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## **“Your Biological Clock is Ticking”: Examining Stigma of Childless Men and Women**

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“Your Biological Clock is Ticking”: Examining Stigma of Childless Men and Women

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A Project

Presented to

the Faculty of the Graduate School

at the University of South Carolina Aiken

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

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by

Kayla Tamas

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### Abstract

Prior research reveals that all childless individuals are negatively stigmatized, but voluntary and involuntary childless individuals are stigmatized to differing degrees. There is a little research investigating the differences in stigma associated with childless men and women. The current study examines the differences in stigma for voluntary and involuntary childless men and women by using a series of vignettes and having participants rate the childless individuals on fourteen general characteristics. Participants were recruited from psychology and sociology courses at the University of South Carolina Aiken as well as Psychological Research on the Net through Hanover College. It was hypothesized that voluntary childless individuals would be more stigmatized than involuntary childless individuals, childless women would be more stigmatized than childless men, and the stigma towards voluntary childless individuals would be especially pronounced for women. The hypotheses were partially supported in that voluntary childless women were perceived as being the most self-centered, but involuntary childless women were seen as having the least amount of life satisfaction as well as immaturity.

### “Your Biological Clock is Ticking”: Examining Stigma of Childless Men and Women

Childlessness is on the rise, leading to a new emerging field of research about the impact of a childless life (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Gillespie, 2000; Gillespie, 2003; Pew Research Center, 2010). According to research by Pew Research Center (2010), nearly one out of every five American women will end their childbearing years without a child compared to one out of every ten women in the 1970s. Childlessness literature focuses mainly on the differences in perceptions of *voluntary* and *involuntary* childless individuals, with little regard to the gender of the childless individual. After providing an overview of the recent literature, this study examines the differences in perceptions of *both voluntary* and *involuntary* childless individuals based on their gender.

#### **Childlessness**

The impact of living a childless life can be studied in many ways. For example, a childless individual’s happiness, job earnings, and socioeconomic status could all be studied to examine the differences of a childless individual’s life in comparison to an individual who does have children. Another major aspect of life that is influenced by the presence or lack of children is the social perception of the target individual. Impression formation of childless individuals and the stigmatization that surrounds the idea of not having children are important areas to examine in terms of the likely implications of not having a child.

Although research on childlessness and family planning is gaining popularity today, in previous decades it has been a neglected area of study (Veevers, 1973).

Research surrounding childless individuals is focused on women, with a lack of research

on the male population and the differences between voluntary and involuntary childless men and women (Seccombe, 1991). This theme remains consistent today, with very few studies focusing on male childless individuals. The literature on childlessness clearly distinguishes between two types of childlessness, which are either voluntary or involuntary. Voluntarily childless individuals, often referred to as childfree individuals, are emerging targets of research and are defined as individuals not having children due to their personal choices and desires. This is different from an individual who is involuntarily childless and who wants to have children, but is unable to due to infecundity or other reasons beyond their control (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008).

**Stigmatization of Childless Individuals.** Perhaps the most common theme in the childlessness literature is that couples and individuals who are childless are viewed negatively and are highly stigmatized by society (Koropecj-Cox & Pendell, 2007a; Koropecj-Cox, Romano, & Moras, 2007; LaMastro, 2001; Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995; Letherby, 2002; Mollen, 2006; Park, 2002; Vinson, Mullen, & Smith, 2010). The literature has examined the negative views of childless individuals through multiple different dependent variables. For example, Lampman and Dowling-Guyer (1995) used perceptions of how caring, driven, and emotionally healthy individuals were. Other dependent variables used throughout the literature are warmth (LaMastro, 2001), desperation or selfishness (Letherby, 2002), ability to have a fulfilling life (Koropecj-Cox & Pendell, 2007a; Vinson, Mullen & Smith, 2010), and happiness (Vinson, Mullen & Smith, 2010), but all were aimed at examining the stigma that is placed on childless individuals.

Link and Phelan (2006) describe stigma as being a combination of five separate processes that come together: 1) differences in humans are identified, 2) the identified difference is labeled as something undesirable or linked to characteristics that are generally considered to be undesirable, 3) two groups are formed (“us” and “them”), 4) the group receiving the stigma is then plagued with discrimination and loss of status, and finally, 5) the dominant group exercises power over the group that is being stigmatized. It is argued that stigma does not exist without the exercise of power by the dominant group. When a group becomes stigmatized in society, it is linked with higher levels of stress and less favorable life outcomes (Link & Phelan, 2006). These five stages of stigma are applicable to childless individuals as the research supports that they are a stigmatized group in today’s society (Koropecykj-Cox & Pendell, 2007a; Koropecykj-Cox, Romano, & Moras, 2007; LaMastro, 2001; Lampman and Dowling-Guyer, 1995; Letherby, 2002; Mollen, 2006; Park, 2002; Vinson, Mullen, & Smith, 2010).

In general, both voluntary and involuntary childless individuals, receive many negative attributions based on their childless status. The most common label given to a childless individual, both voluntary and involuntary, in the research is 'selfish' (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Callan, 1983; Gillespie, 2000; Letherby, 2002; Terry & Braun, 2012). Other adjectives used to describe childless individuals include deviant, desperate, cold, maladjusted, and irresponsible (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Halford, 2006; LaMastro, 2001; Letherby, 2002; Terry & Braun, 2012). For example, LaMastro (2001) asked undergraduate psychology students to rate a couple from one of twenty-four vignettes that differed only by number of children and occupational status. Participants rated the

male and female separately on twenty-eight personality characteristics. The results revealed that childless individuals were seen as less warm, less hardworking, less successful, and as having lower marital satisfaction.

**Variables that contribute to the stigmatization.** There are a host of other variables used in the literature that may influence how childless individuals are perceived, some of which are personality variables, while others are demographic. Individuals with negative attitudes towards childless individuals are most commonly male, older, conservative, religious, low educated, and non-white (Koropecykj-Cox & Pendell, 2007a). Childless couples are additionally more likely to be stigmatized by college students if they are perceived as permanently childless, rather than temporarily childless (Koropecykj-Cox, Romano, & Moras, 2007). This shows that people, or at least college students, are accepting of delays in having children, but outright not wanting children was still stigmatized. This might represent the shift in our society where women are more likely to be higher educated and push starting a family to older ages, which is becoming more acceptable as well.

The description of individuals who tend to have negative views of the childless population is almost the polar opposite of the typical person who is voluntarily childless: white, college educated, non-religious, and from an urban area (Warren & Pals, 2013). Although the gap with other races is closing, white women are most likely to not have children. Men are most likely to remain childless if they are from a broken home and have a professional occupation (Kierman, 1989). Women who have high levels of education and high socioeconomic status are also among the most likely to be childless

(Gillespie, 2003; Pew Research Center, 2010). Education greatly influences a woman's likelihood of remaining childless throughout her life, but for men, higher levels of education did not predict childlessness (Waren & Pals, 2013).

**Societal views of motherhood.** As aforementioned, the research on childlessness tends to focus solely on women, with barely any mention of the stigma associated with men who do not have children. This hints at the idea that society values women based on their role as a mother, which disregards any other role that a woman may hold in today's society. Parks (2002) states that motherhood is seen as the ultimate form of femininity and mature womanhood, while men achieve masculinity by receiving job promotions and similar accomplishments. These results further exemplify how little people seem to care if men have children or remain childfree and also perpetuate a void in the literature explaining the gender gap. The current study aims to shed some light on the gender gap in stigma associated with not having children.

Research conducted by March and Miall (2006) on mothers who give their child up for adoption strengthens the notion that society bases their value of women on their ability to have children. This study revealed that both men and women supported a woman's decision to place their child for adoption and even attributed positive characteristics to these women such as caring, responsible, and unselfish (March & Miall, 2006). These attributions given to women who birth a child, yet choose to remain childless are the polar opposites of the attributions given to women who freely choose not to birth children in the first place as outlined above. Women who choose to not have any children and women who choose to give their only child up for adoption are both



remaining childfree due to their personal choice, but their peers and society generally perceive them very differently.

There is little literature on the stigma associated with being an adoptive mother or if these women are viewed in the same way as women with biological children. Older research reveals that women who adopt a child and their relationship with that child are not looked at as favorably as the women who place their child up for adoption (Miall, 1987). Miall (1987) asked seventy-one adoptive mothers who had struggled with fertility themselves to give their views on adoption through a structured, open-ended interview. Participants felt that a blood relationship with a child was the best way to bond with a child and generally characterized adoptive parents as not being “real” parents. Further research is needed to determine how the perception of women changes based on if they have an adopted or biological child.

### **Involuntary Childlessness**

The majority of the childlessness research focuses on differences between voluntary and involuntary childless individuals. Although all childless individuals are stigmatized, Lampman and Dowling-Guyer (1995) found that involuntary childlessness is not universally stigmatized in the same way that voluntary childlessness is. This study had participants rate individuals from a series of vignettes that varied only on child status and professional status. It was concluded that in some instances, involuntary childlessness could elicit positive attitudes. For example, not giving up on the pursuit to have children may be seen as admirable. Individuals may also feel bad for a couple that cannot have something that they want in their life. Couples that were involuntarily

childless were perceived as being more committed to family than both parents and voluntarily childless couples due to their continued efforts to have a family, suggesting that disclosing infecundity would not be met with the same negative attributions as disclosing a status of voluntary childlessness (Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995).

**The impact of not disclosing childless status.** The issue that arises with involuntary childlessness is that others usually do not know the reason why an individual has remained childless. In the vignette study described previously, LaMastro (2001) also revealed that when perceivers did not know why the individual was childless, they would attribute it to voluntary factors. This is interesting because even if someone wanted to have a child, but could not due to fecundity issues, they would be just as stigmatized as someone choosing to remain childless by choice. Most people will just assume that one's fertility is a choice instead of considering all options. Therefore, in a way, involuntary childless individuals are stigmatized to the same degree until they announce their reasoning for not having children, which is unlikely to get revealed.

