E. H. (1950). Growth and crises of the "healthy personality." In M. J. E. Senn (Ed.), *Symposium on the healthy personality* (pp. 91-146). Oxford, UK: Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation.

- Erikson, E. H. (1964). Inner and outer space: Reflections on womanhood. *Daedalus*, 93(2), 582-606.
- Frankl, V. E. (1985). *Man's search for meaning*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Frankl, V. E. (2014). *The will to meaning: Foundations and applications of logotherapy*. London, UK: Penguin. (Original published 1969)
- Frejka, T., & Sardón, J. P. (2004). Fertility in Austria: Past, present and the near future. *Vienna Yearbook of Population Research*, 2, 35-56.
- Frisén, A., Carlsson, J., & Wängqvist, M. (2014). "Doesn't everyone want that? It's just a given": Swedish emerging adults' expectations on future parenthood and work/family priorities. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 29(1), 67-88.
- Gable, S. L., & Haidt, J. (2005). What (and why) is positive psychology? *Review of General Psychology*, 9(2), 103-110.
- Gannon, K., Glover, L., & Abel, P. (2004). Masculinity, infertility, stigma and media reports. *Social Science & Medicine*, 59(6), 1169-1175.
- Ganong, L. H., Coleman, M., & Mapes, D. (1990). A meta-analytic review of family structure stereotypes. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 52(2), 287-297.
- Gillespie, R. (1999). Voluntary childlessness in the United Kingdom. *Reproductive Health Matters*, 7(13), 43-53.
- Gillespie, R. (2003). Childfree and feminine: Understanding the gender identity of voluntarily childless women. *Gender & Society*, 17(1), 122-136.
- Ginsburg, R. B. (1984). Some thoughts on autonomy and equality in relation to Roe v. Wade. *North Carolina Law Review*, 63(2), 375-386.
- Glenn, E. N. (1994). Social constructions of mothering: A thematic overview. In E. N. Glenn, G. Chang, & L. R. Forcey (Eds.), *Mothering: Ideology, experience, and agency* (pp. 1-29). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Goldberg, A. E., & Kuvalanka, K. A. (2012). Marriage (in) equality: The perspectives of adolescents and emerging adults with lesbian, gay, and bisexual parents. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 74(1), 34-52.
- Greil, A. L. (1997). Infertility and psychological distress: A critical review of the literature. *Social Science & Medicine*, 45(11), 1679-1704.
- Greil, A. L., Leitko, T. A., & Porter, K. L. (1988). Infertility: His and hers. *Gender and Society*, 2(2), 172-199.
- Hansen, T. (2012). Parenthood and happiness: A review of folk theories versus empirical evidence. *Social Indicators Research*, 108(1), 29-64.
- Hansen, T., Slagsvold, B., & Moum, T. (2009). Childlessness and psychological well-being in midlife and old age: An examination of parental status effects across a range of outcomes. *Social Indicators Research*, 94(2), 343-362.
- Harvey, J. H. (2001). The psychology of loss as a lens to a positive psychology. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 44(5), 838-853.
- Held, B. S. (2004). The negative side of positive psychology. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 44(1), 9-46.
- Hird, M. J., & Abshoff, K. (2000). Women without children: A contradiction in terms? *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 31(3), 347-366.
- Hirsch, A. M., & Hirsch, S. M. (1989). The effect of infertility on marriage and self-concept. *Journal of Obstetric, Gynecologic, & Neonatal Nursing*, 18(1), 13-20.

- Hoffman, S. R., & Levant, R. F. (1985). A comparison of childfree and child-anticipated married couples. *Family Relations*, 34(2), 197-203.
- Houseknecht, S. K. (1978). Voluntary childlessness. *Alternative Lifestyles*, 1(3), 379-402s
- Houseknecht, S. K. (1987). Voluntary childlessness. *Handbook of marriage and the family* (pp. 369-395). Boston, MA: Springer.
