



USELESS UTERUS: THE IMPACT OF UNWELCOME AND UNSOLICITED MESSAGES ON THE CHILDFREE

Amanda June Penney¹, Jennifer June Anderson²

¹MSW, LCSW, DSW, George Williams College, Aurora University, Aurora, IL, USA

²MSW, LCSW, PhD, University of Wisconsin at Whitewater, Laurentide, Whitewater, WI, USA

Abstract

This study explored how individuals that are childfree by choice are impacted by pronatalist messages that they receive. By utilizing a grounded theory approach for this qualitative study, a deeper understanding was gained of the interpersonal experience of individuals that identify as childfree by choice. Pronatalist messages were found to have varying degrees of pressure and escalate as individuals continued to resist their pressure. The negative messages were primarily directed at women and were categorized as hostile. The men were found to receive mostly positive messages that were categorized as persuasive. The sources of the direct messages are through the relationships closest to the childfree individuals which suggest persistent and regular exposure to them. The impact was found to be one of two possible experiences: anxiety or gaslighting. Anxiety was observed through the participants attempting to resist impact by enacting a defensive or avoidant state. Gaslighting was evidenced by participants absorbing impact through internalizing the pronatalist messages and judgements, or by questioning themselves.

Keywords

Childfree, Pronatalism, Messaging, Grounded Theory

There has been a shift in society, with more people making the decision to remain childfree. In 2018, the United States saw the birth rate dropped to the lowest it had been in 32 years, 11.6 births per 1000 people in the population (Hamilton et al., 2019). This phenomenon is not exclusive to the United States. In Canada, the crude birth rate per 1000 people was calculated to be 10.1 births during 2018 (Statistics Canada, n.d.). In the European Union, the birth rate is even lower, totaling 9.5 births for every 1000 people (The World Bank, n.d.). This decline in the birth rate signals a change in behavior. Now, more than ever, people are choosing not to have children. As a result, it becomes imperative to explore the experiences of those who elect to be childfree.

Messages and Meanings

As the childfree by choice population grows (Rybińska, 2020), U.S. society is having difficulty accepting them and their choices (Powell, 2020; Salyakhieva & Saveleva, 2017). This lack of understanding and acceptance results in various pronatalist messages being directed at those that are childfree by choice (Breines, 2020).

Heteronormativity

At the heart of this research is the motivational force behind the messages, heteronormativity. Heteronormativity was a concept that Warner (1991) explained as the devaluing of other sexualities by holding heterosexuality as the normative and natural sexual orientation. To this point, our understanding of how a certain gender is expected to act, think, look, or feel is constructed from the prevailing stereotypes and society at large (Page & Peacock, 2013). Heteronormative gender expectations are perpetuated by the programming in American media by their “proclivity for recreating narratives of heterosexual fairytale endings” (Stern, 2012, p. 168). Heteronormative expectations are further reinforced in U.S. society when people who do not fit the expectation, feel discouraged from displaying behavior that is contrary to heteronormativity. This was found to be the case by Rodó-De-Zárate (2017), whereas homophobic violence, aggressions, and judgement caused her participants who were lesbian, to opt to pass as heterosexual. This behavioral response allowed the public space to remain heteronormative. Habarth (2015) seems

to echo this when she refers to “negative social consequences for anyone who violates [heteronormative] expectations” (p. 169).

It is within the sphere of heteronormativity that “males and females are depicted as appropriate and complementary sexual partners for the purpose of procreation” (Page & Peacock, 2013, p. 640). As Poirot (2017) observes, “the heteronormative gendered family is the most celebrated unit of citizenship, not the individual” (p. 322). Pronatalism is central to heteronormative beliefs.

Pronatalism

Pronatalism is defined as “any attitude or policy that is ‘pro-birth’, that encourages reproduction, that exalts the role of parenthood” (Peck & Senderowitz, 1974, p. 1). Pronatalism creates a “prejudiced cultural context” by restricting or denying choice to individuals as a result of its rigid ideology (Peck & Senderowitz, 1974, p. 2). Fikslin (2021) observes that “pronatalist expectations are disproportionately applied to high-status women in the United States, prescribing not only that women are supposed to reproduce, but which women are supposed to reproduce” (p. 309). Morison et al. (2016) identified three key assumptions of pronatalism: children are natural and to have them is instinctual, having children is a developmental milestone of heterosexual adulthood and demonstrative of normal gender development, and that being a parent is fulfilling and required to have a life of happiness and meaning (p. 185). Bell (2013) found that the involuntarily childless participants in her study identified pressure from pronatalism in the form of questioning and judgement that they received from friends and others.

Language is infused with pronatalist messaging. In a review of the term “family” and various definitions between 1934 and 2009, Gold (2012) found that children were continually included in the updated variations of the definition. Brooks (2019) notes much of the same when it comes to terminology to describe childfree women:

The absence of non-dichotomous language and over-reliance on heteronormative, pronatalist ideals of appropriate roles of women (all demarcations of women as childless, childfree, non-mothering, non-mother, nullipara continue to remind us all of what we, as women, are not doing) perpetuates dynamics of power and legitimacy in our culture. (p. 150)

Those that live childfree lives challenge the pronatalist societies that they live in and conflict with the heteronormative expectations. The pronatalist messages that the childfree by choice receive are not always intended to be negative, but often they are, regardless of intention. The messages range anywhere from questioning to criticizing (Bell, 2013), axiologically incentivizing (i.e., parking spots for “expectant mothers” (Rubel, 1996), or tailored services (i.e. gender reveal parties) (Williams, 2016).