These findings are consistent with the psychological concept known as the fundamental attribution error, which suggest humans have a predisposition to attribute an individual's behavior to dispositional characteristics rather than situational circumstances that are out of the individual's control (Hooper, Erdogan, Keen, Lawton, & McHugh, 2015). In this case, involuntary childless couples are experiencing negative consequences from the belief that the couple is choosing to be childless (Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995).

**Stigmatization of involuntary childless individuals.** Research suggests that infertility has many negative impacts on a marriage, and in general, couples that struggle with infertility have lower marital satisfaction (Abbey, Andrews & Halman, 1992; Andrews, Abbey & Halman, 1991; Sabatelli, Meth & Gavazzi, 1988). Higher levels of stress and anxiety negatively impact marital satisfaction, along with lower levels of self-esteem, which are all caused by infertility (Andrews et al., 1991; Sabatelli et al., 1988). Abbey et al. (1992) conducted a study on couples struggling with infecundity that were referred by their medical doctor. Both partners were interviewed separately and could not hear the responses of the other. Results indicated a negative correlation between the level of stress and the level of self-esteem in couples struggling with infertility. Infertility adds high levels of stress to a marriage, which not only decreases one's self-esteem, but also one's general quality of life. Research reveals that women suffer from higher levels of stress and depression than men who are involuntarily childless (Abbey et al., 1992; Andrews et al., 1991). Although women may have slightly higher rates of stress, diminished self-esteem, and lowered life quality than men due to infertility, there is a positive correlation between wives' and husbands' ratings of these concepts. For example, if a wife rated stress highly, the husband would also rate stress high, just slightly lower than his wife (Abbey et al., 1992).

### **Voluntary Childlessness**

Since voluntary childlessness is heavily stigmatized, it is important to understand why individuals would choose this lifestyle. Some of the main reasons for couples not wanting children are freedom, personal advancement, relationships with partners, health

concerns, and a rejection of all activities associated with motherhood (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Gillespie, 2003; Mollen, 2006). Gillespie (2003) conducted interviews with twenty-five voluntary childless women on their reasoning for not wanting children. The most common reason found was the freedom aspect, where women want to travel, have money, build careers, and not have to worry about how all of their personal decisions are impacting a child.

Some couples decide early to not have children, while some couples make small postponements, which eventually push them past the point of childbearing. In a self-report survey comparison of 55 early deciders and 23 postponers in Australia, Callan (1983) found that individuals who chose early to not have any children reported more negative feelings about their childlessness than the those who became voluntary childless due to their lifestyle postponements. Postponers reported having to deal with less negative feedback from family members and others in general because their childless state was seen as temporary instead of permanent like the early deciders (Callan, 1983).

In a similar study, Gillespie (2000) recruited 25 women that self-identified as voluntary childless and interviewed them by phone on their subjective experiences as a voluntary childless woman. The results revealed that often times, when early deciders share that they are choosing to be childfree, they are met with either disbelief or disregard from family or others in response to their childbearing preferences. This would occur most often by people telling them that they will change their mind eventually.

**Research on tubal ligation and vasectomy outcomes.** Reactions to childless individuals as described above may lead to lower psychological well-being due to the

idea that their need for autonomy support is being thwarted as explained by the concept of the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This concept states that autonomy is universally required for humans to experience psychological growth and overall well-being. When the need for autonomy is thwarted, psychological outcomes are less favorable than when autonomy is supported. If a childless individual's autonomy in one's major life decisions is not supported by the people in their environment, it is suggested that they may suffer from less psychological growth and lower levels of well-being when compared to individuals with autonomy support (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

This type of disregard also occurs in medical settings, where women who do not want any children are denied sterilization procedures because the doctor believes she may experience sterilization regret (Gillespie, 2000). Reactions like this are very undermining to a woman's autonomy to independently choose major life decisions.

On the contrary, research reveals that very few women who have a tubal ligation procedure experience regret about their decision (Miller, Shain, & Pasta, 1991; Richards et al., 1991). Previous research was done on women who already had biological children of their own, which lowers the generalizability to the current study. Miller et al. (1991) interviewed women scheduled to have a sterilization procedure prior to the procedure and then annually for the next five years. This study found that regret for post-sterilization procedures was less than ten percent when defined as a woman who later wanted to reverse her procedure. It was also shown that the small amount of post-sterilization regret could be linked to five predictive factors pre-surgery. Women who were relatively young, had ambivalence about their decision to not have children, had negative attitudes about

the procedure in general, experienced domination from their husband in the decision to have the surgery, or experienced conflict with their husband about the surgery prior to having the sterilization procedure were most likely to have some form of regret about their decision in a post-sterilization follow-up. Richards et al. (1991) interviewed women scheduled for a tubal ligation prior to their surgery, 6 months after their surgery, and 12 months after their surgery. They also got data from a group of women using other forms of birth control at comparable times. The study concluded that women who decided to have a tubal ligation surgery as their form of birth control experienced no more regret than women who used another form of birth control. In addition, women who had a tubal ligation did not experience any difference in sexual satisfaction with their partner or mental health in comparison to women using other forms of birth control.

On the other hand, men who opt to get a vasectomy do not seem to have the same results. Interestingly, while men did not experience any change in sexual satisfaction, marital satisfaction, communication, or frequency of sexual intercourse from pre- to post-vasectomy (Hofmeyr & Greeff, 2002), it has been shown that both men and their wives suffered from adverse psychological effects after the surgery was complete (Ziegler, Rodgers, & Kriegsman, 1966). Of all men who eventually seek to reverse their vasectomy, the majority did not present wanting more children as the reason for the reversal seeking (Howard, 1982). The reasons given for the vasectomy reversal request included a sense that they had been unfairly pressured into getting the procedure done by doctors. For example, multiple men felt that the medical doctors over supported the wives of the men during the decision process and disregarded the men's concerns about having

the procedure done (Howard, 1982). After more investigation, Howard (1982) found that the main predictor of men wanting to reverse their vasectomy was immaturity.

Immaturity was comprised of the men being young when the procedure was completed, presence of teenage pregnancies, and the man being young at the age of the first pregnancy. Another reoccurring predictor for men regretting and eventually wanting a reversal of their vasectomy was when the vasectomy was completed during a time of crisis in an effort to resolve the crises (Howard, 1982).

**Impact of a voluntarily childless life.** The research on this topic then begs the question: does the psychological impact of having a preemptive surgery to not have children fair better than the outcome if an individual were to have a child? Zhang and Hayward (2001) reviewed data from the Asset and Health Dynamics Among the Oldest Old (AHEAD) data set, which includes a nationally representative sample of individuals over the age of 70 who are living in a community setting. The study found that older childless individuals did not have increased levels of loneliness or depression compared to other elderly individuals with kids. In contrast, it is widely reported that married couples who are parents tend to have more negative interactions with their spouse and a lower rating of marital satisfaction (Feldman, 1981; Renne, 1976; Somers, 1993; Crohan, 1996). Not only do couples with no children tend to have happier marriages, they also tend to have a better general quality of life (Renne, 1976). Voluntary childless couples show higher levels of dyadic satisfaction with their partners compared to couples with children (Callan, 1987; Somers, 1993). Dyadic satisfaction is characterized by things such as lower frequency of arguments and threats of divorce, both of which were

characteristics of voluntary childless couples (Somers, 1993). Childless couples also ranked dyadic cohesion higher, which consists of things such as working together and exchanging ideas (Callan, 1987).

Voluntary childless couples were found to have more positive interactions with each other in general than couples that have children in a self report study utilizing surveys of the two partners separately (Feldman, 1981). According to Somers (1993), which compared the survey results of seventy-four voluntary childless individuals with those of one hundred and twenty-seven parents, the reason for marital satisfaction being higher among voluntary childless couples is due to the marriage being the center of attention rather than children. Parents tend to focus much of their time on their children, while childless couples can use that time to focus on each other and strengthen their relationship (Callan, 1987; Somers, 1993).

**Coping strategies.** In an effort to manage the stigma associated with childlessness, voluntary childless individuals use different strategies to cope with the negativity. Park (2002) looked at voluntary childless individuals and identified some of the most common ways that voluntary childless individuals deal with the stigma. Passing, or letting someone believe you are temporarily childless, and identity substitution, implying that the childlessness is due to reasons such as infecundity, were the most common ways of coping. It seems to be easier and more comfortable to pass in that situation than to correct others and have them possibly be offended.

The coping strategies used by childless individuals to manage the social stigma they receive, as outlined above, could potentially lead to negative personal and social



consequences (Gino, Kouchaki, & Galinsky, 2015; Newheiser & Barreto, 2014).

Research revealed that individuals who behaved in ways that were inauthentic with their true feelings or thoughts had more feelings of both immorality and impurity (Gino et al., 2015). If voluntary childless individuals are either lying or passively being deceptive, they are not acting authentically and consistent with their true beliefs. This strategy of identity management by childless individuals has been shown in the literature to result in adverse social outcomes for different populations (Newheiser & Barreto, 2014). For example, individuals who hid a stigmatized identity in social interactions not only felt fewer feelings of belonging than those who revealed their true identity, outside observers also rated their interactions as less positive and were less accepting of the individual hiding their true identity (Newheiser & Barreto, 2014). Based on the prior research, it appears that individuals who are childless by choice who choose to not reveal their voluntary status to others may be eliciting the exact opposite reaction from which they are hoping. Instead of reducing the stigma associated with their decisions, the act of hiding their voluntary childless status may be resulting in more negative feelings within themselves as well as less positive social interactions with their peers.

Other strategies that voluntary childless individuals use to cope with the stigma are justifications, such as condemning the condemner (accusing parents of having children for selfish reasons after being called selfish themselves) and self-fulfillment (everyone has the right to happiness and making their own choice, even if that means not having children). Childfree individuals also made excuses for their childlessness, which tend to minimize their responsibility in the choice to not have children (Park, 2002). For

example, multiple women in the study deferred to their self-perceived lack of maternal instinct as a reason for their childlessness. They expressed this lack of maternal instinct as a fault of their own, but also the reason they have made the decision to not have any children (Park, 2002). These coping strategies tend to help voluntary childless individuals overcome the negativity aimed at their life decisions.