- Hull, N. E., Hoffer, W., & Hoffer, P. C. (Eds.). (2018). *The abortion rights controversy in America: A legal reader*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Inhorn, M. C., & van Balen, F. (2002). *Infertility around the globe: New thinking on childlessness, gender, and reproductive technologies*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Ireland, M. S. (1993). *Reconceiving women: Separating motherhood from female identity*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Jamison, P. H., Franzini, L. R., & Kaplan, R. M. (1979). Some assumed characteristics of voluntarily childfree women and men. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 4(2), 266-273.
- Jeffries, S., & Konnert, C. (2002). Regret and psychological well-being among voluntarily and involuntarily childless women and mothers. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 54(2), 89-106.
- Kanazawa, S. (2014). Intelligence and childlessness. *Social Science Research*, 48, 157-170.
- Keizer, R., Dykstra, P. A., & Jansen, M. D. (2008). Pathways into childlessness: Evidence of gendered life course dynamics. *Journal of Biosocial Science*, 40(6), 863-878.
- Kelly, M. (2009). Women's voluntary childlessness: A radical rejection of motherhood? *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 37(3/4), 157-172.
- Keyes, C. L. M., & Ryff, C. D. (1998). Generativity in adult lives: Social structural contours and quality of life consequences. In D. P. McAdams, & E. de St. Aubin (Eds.), *Generativity and adult development: How and why we care for the next generation* (pp. 227-263). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Klinger, E. (1977). *Meaning and void: Inner experience and the incentives in people's lives*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Koropecykj-Cox, T. (2002). Beyond parental status: psychological well-being in middle and old age. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64(4), 957-971.
- Koropecykj-Cox, T., Çopur, Z., Romano, V., & Cody-Rydzewski, S. (2018). University students' perceptions of parents and childless or childfree couples. *Journal of Family Issues*, 39(1), 155-179.
- Koropecykj-Cox, T., & Pendell, G. (2007). The gender gap in attitudes about childlessness in the United States. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69(4), 899-915.
- Koropecykj-Cox, T., Pienta, A. M., & Brown, T. H. (2007). Women of the 1950s and the "normative" life course: The implications of childlessness, fertility timing, and marital status for psychological well-being in late midlife. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 64(4), 299-330.
- Lalos, A., Lalos, O., Jacobsson, L., & Schoultz, B. V. (1986). Depression, guilt and isolation among infertile women and their partners. *Journal of Psychosomatic Obstetrics & Gynecology*, 5(3), 197-206.
- Lechner, L., Bolman, C., & Van Dalen, A. (2007). Definite involuntary childlessness: associations between coping, social support and psychological distress. *Human Reproduction*, 22(1), 288-294.
- LeMasters, E. E. (1957). Parenthood as crisis. *Marriage and Family Living*, 19, 352-355.

- Letherby, G. (1999). Other than mother and mothers as others: The experience of motherhood and non-motherhood in relation to 'infertility' and 'involuntary childlessness'. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 22(3), 359-372.
- Letherby, G. (2002). Childless and bereft? Stereotypes and realities in relation to 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' childlessness and womanhood. *Sociological Inquiry*, 72(1), 7-20.
- Letherby, G., & Williams, C. (1999). Non-motherhood: Ambivalent autobiographies. *Feminist Studies*, 25(3), 719-728.
- Linley, P. A., Joseph, S., Harrington, S., & Wood, A. M. (2006). Positive psychology: Past, present, and (possible) future. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 1(1), 3-16.
- Lomas, T., Hefferon, K., & Ivtzan, I. (2014). *Applied positive psychology: Integrated positive practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lopez, S. J., & Gallagher, M. W. (2009). A case for positive psychology. In S. J. Lopez, & C. R. Snyder (Eds.), *Oxford handbook of positive psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 3-6). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Margolis, R., & Myrskylä, M. (2011). A global perspective on happiness and fertility. *Population and Development Review*, 37(1), 29-56.
- Matthews, R., & Matthews, A. M. (1986a). Infertility and involuntary childlessness: The transition to nonparenthood. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 48(3), 641-649.