There are many ways that people are exposed to the ideas of pronatalism. Bhambhani & Inbanathan (2020) explain how “the norm to procreate has been primarily preserved and perpetuated by the social institutions of marriage and family, with other institutions such as religion, education, economy, health, and jurisprudence, encouraging their continuance” (p. 341). From the moment a person is born they are surrounded by pronatalist messages that come from friends, family, and society. Rieder (2015) discussed the “pressure to have children (from parents and grandparents, friends and society as a whole-especially for women), and although it is diminishing, there is something of a stigma attached to not having children” (p. 294).

The purpose of this study was to explore how individuals that are childfree by choice are impacted by pronatalist messages that they receive throughout their lives. Attention was given to the content of the messages and the varying responses that childfree by choice individuals employed when confronted with pronatalist messages.

Qualitative Research Method

This study utilized a grounded theory approach. This process consisted of “multiple stages of data collection and the refinement and interrelationship of categories of information” (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2007, 2015, as cited in Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 13). By utilizing a grounded theory approach for this qualitative study, a deeper understanding was gained in terms of the interpersonal experience of individuals that identify as childfree by choice. This discernment helped to synthesize the experience of receiving pronatalist messages as a childfree by choice individual.

The participants for this study were recruited from social media interest groups. Participants voluntarily took part in the study by accessing a link to a questionnaire that was posted on social media. The participants were individuals of varying demographic backgrounds. The data gathered was processed and analyzed to build theory that helps to better understand the experience and impact of receiving pronatalist messages that contrast with the reality of those that are childfree by choice.

Theoretical Sampling

As is aligned with using a grounded theory approach, the researcher utilized what is known as theoretical sampling once initial concepts and themes began to emerge from the data. What this means is that the participants in the study were chosen to “help the researcher best form the theory” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 85). To be included in the study, participants had to be 18 yrs. or older and needed to identify as childfree by choice. The questionnaire was comprised of nine demographic questions and five open-ended questions specifically focused on their experience with messages related to them not having children.

IRB Approval

This study was approved by the institutional review board at a large midwestern university (IRB #1090). No identifiable information was collected from the participants.

Grounded Theory Analysis of Data

Using grounded theory, the researcher was ultimately able to build a framework using the themes that emerged through the data. The grounded theory analysis procedures are iterative and involve multiple steps of coding. There are three steps in the coding process: open coding, focused coding, and theoretical coding. The initial phase of coding involved going line by line and using gerunds to discern what action or process was taking place. Following open coding, the researcher then moved to the focused coding phase which involved identifying the most conceptually significant codes and refining them into categories. After the researcher identified the focused codes, she moved into theoretical coding. The researcher completed an iterative process of data analysis which included five rounds of coding.

During the fourth phase of coding is when the researcher began to see diverging themes come through the data in correlation with the gender of the participants. The data was then separated by gender and analyzed separately. It was during the fourth round that the categories and themes were defined. The researcher continually compared the data to the categories and themes, while consulting the existing research to substantiate or delineate the categories and themes that had emerged. The final round of coding is when the researcher was able to organize and define the manifest themes to better understand the latent themes that emerged from the data.

Findings

The data was subjected to an iterative process of analysis which enhanced the researcher’s understanding of the various codes and themes that were present in the data. As the researcher moved through the coding process, she then addressed the meanings of the manifest themes and conducted further analysis and comparison to the literature to identify the latent themes.

Descriptive

The sample (N=15) was comprised of nine females and six males. The youngest participant to complete the questionnaire was 18 years old, and the oldest participant was 67 years old. Most participants indicated that they are married with nine married, four that are single, and two that are in relationships. All participants indicated that they are either “White” or “Caucasian”. Ethnically, there are two participants that indicated that they are Hispanic. All participants that were included in the data indicated that they are childfree by choice, 13 identified as *early articulators* who had made their decision prior to the age of 29 years old. Two participants identified as *postponers* who made their decision to be childfree during or after the age of 29 years old.

Manifest Themes: Messaging

There were eight manifest themes that emerged from the data that was provided in response to the question that asked the participants about the pronatalist messages that they have received (see Table 1). Natural, fulfillment, glorifying, infantilizing, questioning, demanding, threatening, and shaming are the manifest themes that were found.

Natural

The theme of natural is defined as having children being seen as an expected life course. Messages that fit the theme were reported by 27% of the participants. The next theme discovered is fulfillment.

Fulfillment

Fulfillment is defined as being told that children are required to feel complete. Messages that matched the theme of fulfillment were reported by 13% of the participants. The theme of glorifying follows fulfillment.

Glorifying

Messages seen as glorifying are defined as highlighting the positive impact that having children could have on your life. Messages that fit the theme of glorifying were reported by 40% of the participants. Following the theme of glorifying is that of infantilizing.

Infantilizing

Infantilizing was defined as being made to feel that the person doesn't know what they want or that their beliefs are flawed. Infantilizing themed messages were reported by 27% of the participants. The next theme is questioning.

Questioning

The theme of questioning is defined as occurring when others appear to try to understand a person's choice to not have children by asking passive aggressive questions. Messages that fit the theme of questioning were reported by 33% of the participants. Demanding is the next theme that was found.

Demanding

Demanding is defined as when others want the person to have children due to their own desires. Demanding themed messages were reported by 20% of the participants. The next theme is threatening.

Threatening

The theme of threatening is defined as being told that there will be regret if they do not have children. Messages that fit the theme of threatening were reported by 20% of the participants. The last manifest theme is shaming.