### **Gender**

Overall, the research on stigma differences for childless men and women is outdated and inconsistent. For example, Calhoun and Selby (1980) had experiment participants read a file on a couple that was assumed to be applying for a car loan. The couples in the files were the same other than their childless status (voluntary, involuntary, or having 2 children). Perceptions of the woman varied dependent on childless status (voluntary vs. involuntary), while perceptions of the men varied dependent on having children or not. Women were liked less and seen as less adjusted if she was voluntary childless compared to involuntary childless. Men were liked less if they did not have children, no matter the reason. This may suggest that men are judged for not having children, but women are judged based on their reasoning for not having children (Calhoun & Selby, 1980).

Another study found that although participants rated childless women unfavorably, they were rated as more favorable than childless males (Jamison, Franzini, & Kaplan, 1979). Participants rated either a childless male or female from a vignette and rated the male as more selfish, atypical and unfulfilled in comparison to the female.

In addition to gender of the target, gender of participants has also been examined in the literature. In regard to perceptions of the voluntary childless, Koropecykj-Cox and Pendell (2007b) found that women are much more likely to be accepting of childfree individuals of both genders than men. This gender gap was consistent across all races, ages, employment status, and education levels and was best explained, although only partially, by differences in attitudes towards marriage by men and women. Women on average hold less traditional and less optimistic views of the importance, benefits, and permanence of marriage. This could suggest that women are more open to childlessness because it is an alternate to being stuck in an unhappy marriage or having a child to raise as a single woman if a divorce were to occur (Koropecykj-Cox & Pendell, 2007b).

A few gender differences between childless individuals themselves were also found. Waren and Pals (2013) noted that most variables related to why women decided not to have children were the same for men as well, except for education. For women, higher levels of education were correlated with higher rates of childlessness, but for men this same pattern was not found. It was also found that married males who were childless were much more likely to still want a child than their wives. Childless husbands rated the importance of having children much higher than their wives as well (Seccombe, 1991).

Scant studies have investigated the gender differences in the stigmatization of voluntary childlessness, and when mentioned, gender differences are only briefly discussed. Koropecykj-Cox and colleagues (2007c) had participants read a vignette describing a married, childless couple and asked the participants to rate the couple on a variety of general characteristics. They found that the participant's ratings of the wife on

general characteristics were much more diverse than their ratings of the husband and were mostly influenced by the woman's occupation. The findings also revealed that participants viewed the couple's decision to not have children as more of the wife's decision than the husband's. The current study aims to fill the gaps in the literature about the gender differences in stigma for both voluntary and involuntary childless individuals.

### **Culture**

The current study focused on targets in the United States, but it is important to understand the differences in attitudes of childlessness among differing cultures. Most research on attitudes and perceptions of childless individuals have included only the United States, but more research is starting to look at other countries as well. Studies conducted in Turkey, Nigeria, South Korea, and Tanzania all replicated the previous findings in the United States; Childless individuals were viewed negatively (Copur & Koropecj-Cox, 2010; Hollos & Larsen, 2008; Husnu, 2016; Ibisomi & Mudege, 2013; Yang & Rosenblatt, 2007). Although still consistent with childless individuals being viewed negatively, a study that used responses to the European Social Survey, which included 20 European countries, resulted in childless individuals being less stigmatized if the rater had a high level of education and was younger. Older participants and participants who were religious endorsed negative attitudes towards childless individuals (Merz & Liefbroer, 2012).

A study conducted in South Korea found that childless individuals were mostly assumed to be involuntarily childless and given negative labels such as pitiful, depressed and lonely. When confronted with a voluntary childless individual scenario, participants

viewed these individuals as selfish and a disappointment to their parents, consistent with traditional Confucian family values (Yang & Rosenblatt, 2007). It was also revealed that being voluntary childless led to attributions of an unhealthy marriage that was likely to end in divorce, which was consistent with results found in Tanzania as well (Hollos & Larsen, 2008; Yang & Rosenblatt, 2007).

Nigeria appears to still have universally negative perceptions of childless individuals, especially voluntary childless individuals. Both voluntary and involuntary childless individuals were seen as being invisible and having a high level of poverty, but voluntary childlessness resulted in negative attributions such as impotent, lazy, and defiant to God. This negative outlook toward voluntary childless individuals was consistent across region, level of education, gender, and religion of the rater (Ibisomi & Mudege, 2013).

### **Sexual Orientation**

Even less research has been conducted on childlessness in the gay and lesbian population. Research reveals that gay and lesbian individuals are less likely to express wanting children than their heterosexual peers (Baiocco & Laghi, 2013; Riskind & Patterson, 2010). Of the gay men that did express a desire for children, there was a much lower rate of intention than in heterosexual men. Even though homosexual individuals tended to not express a want for children, they did place a high level of value in being a parent equal to the value that heterosexual individuals place on it (Riskind & Patterson, 2010). Homosexual individuals felt as if they wouldn't receive the same amount of social support of being a parent in comparison to their heterosexual peers as well. This suggests

that if homosexuals do have a desire for children, the intention may not be present due to perceived obstacles that may be present if they were to have a child (Baiocco & Laughi, 2013).

A study conducted by Rowlands and Lee (2006) looked directly at the perceptions of heterosexual lesbian women who were choosing to remain childless. Participants, who were freshman students studying psychology and similar to the participants of the current study, rated heterosexual women more favorable than lesbian women. They also rated women who wanted children more favorably than women who did not want children. There was, however, an interesting interaction effect. Lesbian women who were planning to have children were rated as happier and more mature than heterosexual women choosing to have children (Rowlands & Lee, 2006).

### **Current Study**

During the current study, participants rated the childless individuals on 14 different characteristics in order to compare the stigma placed on men and women who are voluntarily and involuntarily childless. The current study first investigated the differences in stigma for voluntarily childless men and women. Secondly, it investigated the differences in stigma between voluntary and involuntary childless individuals. Thirdly, the current study examined how race and income moderate the relationship between gender and childless status.

### **Hypotheses**

The hypotheses for the current study were as follows:

**Hypothesis 1:** Voluntary childless individuals will be stigmatized more than involuntary childless individuals. Hypothesis 1 is based on the research mentioned previously that revealed although both voluntary and involuntary childless individuals are both stigmatized, involuntary childlessness is not as universally stigmatized as voluntary childlessness and, in some cases, may even elicit positive attributions (Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995).

**Hypothesis 2:** Childless women will be stigmatized more than childless men. Hypothesis 2 is based on the research described previously conducted by Calhoun and Selby (1980) that revealed women tend to be stigmatized more for their reasoning for not having children (i.e. being voluntary or involuntary childless, as the current study presents).

**Hypothesis 3:** Stigma toward voluntary childless individuals will be especially pronounced for female targets. Hypothesis 3 is predicting an interaction effect of stigma between childless status and gender.

## Method

### Participants

A total of 312 ( $n=312$ , Mean age = 22.3,  $SD = 8.9$ ) participants were recruited from the Introductory Psychology courses offered at the University of South Carolina Aiken ( $n=112$ ), Dr. Pazda's psychology statistics course ( $n=23$ ), Dr. Mason's sociology courses ( $n=22$ ), as well as Psychological Research on the Net through Hanover College ( $n=155$ ). See Table 1 for participant demographic information broken down by source of origin (USCA vs. Hanover). Participants from the USC Aiken psychology 101 courses were compensated with .5 research credit for their psychology course in exchange for

participating in the study. Participants from Dr. Pazda and Dr. Mason's courses were rewarded with class extra credit and participants recruited from the Internet were not compensated for their participation. The participants were told that they were volunteering to participate in a study about impression formation.

### **Procedure**

After registering to take part in this study through a computer program for research (SONA), their professor, or Research on the Net, participants were granted access to a link to the study that they were able to complete remotely. The survey started with an information letter informing the participant about the nature of the study and the contact information of the researcher. The information letter can be seen in Appendix A. Each participant was then randomly assigned to read one of four vignette sets about a childless middle-aged individual. The vignette sets varied based on gender (male or female) and childless status (voluntary vs. involuntary). There were four within subjects target vignettes in each set that varied income (high-income or low-income) and race (white or black). The vignettes were not counterbalanced due to the software limitations. This did not have an impact on the main hypotheses testing because each target vignette was presented first between subjects, but it may have impacted the supplemental analyses due to vignettes being presented within subjects. For the supplemental analyses, it is possible that participants' responses were skewed due to fatigue or prior exposure to the other vignettes. Both income and race were varied for exploratory purposes; therefore, there were no a priori hypotheses about how these variables would influence stigma of childless individuals. The gender and childless status remained consistent for the within-



subject vignettes. The format of the current study is based off the format used by Lampman and Dowling-Guyer (1995), which varied the vignettes on childless status (i.e. want very much to have children, although they were unable to have children of their own, not planning on having children, or having two children) and professional status (i.e. auto mechanic and beautician or bank manager and career counselor). Income was the same for all the vignettes.

As reported above, after reading the information letter and consenting to participate in the study, the participant was then presented with the following instructions: “On the following pages, you will be asked to read a short description of an individual and form an opinion of the person. After reading each description, please rate the individual on the provided characteristics based on what you read.” The participant was then presented with a target vignette. The following is an example of the vignette from the current study for the white, high-income woman who is voluntary childless. The other target vignettes can be seen in Appendix B.

Kathy is a white female in her early 40s. She is happily married to her husband of 15 years, Mark, and they have no children due to their personal choice. Kathy earns an income of \$100,000. Outside of work, Kathy enjoys running.

On the same page with the vignette, participants were then asked to rate the individual from the vignette on 14 pairs of bipolar adjectives using a 6-point Likert scale that were adapted from a study conducted by Rowlands and Lee (2006) that examined attitudes toward both heterosexual and lesbian women who were either childfree or a mother. The

14 adjectives that the participants used to rate the individuals came from both published commentaries and published articles surrounding the childfree population (Rowlands & Lee, 2006). A full list of the 14 adjective pairs as well as the format that they were presented in can be found in Appendix D. One example of the bipolar adjectives was loving/unloving, in which the participant rated how loving they believed the person from the vignette was. The instructions that were presented with each vignette and bipolar adjectives were: “Please rate this person on the following characteristics.”