- Matthews, A. M., & Matthews, R. (1986b). Beyond the mechanics of infertility: Perspectives on the social psychology of infertility and involuntary childlessness. *Family Relations*, 35(4), 479-487.
- Mätzke, M., & Ostner, I. (2010). The role of old ideas in the new German family policy agenda. *German Policy Studies*, 6(3), 119-162.
- McAdams, D. P., & de St Aubin, E. (1992). A theory of generativity and its assessment through self-report, behavioral acts, and narrative themes in autobiography. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 62(6), 1003-1015.
- McLanahan, S., & Adams, J. (1987). Parenthood and psychological well-being. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 13, 237-257.
- McLeod, C., & Ponesse, J. (2008). Infertility and moral luck: The politics of women blaming themselves for infertility. *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics*, 1(1), 126-144.
- McMahan, E. A., & Estes, D. (2011). Hedonic versus eudaimonic conceptions of well-being: evidence of differential associations with self-reported well-being. *Social Indicators Research*, 103(1), 93-108.
- McQuillan, J., Greil, A. L., Shreffler, K. M., & Tichenor, V. (2008). The importance of motherhood among women in the contemporary United States. *Gender & Society*, 22(4), 477-496.
- Medina, S., & Magnuson, S. (2009). Motherhood in the 21st century: Implications for counselors. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 87(1), 90-96.
- Meyers, D. T. (2001). The rush to motherhood: Pronatalist discourse and women's autonomy. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 26(3), 735-773.
- Miall, C. E. (1986). The stigma of involuntary childlessness. *Social Problems*, 33(4), 268-282.
- Milardo, R. M. (2005). Generative uncle and nephew relationships. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67(5), 1226-1236.
- Mitchell, D., & Gray, E. (2007). Declining fertility: Intentions, attitudes and aspirations. *Journal of Sociology*, 43(1), 23-44.

- Movius, M. (1976). Voluntary childlessness: The ultimate liberation. *The Family Coordinator*, 25(1), 57-63.
- Myers, D. G. (1999). Close relationships and quality of life. In D. Kahneman, E. Diener, & N. Schwarz (Eds.), *Well-being: Foundations of hedonic psychology* (pp. 376-393). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Nomaguchi, K. M., & Milkie, M. A. (2003). Costs and rewards of children: The effects of becoming a parent on adults' lives. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 65(2), 356-374.
- Noordhuizen, S., de Graaf, P., & Sieben, I. (2010). The public acceptance of voluntary childlessness in the Netherlands: From 20 to 90 per cent in 30 years. *Social Indicators Research*, 99(1), 163-181.
- Ornstein, P. (2000). *Flux: Women on sex, work, kids, love, and life in a half-changed world*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Park, K. (2002). Stigma management among the voluntary childless. *Sociological Perspectives*, 45(1), 21-45.
- Pelton, S. L., & Hertlein, K. M. (2011). A proposed life cycle for voluntary childfree couples. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, 23(1), 39-53.
- Peterson, H. (2015). Fifty shades of freedom: Voluntary childlessness as women's ultimate liberation. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 53, 182-191.
- Peterson, H., & Engwall, K. (2013). Silent bodies: Childfree women's gendered and embodied experiences. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 20(4), 376-389.
- Pohlman, E. (1970). Childlessness, intentional and unintentional: Psychological and social aspects. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 151(1), 2-12.
- Pollet, T. V., Kuppens, T., & Dunbar, R. I. (2006). When nieces and nephews become important: Differences between childless women and mothers in relationships with nieces and nephews. *Journal of Cultural and Evolutionary Psychology*, 4(2), 83-93.
- Rempel, J. (1985). Childless elderly: What are they missing? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 47(2), 343-348.
- Resnick, S., Warmoth, A., & Serlin, I. A. (2001). The humanistic psychology and positive psychology connection: Implications for psychotherapy. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 41(1), 73-101.
- Ridgeway, C. L., & Correll, S. J. (2004). Unpacking the gender system: A theoretical perspective on gender beliefs and social relations. *Gender & Society*, 18(4), 510-531.