Shaming

Shaming is defined as being judged negatively for the choice to not have children. Shaming messages were reported by 33% of the participants. The manifest themes were then further analyzed to define the latent themes.

Messaging: Latent Themes

The manifest themes were organized into two categories which became the basis for the latent themes. The latent themes that were found were positive and negative messages. The latent themes were identified as such based on the experience that the participants seemed to communicate in relation to the messages associated with the latent theme.

Positive Messages

One of the latent themes is positive messages. The positive messages are inclusive of the manifest themes of natural, fulfillment, and glorifying. These themes all seem to illustrate the experience of persuasion due to the attempts to convince the childfree person to change their stance on not having children. The other latent theme that was found is negative messages.

Negative Messages

The latent theme of negative messages includes the manifest themes of infantilizing, questioning, demanding, threatening, and shaming. These themes were interpreted to be experienced as hostility. The feeling of hostility was conveyed through messages that were passive aggressive or that implied a negative characterization of the individual that they were directed at. Hostility was directly communicated in the messages that were threatening or shaming.

Summative Responses			
The variation in the messages that are received by those that are childfree by choice.			
Latent Themes	Manifest Themes	Meaning	Context
Positive Messages: Persuasion	Natural	Having children is seen as an expected life course.	"That I'm avoiding what humans have been doing since the beginning."
			"Everyone should have children; it is just what everyone does."
			"I put pressure on myself when I see it as your <i>next step</i> and <i>starting a family</i> ."
	Fulfillment	Being told that children are required to feel complete.	"It will fulfill you completely."
			"I have been told that I'll feel incomplete."
	Glorifying	Highlighting the positive impact that having children could have on your life.	"I've been told that it's a sign of success to have a child."
"It is what brings you joy in life."			
"They are the best thing that can happen to you."			
Negative Messages: Hostility	Infantilizing	Being made to feel that they do not actually know what they want due to immaturity or that their beliefs are flawed.	"Oh, you haven't lived until you've had children."
			"You're too young to decide right now."
			"When I was young everyone told me I would change my mind."
			"Wouldn't listen when I said I knew I didn't want kids and it was easy."
			"You will change your mind."

Negative Messages: Hostility	Questioning	When others appear to try to understand a person’s choice by asking passive aggressive questions.	“What are you waiting for?”
			“Why wouldn’t you want kids?”
			“Is there something wrong with you?”
			“Don’t you like kids?”
	Demanding	When others want the person to have children due to their own desires.	“I got messages from my sister in-law wondering when she would become an aunt.”
			“I’ve been told I need to have a child so my child could be friends with my friends’ children or that my mom wants to be a grandma.”
	Threatening	This is experienced through being told that they’re running out of time and will regret their choice.	“You’ll regret it.”
			“I’ve been told multiple times that I’m 35 and should have children by now.”
			“I’ll regret not having kids.”
	Shaming	Being judged negatively for choosing not to have children.	“If I have a kid too late in life then I would be an old man.”
			“Something must be wrong if you don’t have children.”
			“I’m selfish for not having any.”
			“People that are childfree by choice are judged/criticized more harshly than people who decide to have kids.”

Table 1: Overview of Qualitative Results

Origin: Manifest Themes

There were eight manifest themes that emerged from the data that was provided in response to the question that asked the participants about who or where they receive pronatalist messages from. Self, partner, family, friends, coworkers, acquaintances, media, and society are the manifest themes that were found. The manifest themes are created from in vivo codes and are self-explanatory.

Self

The first manifest code is self. The code of self represents that the participant is identified as the original source of the pronatalist messages. This code was only reported by 7% of the participants.

Partner

The next theme is partner. This theme was also reported by 7% of the participants as a source of messages. One participant reported that his lack of interest in having children can be a hindrance to dating, especially since he is at an age where many people would be thinking of starting a family.

Family

Family was the source, identified most frequently as the origin of pronatalist messages. 73% of the participants identified family or specific family members as a source. The next theme, friends, was the second most frequently identified source of messages.

Friends

Friends were a source of messages that were identified by 53% of participants. There were 44% of female participants that identified friends as a source of messages, compared to 67% of male participants. Coworkers were the third most frequently identified source of messages.

Coworkers

The theme of coworkers was cited by 33% of the participants. Coworkers were identified equally by the males and females. Cited slightly less than coworkers, was acquaintances.

Acquaintances

The theme of acquaintances was cited by 27% of participants. The researcher found it interesting that men would receive messages from acquaintances as parenthood has not been as intertwined with the male identity to the degree that it has for females.

Media

The theme of media was cited by 20% of the participants. The participants that identified the media as a source of messages all identified as female. This could be related to the media’s often negative portrayal of childfree women in contrast to how men without children are portrayed.

Society

The final manifest theme is society. The theme of society was cited by 33% of respondents. The manifest themes were then divided into three categories which helped to identify the latent themes.

Origin: Latent Themes

The manifest themes were organized into three categories which became the basis for the latent themes. The latent themes were understood based on the proximity of the relationship to the origin manifest themes. The latent themes were identified as the micro system, mezzo system, and macro system.

Micro System

One of the categories is close relationships. This category includes the manifest themes of self, partner, family, and friends. These manifest themes all seem to align with the latent theme of an individual's micro system. Those specific relationships would typically have the most direct interaction with and impact on an individual throughout their life. The next category of manifest themes is loose relationships.