In order to disguise the target variable of this study (childlessness), each participant rated a total of ten individuals from ten different vignettes. The first vignette was one of the four randomly assigned target vignettes, as described above (see Appendix B), and paired with its three corresponding target vignettes that varied income and race. Between the target vignettes were 6 filler vignettes. These filler vignettes included different individuals with varying characteristics that were also rated by participants on the 14 bipolar adjectives (see Appendix D). Only the data from the first target vignette was analyzed for hypothesis testing, while all 4 target vignettes were analyzed for exploratory purposes. The following is an example of one of the six filler vignettes that was presented to the participants in between the target vignettes.

Andy is a single homosexual male in his early twenties. He is finishing up his senior year of college at a midwestern university studying marketing and plans to move to California when he graduates to try to start an acting career. In his spare time, Andy enjoys salsa dancing and hiking.

The four target vignettes were presented with two filler vignettes between each of them in all conditions (target, filler, filler, target, etc.)

After completing the adjective ratings, the participants were asked to fill out a number of demographic questions, including age, sex, race, political and religious affiliations, and if they have children or not. A breakdown of participant demographic information can be seen in Table 1. A copy of the demographics questionnaire filled out by the participants can be seen in Appendix E.

A manipulation check was placed at the end of the third vignette in the survey, which asked respondents to recall the information from the first vignette that was manipulated (if the individual in the vignette was a male or female and if the individual was voluntarily or involuntarily childless). Analyses reported below include all 312 participants. Excluding the 21 participants that failed the manipulation check did not change the results.

## **Results**

### **Data Preparation**

All analyses were conducted using SPSS. There are many different types of stigma and the adjectives used in the current study reflected a vast array of characteristics; therefore, a principle component analysis was run in order to determine which characteristics may fit together to explain stigma. The principal components analyses resulted in 5 separate factors with an eigenvalue above 1, which cumulatively explained 66% of the variance. Each factor is composed of the characteristics that loaded higher than a .6 and seemed to reflect similar qualities of

stigma. The characteristics in each of the five factors were averaged together to create five new dependent variables. The five new variables are as follows: Poor Life Satisfaction (composed of unfulfilled, unhappy, life has no meaning, and ill adjusted), Immaturity (composed of immature, irresponsible, neglectful, and lonely), Femininity (composed of feminine and reverse scored masculine), Self-centeredness (composed of materialistic, selfish, and unloving), and Tied Down (composed of tied down). The characteristics that make up the poor life satisfaction, immaturity, and self-centeredness variables are the main focus of stigma of childless individuals for this study. Femininity and tied-down are more neutral traits and therefore, not considered to be stigmatizing for the current study. There was one characteristic that cross loaded. Unloving was closely loaded to both the life satisfaction and the self-centeredness factor (.48 and .44 respectively). Unloving was grouped with self-centeredness because it seemed to fit conceptually with this type of stigma.

### **Hypothesis Testing**

All hypotheses testing was conducted using only data from the first vignette, which consisted of a white, rich childless individual. The hypotheses were formed based on prior research by Lampman and Dowling-Guyer (1995) and Calhoun and Selby (1980) that did not vary target race or income amount. The target race was not specified in either study, but Lampman and Dowling-Guyer (1995) used the names Jim and Rebecca, which are traditionally white names. The income was also set at \$60,000, which fell closer to the current study's high-income vignette. For

these reasons, the hypotheses were tested for only the white and high-income target in the current study.

**Poor life satisfaction.** I conducted a 2x2 between subjects ANOVA with childless status (voluntary vs. involuntary) and target gender (male vs. female) predicting perceived life satisfaction. There was a significant interaction effect of target gender and childless status,  $F(1,308) = 5.7, p = .018$ , indicating that perceptions of life satisfaction as a function of childless status depends on the gender of the target. Next, I tested the simple effects of childless status on perceived life satisfaction separately for male and female targets. For female targets, the effect of voluntary status was significant,  $F(1,162) = 14.31, p < .001$ , such that involuntary childless women were perceived as having poorer life satisfaction ( $M = 2.77, SEM = .11$ ) than their involuntary childless counterparts ( $M = 2.19, SEM = .11$ ). For male targets, childless status had no effect on perceived life satisfaction ( $F = .34, p = .56$ ). See Figure 1.

**Immaturity.** Next, I conducted a 2x2 between subjects ANOVA with childless status (voluntary vs. involuntary) and target gender (male vs. female) predicting perceived immaturity. There was a significant interaction effect of target gender and childless status,  $F(1,308) = 6.1, p = .014$ , indicating that perceptions of immaturity as a function of childless status depends on the gender of the target. Then, I tested the simple effects of childless status on perceived immaturity separately for male and female targets. For female targets, the effect of voluntary status was significant,  $F(1,162) = 4.22, p = .042$ , such that

involuntary childless women were perceived as being more immature ( $M = 2.52$ ,  $SEM = .1$ ) than their involuntary childless counterparts ( $M = 2.23$ ,  $SEM = .10$ ). For male targets, childless status had no effect on perceived immaturity ( $F = 2.13$ ,  $p = .146$ ). See Figure 2.

**Self-centeredness.** I conducted a 2x2 ANOVA with self-centeredness ratings as the dependent variable. The interaction between childless status and target gender was not significant ( $F = .62$ ,  $p = .43$ ). However, a main effect of childless status emerged,  $F(1, 308) = 17.54$ ,  $p < .001$ . Inspection of the marginal means revealed that voluntary childless individuals were perceived as being more self-centered ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SEM = .067$ ) than involuntary childless individuals ( $M = 2.56$ ,  $SEM = .07$ ). The main effect of gender was not significant ( $p = .14$ ). See Figure 3.

**Femininity.** Next, I conducted a 2x2 ANOVA with femininity ratings as the<sup>1</sup>dependent variable. Only a main effect of target gender emerged, such that men were perceived as less feminine ( $M = 2.18$ ,  $SEM = .08$ ) than women ( $M = 4.44$ ,  $SEM = .08$ ),  $F(1,308) = 346.91$ ,  $p < .001$ . See Figure 4.

**Tied down.** Next, I conducted a 2x2 ANOVA with ratings of being tied down as the dependent variable. No main or interactive effects emerged ( $F_s < 3.17$ ,  $p_s > .07$ )<sup>1</sup>. See Figure 5.

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<sup>1</sup> All hypotheses analyses reported were additionally run excluding the 18 participants that reported they had children. There were no differences in significant interactions when participants with children were excluded.

I ran additional analyses to investigate whether participant sex and ethnicity moderate the degree to which target sex and childless status influence perceptions of childless individuals. There were no significant interactions; therefore, participant sex and ethnicity did not moderate the previously reported interactions. This shows that white and minority participants as well as male and female participants judged the childless individual the same.

### **Supplemental Exploratory Analyses**

All of the analyses reported above focused on the initial vignette depicting a relatively wealthy white person. For exploratory purposes, I tested whether race and income moderated any of the effect reported above. I had no specific hypotheses with regard to these variables; thus, the subsequent analyses are entirely exploratory. For each dependent variable, I added two within subjects variables, target race and target income, which yielded a 2x2x2x2 repeated measures ANOVA.

**Poor life satisfaction.** There was a significant 4-way interaction between the target's race, income, gender, and childless status  $F(1,277) = 28.868, p < .001$ . In order to explore this interaction, I tested whether any 3-way interactions would emerge between target race, income, and childless status separately for female and male targets. For female targets the 3-way interaction was significant,  $F(1,146) = 11.863, p < .001$ . For male targets, the 3-way interaction was also significant,  $F(1, 131) = 17.561, p < .001$ . To further explore these interactions, I

tested the within-subjects effects of race and income across levels of childless status separately for female and male targets.

For involuntary childless males, there was a significant interaction effect between race and income  $F(1,58) = 5.447, p = .023$ . Follow-up paired-samples  $t$ -tests were conducted to determine the simple effect of income on life-satisfaction across levels of race. For White targets, lower income led to perceptions of poorer life satisfaction,  $t(63) = 2.57, p = .012$ . However, income was not associated with life satisfaction for Black targets ( $p = .52$ ; see Table 2 for descriptive statistics). For involuntary childless females, main effect emerged for race ( $F = 24.6, p < .001$ ) and income ( $F = 5.60, p < .001$ ). Whites were perceived as having poorer life satisfaction, as were low-income targets. The interaction between these variables was not significant ( $p = .19$ ).

For voluntary childless males, there was a significant interaction effect between race and income  $F(1,73) = 13.47, p < .001$ . Follow-up paired-samples  $t$ -tests were conducted to determine the simple effect of income on life-satisfaction across levels of race. Low income led to poorer life satisfaction for both Whites and Blacks, though the effect was much more pronounced for Black targets (see Table 2).

For voluntary childless women, there was also a significant 2-way interaction,  $F(1,71) = 10.96, p = .001$ . Follow up  $t$ -tests revealed that lower income resulted in perceived poorer life satisfaction for White targets ( $p = .001$ ) but no difference for Black targets ( $p = .21$ ).



**Immaturity.** There was a significant 4-way interaction between the target's race, income, gender, and childless status  $F(1,277) = 8.595, p = .004$ . In order to explore this interaction, I tested for 3-way interactions between target race, income, and childless status separately for female and male targets. For both female targets ( $F(1,146) = 4.82, p = .03$ ) and male targets ( $F(1, 131) = 3.85, p = .05$ ), the 3-way interaction were significant. To further explore these interactions, I tested the within-subjects effects of race and income across levels of childless status separately for female and male targets.