- Rothrauff, T., & Cooney, T. M. (2008). The role of generativity in psychological well-being: Does it differ for childless adults and parents? *Journal of Adult Development*, 15(3-4), 148-159.
- Roy, R. N., Schumm, W. R., & Britt, S. L. (2014). Voluntary versus involuntary childlessness. In *Transition to Parenthood* (pp. 49-68). New York, NY: Springer.
- Rubinstein, R. L. (1987). Childless elderly: Theoretical perspectives and practical concerns. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, 2(1), 1-14.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68-78.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2001). On happiness and human potentials: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52(1), 141-166.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2006). Self-regulation and the problem of human autonomy: Does psychology need choice, self-determination, and will? *Journal of Personality*, 74(6), 1557-1586.

- Ryan, R. M., Deci, E. L., Grolnick, W. S., & LaGuardia, J. G. (2006). The significance of autonomy and autonomy support in psychological development and psychopathology. In D. Cicchetti & D. Cohen (Eds.), *Developmental psychopathology: Vol. 1: Theory and methods* (2nd ed., pp. 795-849). New York, NY: Wiley.
- Ryff, C. D. (1989). Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57(6), 1069-1081.
- Ryff, C. D., & Keyes, C. L. M. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69(4), 719-727.
- Ryff, C. D., & Singer, B. H. (2008). Know thyself and become what you are: A eudaimonic approach to psychological well-being. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 9(1), 13-39.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (1998). What is the good life? *APA Monitor*, 29(10), 2.
- Seligman, M. E. P. (2002). Positive psychology, positive prevention, and positive therapy. In C. R. Snyder, & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 3-12). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 5-14.
- Shaw, R. L. (2011). Women's experiential journey toward voluntary childlessness: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 21(2), 151-163.
- Shea, G. A. (1983). Voluntary childlessness and the women's liberation movement. *Population and Environment*, 6(1), 17-26.
- Shelton, N., & Johnson, S. (2006). 'I think motherhood for me was a bit like a double-edged sword': The narratives of older mothers. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 16(4), 316-330.
- Simons, M. A. (1984). Motherhood, feminism and identity. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 7(5), 349-359.
- Sin, N. L., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2009). Enhancing well-being and alleviating depressive symptoms with positive psychology interventions: A practice-friendly meta-analysis. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 65(5), 467-487.
- Singer, J. A. (2004). Narrative identity and meaning making across the adult lifespan: An introduction. *Journal of Personality*, 72(3), 437-460.
- Snitow, A. (1992). Feminism and motherhood: An American reading. *Feminist Review*, 40, 32-51.
- Snyder, C. R., Lopez, S. J., & Pedrotti, J. T. (2010). *Positive psychology: The scientific and practical explorations of human strengths*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Steger, M. F. (2012). Experiencing meaning in life: Optimal functioning at the nexus of well-being, psychopathology, and spirituality. In P. T. P. Wong (Ed.), *The human quest for meaning: Theories, research, and applications* (pp. 165-184). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Steger, M. F., Frazier, P., Oishi, S., & Kaler, M. (2006). The meaning in life questionnaire: Assessing the presence of and search for meaning in life. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 53(1), 80-93.
- Steger, M. F., & Kashdan, T. B. (2007). Stability and specificity of meaning in life and life satisfaction over one year. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 8(2), 161-179.

- Steger, M. F., Kashdan, T. B., Sullivan, B. A., & Lorentz, D. (2008). Understanding the search for meaning in life: Personality, cognitive style, and the dynamic between seeking and experiencing meaning. *Journal of Personality, 76*(2), 199-228.
- Stillman, T. F., Baumeister, R. F., Lambert, N. M., Crescioni, A. W., DeWall, C. N., & Fincham, F. D. (2009). Alone and without purpose: Life loses meaning following social exclusion. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 45*(4), 686-694.
- Sundby, J. (1999). Sad not to have children, happy to be childless: A personal and professional experience of infertility. *Reproductive Health Matters, 7*(13), 13-19.