Mezzo System

The loose relationships category includes the manifest themes of coworkers and acquaintances. These themes seem to illustrate the latent theme of an individual's mezzo system. Those specific relationships would tend to have contact limited to working hours or sporadic occasions with limited influence or impact on an individual. The last category of manifest themes is peripheral relationships.

Macro System

The peripheral relationships category includes the manifest themes of media and society. These themes illustrate the latent theme of an individual's macro system. The impact of the media and society may be more nuanced and less understood by an individual.

Impact: Manifest Themes

There were four manifest themes that emerged from the data that was provided in response to the question that asked the participants how they feel the messages have shaped them. Judgement, self-doubt, avoidant, and defensive are the manifest themes that were found (see Table 2).

Judgement

The manifest theme of judgement is defined as a sense that they are being judged negatively or internalizing negative judgements. This theme was reported by 13% of the participants. A participant reported impact that matched this theme when she responded, "I always feel judged, always having to defend my choice to not have children".

Self-Doubt

The theme of self-doubt was also reported by 13% of the participants. Self-doubt is defined as feeling a lack of confidence in oneself. A participant demonstrated this theme when she shared, "I do question how it is that I have so much trouble running my own life when my mom had three kids at my age".

Avoidant

Avoidant is the next theme that was identified in the data. Avoidant is defined as avoiding situations where there may be judgement for their childfree by choice identity. The avoidant theme was reported by 20% of the participants.

Defensive

The final manifest theme of defensive was cited by 33% of participants. The theme of defensive is defined as being direct and assertive when perceiving judgement from others. Defensive was also conveyed through participants reporting feeling a greater sense of confidence in their childfree identities. The manifest themes were then divided into two categories which helped to discern the latent themes.

Impact: Latent Themes

The manifest themes were organized into two groups that helped identify the latent themes. The researcher conceptualized these themes based on how some participants detailed how they seemed to have internalized the messages, while others were very defensive against the messages. The latent themes of absorbing impact and resisting impact were identified.

Absorbing Impact

One of the latent themes is absorbing impact. This was named as such due to the participants having internalized some of the pronatalist messages as evidenced in their self-judgement or questioning of self. This includes the manifest themes of judgement and self-doubt. These manifest themes conveyed the experience of being gaslit. Gaslighting emerged as the participant’s experience through their narratives of internalizing the various pronatalist messages that have been directed at them, causing them to experience a sense of anxiety and a decrease in their self-confidence. The next latent theme is resisting impact.

Resisting Impact

The resisting impact theme includes the manifest themes of avoidant and defensive. These themes illustrated the experience of self-preservation. Self-preservation was experienced through the participants’ attempts to cope with confrontation and judgement for their choice to be childfree by using avoidant or defensive strategies. These strategies helped the participants minimize psychological harm from the pronatalist messages that are directed at them. While some participants described using an avoidant strategy, others were direct and assertive when perceiving judgement from others and thus used a defensive strategy to shut down pronatalist attacks and protect themselves from judgement.

Summative Responses			
The impacts of the pronatalist messages were absorbed by some and resisted by others.			
Latent Themes	Manifest Themes	Meaning	Context
Absorbing Impact: Gaslighting	Judgement	Being judged or internalizing negative judgements.	“It makes me feel selfish and that I need to grow up.” “I always feel judged, always having to defend my choice to not have children.”
	Self-Doubt	Feeling a lack of confidence in oneself.	“...other people think they know my mind better than I do.” “I do question how it is that I have so much trouble running my own life when my mom had three kids at my age.”
Resisting Impact: Self-preservation	Avoidant	Avoiding situations where there may be judgement for their childfree by choice identity.	“Made me guarded and try to avoid the topic all together.” “My decision to share that I do not have kids is more guarded [because] of the way it will be perceived.” “I was able to get away from the small town...”
	Defensive	Being direct and assertive when perceiving judgement from others.	“Makes me not want to have kids more just to prove my point.” “Personally, I feel like it strengthens my opinion on the matter...” “These messages have only convinced me that I’m making the right decision.” “They make me more outspoken about not having children.”

Table 2: Overview of Qualitative Results

Discussion

This research study gathered data that helped to illuminate the experience of receiving pronatalist messages and provided a better understanding of the potential impacts of receiving such messages. Although many of the findings from this research are consistent with the existing literature in the subject area, this research helped to synthesize the process and experience of receiving pronatalist messages. Much of the literature available on the childfree population focuses on the outcomes of choosing to be childfree, their characteristics, and various areas of their experience. There is extremely limited research available that examines the process and experience of pronatalist messaging on the childfree by choice population. This study has an advantage in that it includes male and female participants so there is a comparison in the differences of the messages, origins, and the impact. The differences that present themselves through the data substantiate that pronatalism is still operating through not only the institutions within U.S. society, but in a covert tactic of using those closest to the childfree population to perpetuate pronatalist messages.

Historically and currently, pronatalism has relied on creating division between different groups of women and people to dilute their power and create distraction from the oppressive ideologies and forces that continue to be operationalized within U.S. society. “These tend to regulate our place in the world and to conceal inequitable relations of power. The result is that the prevailing order remains largely unchanged” (O’Driscoll, 2019, p. 27). Research such as this helps to expose and challenge these toxic ideologies and institutional structures and practices while recognizing those that have been made to feel that recognition is harmful.

There were findings that were surprising and of interest, especially in relation to answering the research question regarding the impact of pronatalist messages on the childfree population. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the impact, the researcher collected data about the content and origins of the pronatalist messages.