For involuntary childless males, there was a significant interaction effect between race and income  $F(1,58) = 6.36, p = .014$ . Follow-up paired-samples t-tests were conducted to determine the simple effect of income on immaturity across levels of race. Descriptively, lower income was associated with more immaturity for Whites, but less immaturity for Blacks (Table 3). However, neither of these simple effects reached significance ( $ps > .06$ ). For involuntary childless females, main effects emerged for race ( $F = 17.0, p < .001$ ) and income ( $F = 3.96, p = .05$ ). Whites were perceived as being more immature, as were low-income targets. The interaction between these variables was not significant ( $p = .40$ ). See Table 3.

For voluntary childless males, there was a significant main effect of race,  $F(1,71) = 4.67, p = .034$ , and a main effect of income,  $F(1,71) = 12.18, p = .001$ . Whites were perceived as more immature, and low-income individuals were perceived as more immature. No interaction between these variables emerged. For voluntary childless women, there was a significant 2 way interaction,  $F(1,71) = 4.73, p = .033$ .

Follow-up t-tests revealed that higher income resulted in stronger perceptions of immaturity for Black targets ( $p = .008$ ), but no association was found for White targets ( $p = .59$ ). See Table 3 for descriptive information.

**Self-centeredness.** No significant 4-way or 3-way interactions emerged. There was a significant 2-way interaction, such that income interacted with childless status ( $F = 9.42, p = .002$ ). To further explore this, I tested the simple effect of income at different levels of childless status. For involuntary childless targets, the effect of income was significant,  $F(1, 133) = 6.2, p = .014$ . Wealthier targets were perceived as more self-centered. For voluntary childless targets, the effect of income was also significant,  $F(1, 144) = 36.87, p < .001$ . Wealthier targets were also perceived as more self-centered. Overall, wealthier individuals are perceived as more self-centered, but this is especially strong for voluntary childless individuals (see Figure 6).

As mentioned previously, both the feminine and tied-down variables were considered to be neutral rather than stigma for the current study. This was confirmed with the hypotheses testing in which no significant interaction effects were found. Due to these factors, no further analyses were conducted on the femininity or tied down dependent variables because they are not of any theoretical interest.

## Discussion

With the population of childless individuals on the rise, it is imperative that the stigma associated with being childless in today's society be examined. Based on the

previous research on this topic, both voluntary and involuntary childless individuals experience stigma of some kind, with voluntary childless individuals receiving more stigma than involuntary (Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995). The purpose of the current study was to compare the stigmatization of male vs. female as well as voluntary vs. involuntary childless individuals. It was hypothesized that voluntary childless individuals would be more stigmatized than involuntary childless individuals, childless women would be more stigmatized than childless men, and the stigma towards voluntary childless individuals would be especially pronounced for women. In order to test these hypotheses, participants rated childless individuals from vignettes on a variety of characteristics. The results of the current study partially support the previous research findings and hypotheses. All hypotheses testing was conducted using only the first target vignette, which was a white, high income individual. The other three target vignettes were also used to conduct the exploratory analyses.

Hypothesis 1 stated that voluntary childless individuals would be stigmatized more than involuntary childless individuals. This hypothesis was partially supported by the current study's results. Voluntary childless individuals were perceived as being the most self-centered, but not as having lower life satisfaction or being more immature. Voluntary childless individuals may be seen as the most self-centered because they are prioritizing their own wants (e.g. career, travel, money) over having children. The life satisfaction of voluntary childless individuals may not be perceived to be low due to their lack of desire for children; therefore, they most likely are not affected by the absence of something they did not want in the first place (i.e. children). The finding that involuntary

childless individuals are perceived to have a lower life-satisfaction is consistent with prior research that found infertility causes lower marital satisfaction, which could in turn impact overall life satisfaction (Abbey, Andrews & Halman, 1992; Andrews, Abbey & Halman, 1991; Sabatelli, Meth & Gavazzi, 1988). This also plays into the stereotypical views that women gain purpose in their life as they enter motherhood, and that if someone is involuntarily childless that there is no way they could be happy with their life due to the lack of children.

Hypothesis 2 stated that childless women would be more stigmatized than childless men overall. This hypothesis was not supported for perceived life satisfaction, immaturity, self-centeredness, or degree of being tied-down. These findings are inconsistent with previous research conducted by Calhoun and Selby (1980), which concluded that women are more likely to be judged based on their childlessness status. Other research has suggested that women are perceived to be the sole decision makers when it comes to childbearing and family planning, which also contradicts the current findings because in this case, women would most likely be seen less favorable than men (Koropecyj-Cox et al., 2007c). The methodologies of both of the sited studies were very similar to the present study, although they did only have undergraduate participants that brought the mean age of their participants lower than the current study's mean age of 22.3. The slightly older population of the present study could have impacted the way the participants viewed the women in the vignettes. The only significant difference between genders was for femininity; women were perceived to be significantly more feminine than men, as would be expected. The fact that overall, men were seen as less feminine

than women reveals that participants answered the survey in a manner that indicated they were taking the time to read the questions and answer in a meaningful way. The lack of interaction for tied-down further shows this, as all childless individuals regardless of childless status would be equally tied down based on the vignettes and their lack of children.

Hypothesis 3 stated that difference in stigma between gender and childless status would be especially pronounced for voluntary childless women. Although voluntary childless women were seen as being the most self-centered of all the groups, the self-centeredness ratings were not significantly greater than those for the voluntary childless men; and therefore, this hypothesis was not supported. Due to a lack of prior research specifically comparing perceptions of voluntary childless men and women, this hypothesis was based off of the research mentioned for hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 2, which found that generally, voluntary childless individuals are viewed more negatively than involuntary childless individuals and childless women tend to be viewed more negatively than childless men (Calhoun & Selby, 1980; Koropecykj-Cox et al., 2007c; Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995)

Voluntary childless women were perceived as being the most self-centered, but involuntary childless women were perceived to have the lowest life-satisfaction and as being the most immature. This same effect was not seen for men, which could be due to participants perceiving men as not having as much control over childbearing as women have, which is in line with previous research that revealed participants view childbearing preferences to be more of the woman's choice (Koropecykj-Cox et al., 2007c).

Involuntary childless women may be perceived as having lower life satisfaction due to their want for children not being met, while voluntary childless women never had the same desire in the first place; and therefore, their life satisfaction may not be affected in the same way by the absence of children. Involuntary childless women being perceived as being more immature than those with kids is an unexpected finding and A possible explanation for this finding is that in general, society views having children as a mature act and therefore, parents are seen as mature. Although Voluntary childless individuals don't have children, it is presumed that they have made a mature decision to not have children. On the other hand, involuntarily childless individuals who do not have children are not viewed as mature due to their lack of ability to either have children or make their own mature decision in regard to children. This finding was unexpected, and the underlying reasons should be explored in future research.

For exploratory purposes, race and income of the target were added as within-subject variables to determine their influence on the relationship between gender and childless status. One of the most interesting findings was the impact of income on the relationship between gender and childless status for perceived self-centeredness. Wealthy childless individuals, both voluntary and involuntary, were seen as being more self-centered, but this was especially pronounced for wealthy voluntary childless individuals. Voluntary childless individuals were perceived to be more self-centered overall, as mentioned earlier, so this finding suggests that this is even more so if the individual is wealthy. Individuals choosing to not have children with a low-income are seen as self-centered, but not as much as someone who has the financial means to support a child.

Having a high-income and no desire to have children is seen as extremely self-centered, most likely due to the fact that they are spending their high-income on things that they personally enjoy instead of procreating. This finding is not consistent with prior research that revealed low-income individuals are more likely to be viewed negatively (Lindqvist, Björklund, & Bäckström, 2017). The interaction between childless status and income could be examined in more depth in future research.

The target's race did not impact the results for self-centeredness, but it was significant for both life satisfaction and immaturity. Interestingly, for both male and female involuntary childless targets, White targets were seen as having lower life satisfaction and a higher level of immaturity. The results for voluntary childless individuals were mixed and inconsistent. Prior research has revealed that Black women face different barriers to having children than white women, such as lack of suitable partners due to unemployment, incarceration, and even early death among black males. Black individuals also tend to have more poverty and discrimination, which have also been linked to childlessness (Lundquist, Budig, & Curtis, 2009). It is possible that the reason participants in the current study rated Black involuntary childless targets more favorably than white involuntary childless targets is of the social and economic barriers that the Black population faces.

It is important to note that the results found in the exploratory analyses may have been reduced due to the use of within-subject changes of race and income. Participants may have recognized the target vignettes as being the same with slight variations, and

then adjusted their answer as to not appear as if they were judging based on income or race.

### **Limitations**

There are a number of limitations that could have impacted the outcome of this study. Although there were some participants recruited from the Internet, most of the participants in this study were undergraduate students at the University of South Carolina Aiken. Most of the participants in this study were young undergraduate students (Mean age: 22.3) who were studying psychology at a small liberal arts college. This limits the current study's ability to identify differences in childless stigma based on the age of the participant, which was found in previous research (Koropeckyj-Cox & Pendell, 2007a) and suggests that the findings from this study are not generalizable to the entire population.

Another potential limitation of this study is that just over half of the participants are taken from a small public liberal arts college located in the South (USC Aiken). Individuals in the South are known to have conservative values in regard to family formation and planning (Trent & South, 1992). For example, Trent and South (1992) found that participants from the South believed it was more important to be married before having children, to not get a divorce if children are involved, and that children are better off living with their biological parents than participants from other regions in the United States. Therefore, the results of the current study may show more stigmatization of childless individuals than would be found if the study utilized a national pool of participants.



Another limitation of this study was the use of vignettes. Reading a vignette about an individual may not produce the same reaction or judgment as meeting a person face-to-face. This may have led to smaller effects and ultimately, less intense stigmatization than would occur in a real life setting for a childless individual. The vignettes that were used in this study were also followed by specific personality characteristics that were used to determine negative views of childless individuals. Childless individuals may have been rated positively on other attributes that were not measured in this study, such as being dedicated to work.

Participants had access to this study online remotely and did not complete the survey in a controlled lab. Since the environment that the survey was completed in was not monitored, it is possible that participants paid less attention to the vignettes than if they were to complete the study in a lab.