- Tabong, P. T. N., & Adongo, P. B. (2013). Infertility and childlessness: A qualitative study of the experiences of infertile couples in Northern Ghana. *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth, 13*(1), 72.
- Tanturri, M. L., & Mencarini, L. (2008). Childless or childfree? Paths to voluntary childlessness in Italy. *Population and Development Review, 34*(1), 51-77.
- Taylor, V., & Whittier, N. (1995). Analytical approaches to social movement culture: The culture of the women's movement. In H. Johnston, & B. Klandermans (Eds.), *Social Movements and Culture: Vol. 4: Social Movements, Protest, and Contention* (pp. 163-187). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Thoits, P. A. (1992). Identity structures and psychological well-being: Gender and marital status comparisons. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 55*(3), 236-256.
- Thoits, P. A. (2012). Role-identity salience, purpose and meaning in life, and well-being among volunteers. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 75*(4), 360-384.
- Thompson, S. C., & Janigian, A. S. (1988). Life schemes: A framework for understanding the search for meaning. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 7*(2-3), 260-280.
- Thornton, A., & Young-DeMarco, L. (2001). Four decades of trends in attitudes toward family issues in the United States: The 1960s through the 1990s. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 63*(4), 1009-1037.
- Tucker, J. S. (2006). The new future of motherhood. *Off Our Backs, 36*(2), 32-38.
- Twenge, J. M., Campbell, W. K., & Foster, C. A. (2003). Parenthood and marital satisfaction: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 65*(3), 574-583.
- Umberson, D. (1989). Relationships with children: Explaining parents' psychological well-being. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 51*(4), 999-1012.
- Umberson, D., Pudrovska, T., & Reczek, C. (2010). Parenthood, childlessness, and well-being: A life course perspective. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 72*(3), 612-629.
- Unisa, S. (1999). Childlessness in Andhra Pradesh, India: Treatment-seeking and consequences. *Reproductive Health Matters, 7*(13), 54-64.
- Veevers, J. E. (1973a). Voluntary childlessness: A neglected area of family study. *The Family Coordinator, 22*(2), 199-205.
- Veevers, J. E. (1973b). The social meanings of parenthood. *Psychiatry, 36*(3), 291-310.
- Ventegodt, S., Andersen, N. J., & Merrick, J. (2003). Quality of life philosophy I. Quality of life, happiness, and meaning in life. *TheScientificWorldJOURNAL, 3*, 1164-1175.
- Voice Group. (2010). Motherhood, marketization, and consumer vulnerability. *Journal of Macromarketing, 30*(4), 384-397.
- Wachter, K. W. (1997). Kinship resources for the elderly. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences, 352*(1363), 1811-1817.
- Waren, W., & Pals, H. (2013). Comparing characteristics of voluntarily childless men and women. *Journal of Population Research, 30*(2), 151-170.

- White, L. K., Booth, A., & Edwards, J. N. (1986). Children and marital happiness: Why the negative correlation? *Journal of Family Issues*, 7(2), 131-147.
- Wong, P. T. P. (2011). Positive psychology 2.0: Towards a balanced interactive model of the good life. *Canadian Psychology*, 52(2), 69-81.
- Wong, P. T. P. (2012). Toward a dual-systems model of what makes life worth living. In P. T. P. Wong (Ed.), *The human quest for meaning: Theories, research, and applications* (2nd ed., pp. 3-22). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Wong, P. T. P., & Fry, P. S. (Eds.). (1998). *The human quest for meaning: A handbook of psychological research and clinical applications*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Worell, J., & Todd, J. (1996). Development of the gendered self. In L. Smolak, M. P. Levine, & R. Striegel-Moore (Eds.), *The developmental psychopathology of eating disorders: Implications for research, prevention, and treatment* (pp. 135-156). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Wretmark, A. A. (1999). Coping with childlessness and perinatal loss: Reflections of a Swedish hospital chaplain. *Reproductive Health Matters*, 7(13), 30-38.
- Zhang, Z., & Hayward, M. D. (2001). Childlessness and the psychological well-being of older persons. *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 56(5), S311-S320.