Messages

There were various types of messages that were reported in the data that were found to fall into one of two latent themes overall. The first latent theme that was found is persuasion. This theme appeared through the data about the messages and initially appeared to seemingly have a positive tone. These messages were premised on the themes of procreation as natural, fulfillment, and glorifying. The messages that fit in these themes all fit within either the “destiny assumption” or the “fulfillment assumption” as Carroll (2012) described. These pronatalist assumptions are rooted in the beliefs that procreation is instinctual or that parenthood is required in order to achieve fulfillment in life.

These messages may seem innocuous at first glance, but under closer examination they are very much double-edged in that, although procreation may very much feel instinctual for many individuals, for those that do not share that feeling these messages imply abnormalcy or unnaturalness. Along those same lines, if believing that procreation is the only way to achieve fulfillment, then being childfree symbolizes being unfulfilled. The messages that glorify having children are subjective and a matter of perspective. Just because some people relish being a parent, this does not mean that all people will or do. There has to be trust that people know what is in their own best interest. The other latent theme that presented in the data is hostility,

The latent theme of hostility was comprised of five different themes: infantilizing, questioning, demanding, threatening, and shaming. The messages that were questioning or threatening were reported by both, men and women, while demanding was only reported by men and infantilizing and shaming were only reported by women. Within the messages that both genders reported receiving, there were stark contrasts in the specific messages that the men received versus the women.

The messages that fit the theme of questioning had a different essence based on gender. While the messages that men reported were “what are you waiting for”, the messages reported by women were more pointed: “is there something wrong with you” or “don’t you like kids”. The difference in tone is likely related to sociolinguistics and the influence of the pronatalist beliefs regarding procreation being expected and normal for women. Williams (2018) points out that “not only are [women] expected to have children, but we are also expected to want to have children. This is dictated to us by the language used in society...[and] by our family” (p. 45). The messages that were threatening were another theme of messages that both male and female participants reported receiving.

The threatening messages were similar in their actual phrasing regardless of gender. Messages of regret or being told that they are missing out are the premise of the threats. Aside from the research on feelings of regret of individuals that choose not to have children that tends to support a majority of those that are childfree not experiencing regret (DeLyser, 2012), this would align with the research and instances where parents have admitted to regretting having children (Donath, 2015). It is possible that many more parents share this feeling of regret than are able to openly express, as Walters (2012) noted, the expression of parental regret is a taboo subject and parents are shamed if they do dare to honestly share their feelings of regret. The next theme of messages are those that were identified as demanding.

The demanding messages were surprisingly only identified by male participants. These messages were received from friends and relatives that wanted the childfree individuals to have children to meet their friends or relative’s personal desires. The desires from relatives involved wanting to take on a new identity within the family system, such as grandparent or aunt. Lunneborg (1999) found that the childfree men in her study that experienced pressure, identified their mothers as a source. It was interesting to find this sort of filial obligation directed towards males whom have been found to be associated with the filial obligation of instrumental support (Hwang et al., 2018). This could have been the result of the individual being an only option for these relatives to have an opportunity to change their roles, as would be the case if the son was an only child (Veevers, 1980), or the only other sibling to the person that was desiring to experience aunthood (May & Lahad, 2019). The messages from friends would have different motivations than family members.

The message that were reported from friends wanting the individual to have children could be an attempt by the friends to secure their friendship with the childfree individual during this transitional time in their life as Carroll (2012) suggests. The friends may also want to share the experience of parenthood with the individual, as much of the basis of friendship is very much related to the tenet of homophily; We associate with those that have similarities to ourselves (Christakis & Fowler, 2013; McPherson et al., 2001; Sprecher & Felmler, 2021). While the messages that were rooted in the theme of demanding were experienced by men, messages that were infantilizing and shaming in nature were solely directed at women.

A majority of female participants reported receiving messages that were infantilizing and shaming. For the infantilizing and shaming themes, 89% of female participants reported receiving at least one or both of these types of messages. The messages that were shaming were telling the women that they are selfish while the infantilizing messages commonly focused on dismissing the women’s beliefs by telling them that they were “too young” to know what they wanted or “you will change your mind”. There is something that feels very familiar in the infantilizing messages: paternalism. Paternalism is closely intertwined with pronatalism and works to reinforce pronatalist ideals. Through these infantilizing messages, paternalism attempts to interfere with the beliefs of these

individuals by denying and discrediting their personal agency. Paternalism also promotes the stereotypes of women as requiring protection or guidance from others in order to live a life that is in their best interest since women have a history of being seen as irrational, incapable, and unable to be trusted to know what they want.

Origins

The origins of the messages were identified by the participants who had received pronatalist messages. There was a clear theme of the micro, mezzo, and macro systems identified. While there were some engendered differences in the sources of the messages that they received, there were many commonalities.

The commonalities that were identified were prevalent in the micro and mezzo systems. Within the micro system the participants frequently identified their family and friends as sources of pronatalist messages. This data was not surprising as many studies have identified these relationships to be sources of pronatalist pressure, as was found by Carroll (2000), Gotlib (2018), Mullins (2018), & Walters (2012). The percentage of female and male participants who identified mezzo-level relationships as being sources of messages was almost identical. For both genders, 33% identified coworkers, while 22% of female and 17% of male participants identified acquaintances. In contrast to the commonalities, there were two key areas where there were contrasts between the origins of the pronatalist messages for females and males.

There were differences in experiences for males and females when it came to a specific area of micro system message origins as well as the overall macro system. In the micro system there was a female participant who identified herself as a source of messages. Meanwhile, a male participant reported that a former romantic partner was a source of messages for him.