### **Conclusions and future directions**

The implications of this study include a better understanding of the stigmatization towards the childless community, particularly how the stigmatization differs based on gender and status of childlessness (voluntary vs. involuntary). Although the current study is starting to look at the stigmatization of childless individuals, there is much more to be investigated when it comes to the stigmatization of childless individuals.

With the current data, the influence of participant gender, race, income, religion, political affiliation, and child status on the relationship between target gender and childless status could all be examined to provide more valuable information on this population. A few interesting comparisons would be to examine the differences for

different religions (i.e. do participants in more conservative religions view childless individuals more negatively) as well as political affiliations (i.e. do participants who identify as more conservative politically rate childless individuals more harshly).

Analyses could be rerun and separated by participant gender to see if the current study's results support previous research that found women are typically more accepting of childless individuals than men (Koropeckyj-Cox & Pendell, 2007b). Future research could also examine the relationship between involuntary childlessness and immaturity.

The current study found evidence that involuntary childless women were perceived to be more immature than voluntary childless women, although the reason for this is unknown and warrants further investigation. An in depth look at this relationship may reveal new and interesting findings in the field of childlessness.

The current study found that voluntary and involuntary childless individuals are viewed differently and assigned different negative attributions. The results of the current study did not support the idea that voluntary childless individuals are universally stigmatized more than involuntary childless individuals or that childless women were universally stigmatized more than childless men. For the purpose of this study, stigma was measured using five separate factors, each comprised of multiple personality characteristics. The five stigma factors and their respective personality characteristics used in the present study are as follows: poor life satisfaction (unfulfilled, unhappy, life has no meaning, and ill adjusted), immaturity (immature, irresponsible, neglectful, and lonely), femininity (feminine and reverse scored masculine), self-centeredness (materialistic, selfish, and unloving), and tied down (tied down).

Not having children for any reason will lead to negative personal attributions in today's society, although the reason for not having children does influence the stigmatization that is received. If childless by choice, individuals are perceived to be self-centered, while involuntary childless individuals are perceived to be unsatisfied with life and immature. Perceptions of childless individuals also vary on their financial circumstances as well as race.

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Table 1

Characteristics	Participants from USCA		Participants from the Internet		All Participants Combined	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>Sex</b>						
Male	24.0	15.3	57.0	36.8	81.0	60.9
Female	123.0	78.3	67.0	43.2	190.0	26.0
Other	2.0	1.2	1.0	0.6	3.0	0.9
Missing	8.0	5.2	30.0	19.4	38.0	12.2
<b>Age</b>						
18-27	143.0	85.8	105.0	67.8	248.0	74.4
28-37	4.0	2.4	9.0	5.8	13.0	3.9
38-47	1.0	0.6	4.0	2.5	5.0	1.5
48-57	1.0	0.6	2.0	1.3	3.0	0.9
58-67	0.0	0.0	2.0	1.3	2.0	0.6
68-77	0.0	0.0	4.0	2.5	4.0	1.2
Missing	8.0	5.1	29.0	18.7	37.0	11.1
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>						
White	80.0	51.0	79.0	51.0	159.0	51.0
Black	58.0	36.9	20.0	12.9	78.0	25.0
Asian	0.0	0.0	7.0	4.5	7.0	2.2
Hispanic/Latino	5.0	3.2	12.0	7.7	17.0	5.4
American Indian	1.0	0.6	2.0	1.3	3.0	1.0
Other	5.0	3.2	3.0	1.9	8.0	2.6
Missing	8.0	5.1	29.0	18.7	37.0	11.9
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>						
Heterosexual	130.0	82.8	108.0	69.7	238.0	76.3
Homosexual	6.0	3.8	9.0	5.8	15.0	4.8
Bisexual	8.0	5.1	4.0	2.6	12.0	3.8
Asexual	1.0	0.6	1.0	0.6	2.0	0.6
Pansexual	1.0	0.6	1.0	0.6	2.0	0.6
Other	1.0	0.6	3.0	0.6	4.0	1.3
Missing	10.0	6.4	29.0	18.7	39.0	12.5
<b>Political Affiliation</b>						
Republican	60.0	38.2	34.0	21.9	94.0	30.1
Democrat	71.0	45.2	56.0	36.1	127.0	40.7
Green Party	3.0	1.9	1.0	0.6	4.0	1.3
Libertarian	3.0	1.9	4.0	2.6	7.0	2.2
Independent	11.0	7.0	24.0	15.5	35.0	11.2

Missing	9.0	5.7	36.0	23.2	45.0	14.4
Children						
None	142.0	90.4	110.0	71.0	252.0	80.8
One	5.0	3.2	5.0	3.2	10.0	3.2
Two	1.0	0.6	6.0	3.9	7.0	2.2
Three	1.0	0.6	0.0	0.0	1.0	0.3
Missing	8.0	5.1	34.0	21.9	42.0	13.5

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*Demographic Information for Participants*

Table 2

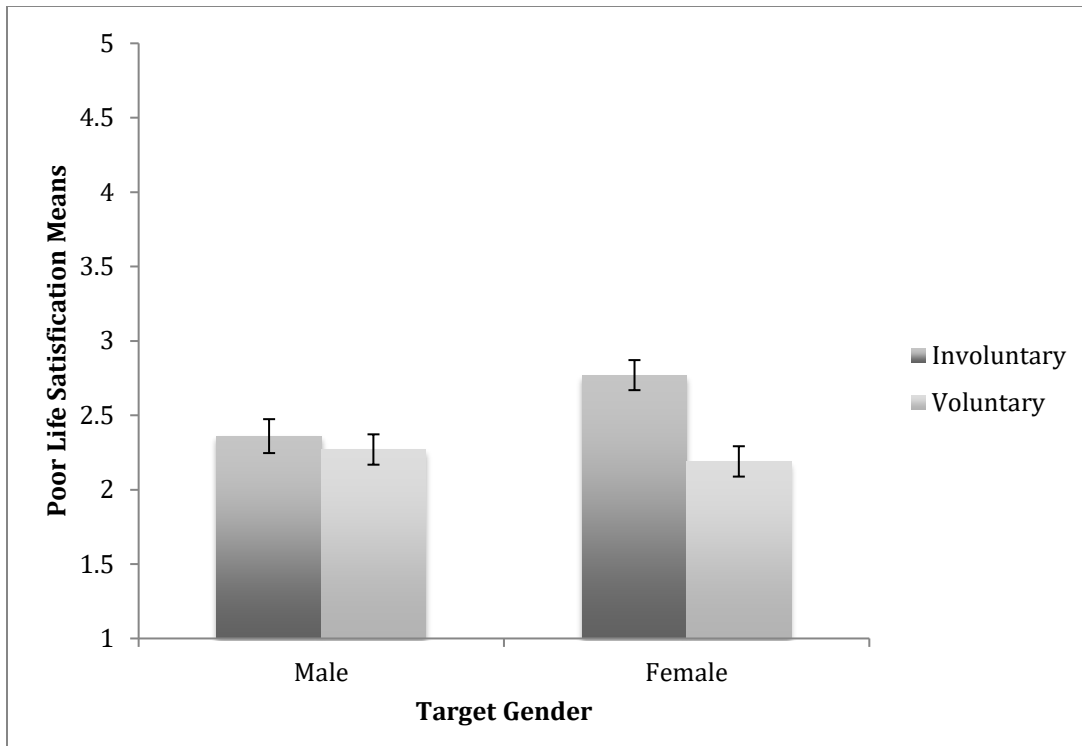
*Descriptive Statistics for Exploratory Analysis – Poor Life Satisfaction*

<u>Childless Status</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Income</u>	<u>Mean (SD)</u>
Involuntary	Women	White	Rich	2.77(1.02)
			Poor	2.98(1.14)
		Black	Rich	2.34(0.94)
			Poor	2.68(1.06)
	Men	White	Rich	2.34(0.83)
			Poor	2.63(1.08)
		Black	Rich	2.15(0.87)
			Poor	2.12(0.89)
Voluntary	Women	White	Rich	2.15(0.92)
			Poor	2.55(0.98)
		Black	Rich	2.42(0.93)
			Poor	2.33(0.9)
	Men	White	Rich	2.25(0.86)
			Poor	2.7(1.06)
		Black	Rich	1.89(0.67)
			Poor	2.78(1.13)

Table 3

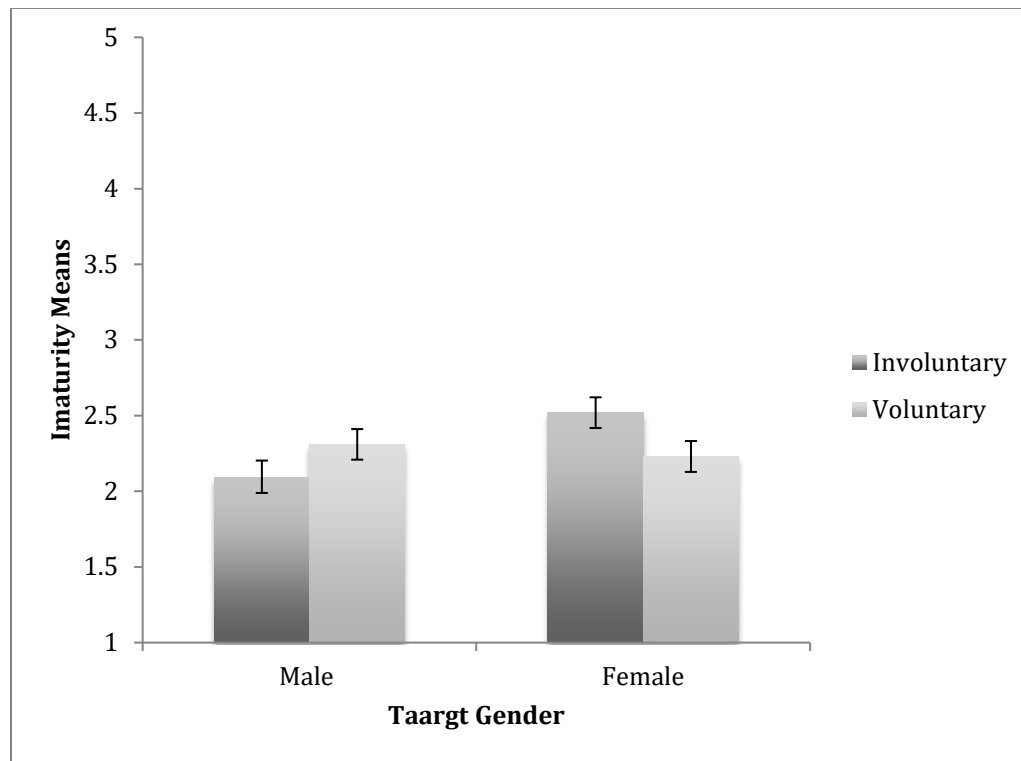
*Descriptive Statistics for Exploratory Analysis – Immaturity*

<u>Childless Status</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Income</u>	<u>Mean(SD)</u>
Involuntary	Women	White	Rich	2.50(0.96)
			Poor	2.57(0.92)
		Black	Rich	2.22(0.95)
			Poor	2.38(1.01)
	Men	White	Rich	2.07(0.89)
			Poor	2.24(1.05)
		Black	Rich	2.18(1.14)
			Poor	2.09(1.16)
Voluntary	Women	White	Rich	2.19(0.83)
			Poor	2.24(0.78)
		Black	Rich	2.46(0.76)
			Poor	2.28(0.78)
	Men	White	Rich	2.25(0.90)
			Poor	2.51(0.94)
		Black	Rich	2.04(0.76)
			Poor	2.34(0.97)

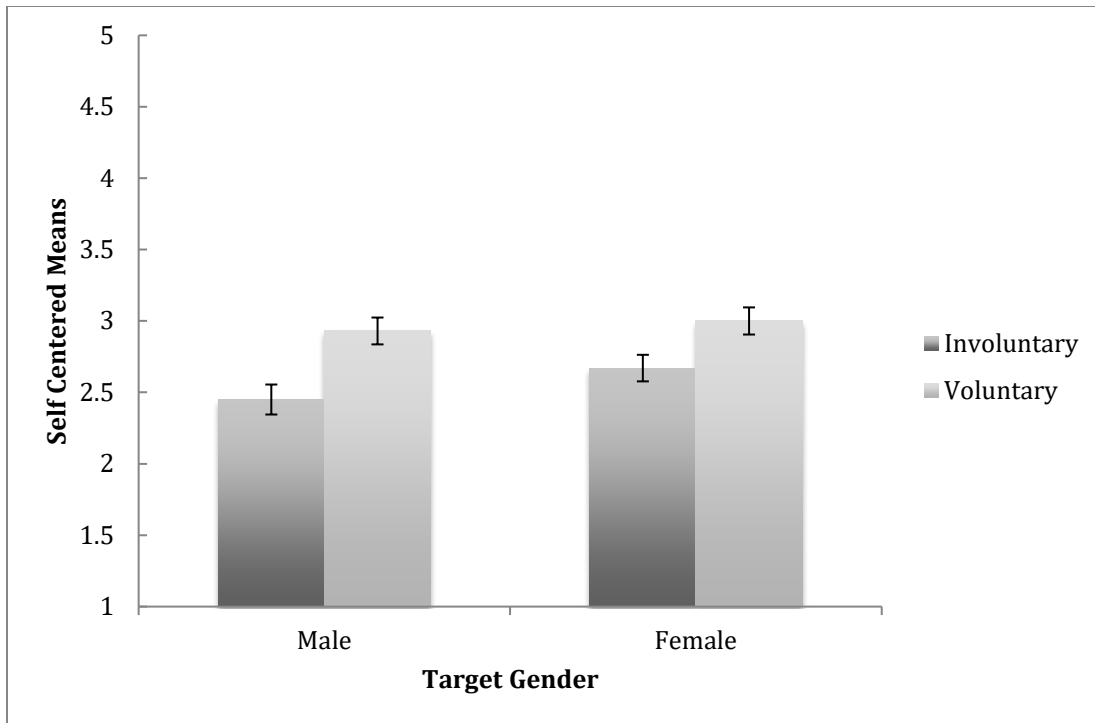


*Figure 1.* Poor Life Satisfaction ANOVA results between gender and childless status. Poor Life Satisfaction is composed of unfulfilled, unhappy, life has no meaning, and ill adjusted.

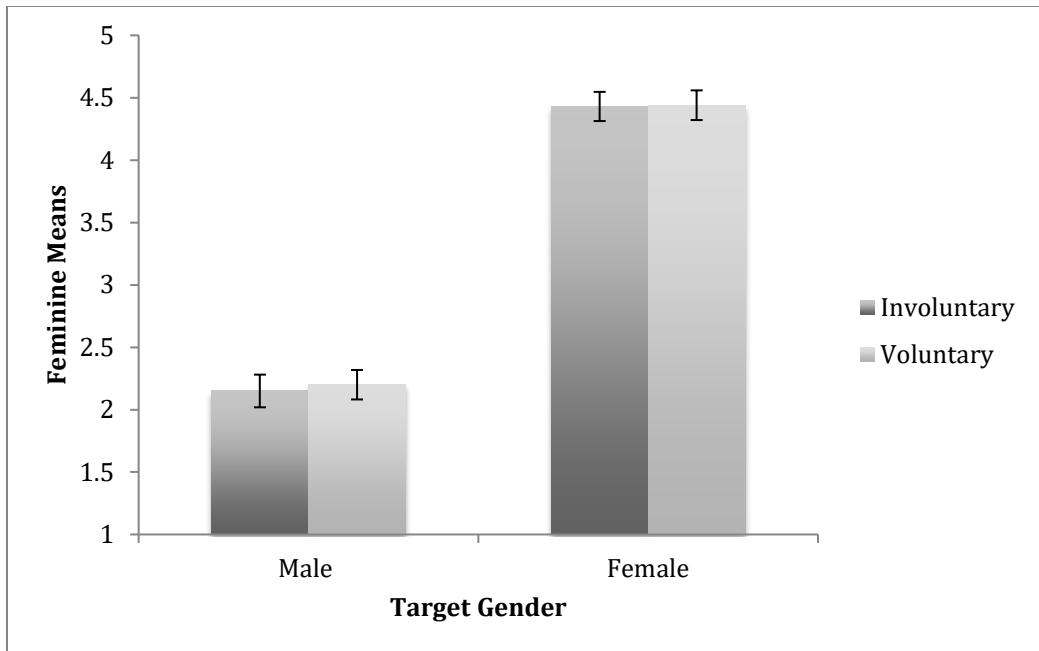




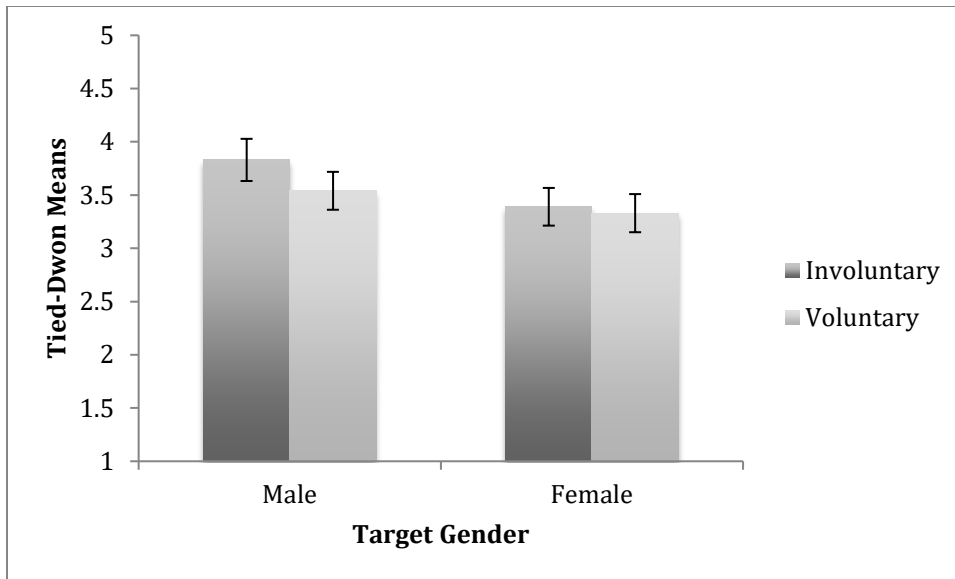
*Figure 2.* Imaturity ANOVA results between gender and childless status. Imaturity is composed of immature, irresponsible, neglectful, and lonely.



*Figure 3.* Self-Centered ANOVA results between gender and childless status. Self-centered is composed of materialistic, selfish, and unloving.



*Figure 4.* Femininity ANOVA results between gender and childless status. Femininity is composed of feminine and reverse scored masculine.



*Figure 5.* Tied-down ANOVA results between gender and childless status. Ties down is composed of tied-down.