The female participant's narrative conveyed a state of having internalized pronatalist messages. She explained, "I have not felt pressure from anyone to have kids. I put pressure on myself when I see it as your 'next step' and 'starting a family'". It is possible that this internalization could be linked to the participant's Hispanic ethnicity. As Walters (2012) highlights, "children are...the center of Hispanic culture" (p. 36). Accordingly, Hartnett and Gemmill (2020) have found a considerable decline in the intended number of children for both native- and foreign-born Hispanics in conjunction with an increase in intended childlessness among native-born Hispanics but they still had the highest parity when compared to any other race-ethnicity. In terms of internalizing the pronatalist pressure, Gotlib (2016) asserts that this is a result of continuously needing to justify one's childfree identity in an effort to resist the stigma, which could certainly be true for the participant as she struggles against societal stigma in addition to ingrained cultural values.

In terms of the male participant receiving messages from a past romantic partner, this could be related to possible scenarios that have been discussed in the literature that has examined relationships of the childfree. One such possibility is that he never told his partner of his intentions to be childfree. As Smith et al. (2020) found that seven out of the nine men in their study that were in relationships, had "either never had or had delayed having a 'serious' conversation about parenthood" (p. 332). Anxiety was found to be surrounding the matter of having a conversation with their partners about their childfree intentions.

Another possibility is that the male participant's partner thought that he might change his mind. Peterson (2018) found that even when women were explicit about their intention to be childfree, they later found that their partners thought they could change their mind or expected their mind to change on the matter naturally. It has been theorized that "men have less commitment to the [childfree] decision, whatever their motives are. They want to leave their options open" (Lunneborg, 1999, p. 134).

As we have thoroughly discussed the differences in the micro system, we shall turn our attention to the macro system. In the macro system there was a noticeable difference in the reports from the females versus the males. There were 44% of female participants that identified society and 33% identified the media as a source of pronatalist messages. This contrasted with the males, whom only 17% identified society and none identified the media. This raises the issue of certain women being represented and recognized in society and media while other women are completely ignored or portrayed in a less than flattering light. Conversely, men are either not being targeted in a multidimensional way or they aren't affected the way childfree women are.

Let's start by examining the vulnerable position of women. Gotlib (2016) insists that "pronatalism...is the official endorsement of women-as-mother – or of woman-as-essentially-mother – through various policies, programs, propaganda, and other means of social narrative-shaping" (p. 330). The most common shaping of social narratives happens through the media and what it decides to feature and what is noticeably absent. The media continuously stalks and fetishizes pregnancy & motherhood on a regular basis in magazines and media coverage of celebrities and social media influencers (Dolan, 2020; Walters, 2012; Williams, 2018). While researching U.S. network television between 2010-2015, Kaklamanidou (2019) came to conclude that "network television, with rare exceptions, not only avoids representations of female childlessness but also promotes pronatalism" (p. 275). Williams (2018) contends that "the media does not mirror reality, but rather constructs its own version of reality" (p. 88). Aside from women who are not mothers being unacknowledged in the media, families that do not include children are also missing (Gotlib, 2016). Families that don't conform to the normative representations "often go unrecognized and unappreciated, and are even pathologized by labels such as 'dysfunctional' or 'morally wrong'"

(Turner-Vorbeck, 2006, p. 153). This absence of representation can be understood as what Tuchman (1979) termed “symbolic annihilation”.

Childless women and families, along with many other marginalized communities, have historically and continue to be symbolically annihilated in the name of patriarchy and capitalism (Caswell et al., 2017). While inquiring into the absence of depictions of childless women and families in advertising, Tugend (2016) discovered the culprit to be capitalism. Mothers are not to be overlooked or underestimated in their utility to the U.S. capitalist society. They are venerated as the “largest spending consumer group in the U.S.” and in 2015 they spent \$3.4 trillion (Tugend, 2016, para 8). As capitalism continues to use the media to target and ensnare mothers, childless women can’t ignore their own absence in the media and lack of value in society. Men’s relationship with the macro system seems to be much different than women’s, based on the minimal recognition of pronatalist messages among the male group of participants.

Only one male participant reported receiving pronatalist messages from society. This was in stark contrast to what the women in the study reported. These findings are supported by McQuillan et al. (2012) whom observed that childfree women identified more social messages than childfree men. This discrepancy may be a result of pronatalism primarily targeting women with mandated motherhood. As previously mentioned, men felt that women by far experience more pronatalist pressure which may help support the findings that not as many men felt pressured by macro system institutions. Lunneborg’s (1999) research seems to confirm this when she found that “the men didn’t talk of feeling pressured by advertising, the media, and social institutions” (p. 133). Another possibility for the imbalance in pronatalist pressure could be due to an idea that Peterson (2018) points out, that men are not as restricted by their biology in their abilities to procreate and thus pronatalism does not focus as intensely on them because they have more opportunity to change their mind, whereas women do not. This unequal pressure, accordingly results in unequal impact.

Impact

This research wanted to answer the question of how those that are childfree by choice are impacted by pronatalist messages that they may receive. The data clearly communicated that there were some shared experiences related to the impact, but there was also a separate process of impact taking place for about half of the women in the study. The two themes that were identified are resisting impact and absorbing impact.