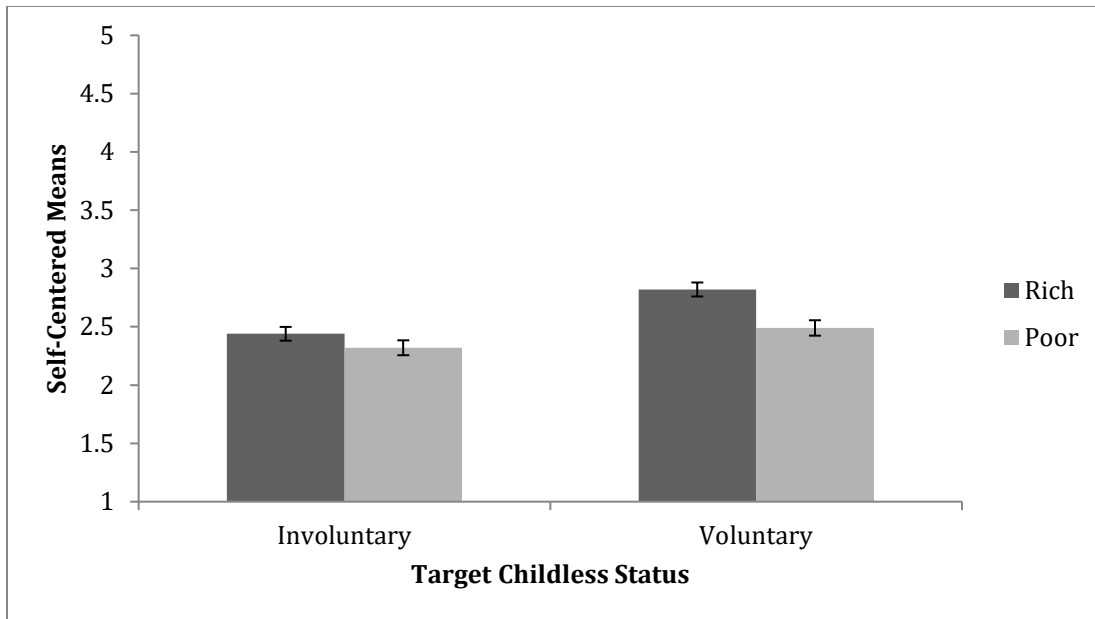


Figure 6. 2-way interaction between income and childless status collapsed across gender and ethnicity.

## Appendix A

## Information Letter

Dear Psychology 101 Student,

My name is Kayla Tamas. I am a graduate student in the Psychology Department at the University of South Carolina Aiken. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my master's degree in Applied Clinical Psychology, and I would like to invite you to participate. My faculty mentor is Dr. Adam Pazda, Assistant Professor of Psychology at USC Aiken.

I am studying how people form impressions of others based on written descriptions of their attributes. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to read descriptions of multiple different individuals and then rate them on a variety of different characteristics. You will also be asked to answer some questions about yourself, including your age, sex, ethnicity, etc., though you are free to decline to answer any of these. I estimate that 200 participants will take part in this study and it should take no longer than 30 minutes to complete.

Your participation in this survey is completely voluntary. You are free to not participate or to withdraw at any time, for whatever reason, without penalty. Furthermore, your responses to this survey will be anonymous. No identifying information will be collected.

You will receive .5 points of extra credit to be used toward an eligible psychology course for participation in this study. This study is not the only way you may receive extra course credit. Your psychology professors may offer an alternative assignment for extra credit in place of participation in psychology studies. To pursue this alternative, notify the instructor and work out the details with him or her.

I will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at 479-567-0877 or [sweetk@usca.edu](mailto:sweetk@usca.edu) or my faculty mentor, Dr. Adam Pazda at 803-641-3471 or [apazda@gmail.com](mailto:apazda@gmail.com) if you have study related questions or problems. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance at the University of South Carolina at 803-777-7095.

Warm Regards,  
Kayla Tamas  
Graduate Student, M.S. Applied Clinical Psychology  
[sweetk@usca.edu](mailto:sweetk@usca.edu)  
479-567-0877

## Appendix B

**Target Vignettes****Voluntary Childless Female**

Kathy is a white female in her early 40's. She is happily married to her husband of 15 years, Mark, and they have no children due to their personal choice.

Kathy earns an income of \$100,000. Outside of work, Kathy enjoys running.

Kathy is a white female in her early 40's. She is happily married to her husband of 15 years, Mark, and they have no children due to their personal choice. Kathy earns

an income of \$15,000. Outside of work, Kathy enjoys running.

Kiara is a black female in her early 40's. She is happily married to her husband of 15 years, Marquis, and they have no children due to their personal choice. Kiara earns

an income of \$100,000. Outside of work, Kiara enjoys running.

Kiara is a black female in her early 40's. She is happily married to her husband of 15 years, Marquis, and they have no children due to their personal choice. Kiara earns

an income of \$15,000. Outside of work, Kiara enjoys running.

**Voluntary Childless Male**

Mark is a white male in his early 40's. He is happily married to his wife of 15 years, Kathy, and they have no children due to personal choice. Mark earns an income of \$100,000. Outside of work, Mark enjoys running.

Mark is a white male in his early 40's. He is happily married to his wife of 15 years, Kathy, and they have no children due to personal choice. Mark earns an income of \$15,000. Outside of work, Mark enjoys running.

Marquis is a black male in his early 40's. He is happily married to his wife of 15 years, Kiara, and they have no children due to personal choice. Marquis earns an income of \$100,000. Outside of work, Marquis enjoys running.

Marquis is a black male in his early 40's. He is happily married to his wife of 15 years, Kiara, and they have no children due to personal choice. Marquis earns an income of \$15,000. Outside of work, Marquis enjoys running.

### **Involuntary Childless Female**

Kathy is a white female in her early 40's. She is happily married to her husband of 15 years, Mark, and they have no children due to infertility. Kathy earns an income of \$100,000. Outside of work, Kathy enjoys running.



Kathy is a white female in her early 40's. She is happily married to her husband of 15 years, Mark, and they have no children due to infertility. Kathy earns an income of \$15,000. Outside of work, Kathy enjoys running.

Kiara is a black female in her early 40's. She is happily married to her husband of 15 years, Marquis, and they have no children due to infertility. Kiara earns an income of \$100,000. Outside of work, Kiara enjoys running.

Kiara is a black female in her early 40's. She is happily married to her husband of 15 years, Marquis, and they have no children due to infertility. Kiara earns an income of \$15,000. Outside of work, Kiara enjoys running.

### **Involuntary Childless Male**

Mark is a white male in his early 40's. He is happily married to his wife of 15 years, Kathy, and they have no children due to infertility. Mark earns an income of \$100,000. Outside of work, Mark enjoys running.

Mark is a white male in his early 40's. He is happily married to his wife of 15 years, Kathy, and they have no children due to infertility. Mark earns an income of \$15,000. Outside of work, Mark enjoys running.

Marquis is a black male in his early 40's. He is happily married to his wife of 15 years, Kiara, and they have no children due to infertility. Marquis earns an income of \$100,000. Outside of work, Marquis enjoys running.

Marquis is a black male in his early 40's. He is happily married to his wife of 15 years, Kiara, and they have no children due to infertility. Marquis earns an income of \$15,000. Outside of work, Marquis enjoys running.

## Appendix C

### **Filler Vignettes**

Andy is a single homosexual male in his early twenties. He is finishing up his senior year of college at a midwestern university studying marketing and plans to move to California when he graduates to try to start an acting career. In his spare time, Andy enjoys salsa dancing and hiking.

Carol is a single middle-aged women working as an administrative assistant at a local law firm. Carol earns roughly \$30,000 a year and gets along with her coworkers. Carol's two children have recently left her home to go to college and she is having a hard time transitioning to being an "empty-nester".

Derek is a teenager living with his father and stepmother. Derek chooses to not speak to his biological mother due to her history of drug abuse when he was a child. He has a great relationship with both his father and his stepmother. Derek enjoys playing football for his high school team after school and hanging out with his friends.

Anne is an exotic dancer in her early twenties. Anne's motto in life is to "work smarter and not harder" and believes that working a minimum wage job is for losers. Anne takes pride in being able to support herself independently and not having to rely on anyone else to take care of her. Outside of work, Anne enjoys watching romantic comedies and eating at high-end restaurants.

Frank is an eighty-year-old male who is married to his high school sweetheart of sixty-three years. Together, Frank and his wife enjoy completing crossword puzzles and watching sitcoms. Frank and his wife are both retired and live off of their social security benefits.

Susan is a single, young mother of four children, who is currently unemployed. Although she is actively looking for a job, she is having a hard time getting to interviews because her car is not reliable. In order to take care of her children, Susan uses multiple forms of government assistance included subsidized housing and food stamps.

## Appendix D

## Adjective Rating Scale

Happy							Unhappy
1	2	3	4	5			6
Lonely							Not Lonely
1	2	3	4	5			6
Unselfish							Selfish
1	2	3	4	5			6
Loving							Unloving
1	2	3	4	5			6
Immature							Mature
1	2	3	4	5			6
Well-adjusted							Ill-adjusted
1	2	3	4	5			6
Neglectful							Nurturing
1	2	3	4	5			6
Fulfilled							Unfulfilled
1	2	3	4	5			6
Irresponsible							Responsible
1	2	3	4	5			6

Materialistic  
materialistic

1            2            3            4            5            6

Feminine

Non-  
Not Feminine

1            2            3            4            5            6

Masculine

Not Masculine

1            2            3            4            5            6

Free

Tied-

Down

1            2            3            4            5            6

Life has no meaning

Has a meaningful life

1            2            3            4            5            6

## Appendix E

## Demographic Survey

1. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_

2. What is your gender?

Male

Female

Other \_\_\_\_\_

3. Which best describes you?

Heterosexual

Homosexual

Bisexual

Asexual

Pansexual

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Please rate yourself on the following scale:

Not at all Heterosexual

Completely Heterosexual

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

5. Please rate yourself on the following scale:

Not at all Homosexual

Completely Homosexual

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

6. What is your ethnicity?

White

Black or African American

Hispanic or Latino

Native American or American Indian

Asian/Pacific Islander

Other \_\_\_\_\_

7. What is your annual household income? \_\_\_\_\_

8. Are you a first generation college student?

Yes

No

9. Are you an international student?

Yes

No

10. What religion do you associate with, if any? \_\_\_\_\_

11. Please choose a number that represents your religiosity:

Not at all religious

Extremely religious

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

12. What political party do you identify with, if any? \_\_\_\_\_

13. Please choose a number that represents your political affiliation:

Very Conservative

Very Liberal

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

14. How many children do you have?

None

One

Two

Three

Four or more

15. Do you consider yourself a southerner?

Yes

No

16. How many children do you want to have eventually?



- None
- One
- Two
- Three
- Four or more

17. Please choose a number that represents your desire to have children in the future:  
Definitely not

Absolutely

1            2            3            4            5            6            7

18. Were you adopted?

- Yes
- No

19. Was anyone in your family adopted?

- Yes
- No