Resisting Impact

There were two common strategies that were employed in efforts to resist impact from pronatalist messages. One strategy was to avoid situations where there could be a negative impact. Stahnke et al. (2020) acknowledged how using an avoidant strategy via “covering up their stigmatized identity” helped childfree women manage the rejection that they received from others (p. 161). Durham (2008) found that participants would conceal their childfree status if they felt they were likely to receive a negative response such as pity, disappointment, or anger.

Research from O’Driscoll (2019) found there to be a “culture of silence around non-motherhood” (p. 21). The avoidant strategy is specifically addressed as a coping mechanism by Veevers (1980) and Mullins (2018). Veevers (1980) termed avoidant strategies as “evasive actions” and discussed how, in some cases, a person may relocate from “intolerant environments” physically, limit their communication and contact with those that disagree with their choice, or conceal their choice altogether (pp. 139-140). In contrast to the avoidant strategy, there was a more direct and defensive strategy as well.

The participants that employed the defensive strategy tended to feel greater confidence in their choice in response to the pronatalist messages. These findings support Park’s (2002) findings of the defensive approach whereas childfree women managed stigma by “condemning the condemners” (p. 21). Smith et al. (2020) found the same tactic when they studied childfree men. The men would deflect judgement that was being directed at them back towards those that questioned their choice. It was theorized that this defensiveness could be the result of the pressures and frustrations that result from being childfree in a pronatalist society. Blackstone’s (2019) own research seems to confirm this when she notes, “For the childfree, having to defend their own valid choice in the face of unsolicited [opinions] is frustrating and exhausting” (p. 178). It’s not too surprising then that Avison & Furnham’s (2015) findings asserted that childfree individuals were found to score low in the areas of agreeableness and extraversion when compared to parents and future parents. Those findings are understandable, considering how the childfree have to navigate social settings with defensive or avoidant strategies in order to preserve their psychological well-being. Likewise, when others repeatedly and needlessly pressure them into abiding by cultural norms and they instead defend their beliefs, they are likely to be seen as disagreeable. The defensive strategies were forms of self-preservation in resisting being impacted by the stigma and judgement that they often encountered, but not all participants were able to employ strategies to resist impact and seemed to instead absorb the impact.

Absorbed Impact

There were four participants that described their experience with receiving pronatalist messages that seemed to describe them absorbing the impact. The themes that were presented in their responses were judgement and self-

doubt. For the participants who expressed feelings of self-doubt, they described questioning themselves or how other people think they know the participant's mind better than the participant. This kind of impact is especially problematic because it can leave participants feeling as though they have been gaslit (Harding, 2009) & infantilized (Gotlib, 2016).

When someone is not believed when they express their wants and needs, and is discouraged from exercising agency within their life, it can impact their confidence. As Gotlib (2016) explains, "at best, she is to be dismissed. At worst, her claims are reduced to the absurd and the abnormal- sometimes to the extent that she begins to doubt her own agential legitimacy and standing" (p. 338). Gillespie (2000) found that childfree women were viewed as immature for their childfree choice and felt patronized. Letherby (1994) identified how women without children are often viewed as children themselves. Gillespie (2000) argues, "an assumption that childless women will change their minds, and that others 'know better' reinforces childlessness as an inappropriate, temporary choice; and of childless women themselves as childlike" (p. 229). This leaves women who choose to be childfree in a permanent state of being viewed and subsequently treated like a child, aside from feeling negatively judged. In reviewing the research, Stahnke et al. (2020) found, "the effects of societal biases on individuals- including guilt, shame, and stigma- can be severe and lasting" (p. 160). These findings have considerable implications.

Synthesis of Grounded Theory

The messages were found to have varying degrees of pressure and escalate as individuals continued to resist their pressure. These messages are rooted in paternalistic and patriarchal beliefs that have been documented throughout the U.S. history. The negative messages directed at the women were shaming and infantilizing messages. The men were found to receive mostly positive messages in an attempt to persuade them to change their childfree position.

These findings confirmed what many intuitively felt, that childfree women were being targeted more harshly in conjunction with being judged harsher, than childfree men as expressed through the content of the pronatalist messages directed at the women. The sources of the direct messages are through the relationships closest to the childfree individuals which suggests persistent and regular exposure to them. The impact was found to have one of two possible impacts: gaslighting and anxiety.

Anxiety was observed through the participants that attempted to resist impact by enacting a defensive or avoidant state. The defensive state presented through the participants being outspoken or assertive when they sensed judgement or pressure because of their childfree status. Other participants described assuming an avoidant response. They described not disclosing their childfree status and avoiding conversations and situations where the topic may be brought up. In contrast to the participants who felt anxiety, there were participants who described an experience of being gaslit.

Participants that were included in the theme of absorbing impact described an experience that portrayed feeling gaslit by those that they received pronatalist messages from. Gaslighting was evidenced by internalizing the pronatalist messages and judgements, or by questioning themselves. They overall described a sense of pressure emanating from within themselves. These impacts are a result of the pronatalist ideology that quietly continues to prevail within the U.S. capitalist society.

There are many wonderful things about children and parenthood that appeal to most people, but overall, it continues to get more expensive to raise children in the U.S. and some would say it is also becoming more difficult. Capitalism has continued to focus on profit and failed to see how it has become impossible to afford children or to afford to sacrifice time in a career. Many people are finding that the prescribed idyllic path of adulthood of getting married, buying a home, and then taking the final step to have children is near impossible when they are suffocating underneath student loan debt and working jobs that offer no real work-life balance, let alone a livable wage. People can either sacrifice to fulfill their parenthood desires or they can commit to the capitalist agenda of working more and spending more, but it is becoming impossible to do both. How this plays out will remain to be seen. The insights that were obtained from this research highlights implications to be considered for social work.

Implications of Findings

Through this research there have been broad implications for social work discovered. The social work values of dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, and competence have been found to be directly connected to this area of research. Dignity and worth of the person was the first value that stood out through this research. It has been found that many childfree individuals exist in a society that attacks their dignity and denies their worth through pronatalist messages and other societal structures and forces. As social workers, we can be an advocate for these individuals and assist them with challenging internal and external pronatalist discourses that they may encounter and help them to feel empowered and validated. The next applicable social work value is the importance of human relationships.

The importance of human relationships is another social work value that is applicable to this research area. Most of the participants identified their family, friends, and coworkers as the primary sources of pronatalist messages. For many individuals these relationships are meant to be a source of support, but for the childfree this appears to be a source of pressure and strain. Childfree individuals would benefit from support and coaching from

social workers that they may work with in clinical practice settings, to assist them with navigating pronatalist dialogues that they encounter.

The childfree individual may also need support in processing feelings of grief over friendships that may evolve, change, or dissipate over time. This can make a childfree person's social support system shrink resulting in feelings of loss and it can be difficult to find other childfree individuals to befriend. The final social work value that is of relevance to this research is competence.

Competence is an area that is equally as important as the preceding social work values. As U.S. society continues to evolve and change there may be continued increase in this population that will warrant continued understanding so that social workers as a collective and as individual practitioners, can continue to meet the needs that arise for this segment of the population. There needs to be continued research to help better understand the differences within the childfree community to provide culturally competent care in conjunction with individualized social work services.

Limitations of the Study

There are limitations of this study that warrant acknowledgment. Although the insight that was gained from the data and the possibilities for ongoing research are abundant, this study was impacted by the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic which resulted in the researcher not being able to gather data in person. Had the researcher been able to meet with the participants face-to-face, she would have been able to enrich the data by guiding the interviews. This would have garnered a deeper understanding and fill in any gaps in explanation by having participants further expand on their statements.

Through face-to-face interviews it is possible the researcher might have disclosed her childfree identity to the participants. This information might have had the effect of making the participants feel more comfortable in answering the research questions. This could have alleviated any innate sense of defensiveness that participants might have experienced.

Lastly, there was quite an absence of diversity in the sample in terms of race and ethnicity. All participants identified as white or Caucasian, and only two identified their ethnicity as Hispanic. Unfortunately, valuable insight is missing from individuals of color in this data, which contributes to the on-going problem of individuals of color being largely absent or grossly underrepresented in research. Their voices, as well as the voices of those of varying gender identities, sexualities, and social locations are desperately needed to better inform this topic and many others in research. Regardless of the limitations of the study, there are still valuable recommendations for further study that should be considered.

Recommendations

There are several recommendations for further study that arose from this research process. First, there needs to be deeper and continued research on family formations that do not include children. These families may have different value and different needs in the U.S. society. One such example would be elder care and estate planning.

Another area that warrants further study is the relational impact between a childfree adult and their parent or family of origin. How does this impact the relationship between the parent and childfree individual? Additionally, how does the familial relationship fare under the pressure of pronatalist messaging? This would all be worthy of examination, especially as family sizes continue to shrink.

A final recommendation for further study, is to look at childfree individuals from diverse and varied social locations. The research has been, and continues to be, dominated by white, heterosexual samples. Very few studies include individuals from social locations that are marginalized or oppressed. It is of import that we understand how they are impacted as they encounter layers of oppression and discrimination. The need to understand how the oppressive ideologies and structures intersect and impact people of varying backgrounds can not be over-stated.

Summary

This study set out to better understand the impact of pronatalist messaging. It has succeeded in conceptualizing the process of pronatalist messaging and understanding the corresponding impact. This research utilized the available literature to examine and expose the toxic and discriminatory ideologies, which influence those closest to a childfree individual to engage in harmful and oppressive discourse. The implications for social work that have been uncovered throughout this research process have been consequential.

The patriarchal ideology has quietly continued to operate while women and other marginalized and oppressed communities have focused on various social issues of importance and relevance. The multiplicity of social movements simultaneously operating has divided the collective power of the marginalized and oppressed communities. This is not to say that any single cause is more important than any other, rather there is disconnect and disorganization. The disconnect and disorganization makes it difficult for individuals to organize in a manner that combines their collective power. Then the harmful and dangerous root causes that allow for the imbalance of

justice and equality can be efficiently addressed. Racism and sexism are underlying many of the injustices and inequalities that continue to prevail currently in U.S. society, both of which are relevant to pronatalism.

Significant components of pronatalism are heteronormativity, patriarchy, and capitalism, all of which are systems that are historically rooted in racist and sexist beliefs and practices. As women have fought and won “more rights and status within the patriarchal system, that was never...the goal of feminism. It’s not enough...the system needs to be replaced, not remodeled” (Westervelt, 2018, p. 2). There needs to be an examination of many social policies that operate in a way that continues to oppress and marginalize women and individuals, with and without children. The pronatalist messages that prevail in society are just one of many tactics used to maintain oppressive ideologies that specifically target all women, some in different ways than others.

Pronatalism operates in a covert manner by using those closest to childfree individuals to persistently call into question the childfree individual’s decision in an effort to destabilize their sense of self and autonomy. While the friends and family of the childfree individual challenge their beliefs directly, societal institutions—such as but not limited to policy, healthcare, economy, workplace, religion, and media, are an ever-present and nuanced source of influence and may need to embrace opportunities for change.

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