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Attitudes about Childlessness in the United States: Age, Gender, and Other Correlates.

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Abstract

Acceptance of childlessness has increased in the United States since the 1960s. Existing studies have examined and tracked acceptance of childlessness. We use cross-sectional data from the National Survey of Families and Households (1987-88 and 1992-94) to examine the correlates of positive, neutral, or negative attitudes about childlessness. Reported attitudes reflect the extent of agreement with the following statements: "it is better to have a child than to remain childless" (time 1) and "a man/woman can have a fulfilling life without children" (time 2). Bivariate results show more positive attitudes at Time 2 and among those who are young, never married or cohabiting, those who are childless or are adoptive parents, and those of higher socio-economic status. More negative attitudes are related to being male, lower education, unemployment, lower childhood socio-economic status, being Hispanic, or being married or widowed. Multinomial logistic regressions show strong differences by age, gender, racial-ethnic group, and current parental status that remain after controlling for other factors, but partner status and childhood background are not significant.

Abstract: 172 words

Social attitudes in the United States since the early 1970s have reflected a dramatic shift toward more diverse lifestyles and greater acceptance of childlessness (Thornton, 1989; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). By the mid-1970s, it also became more common and acceptable to give voice to negative perceptions of parenting (Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1981), and more recently, concern and resentment have been raised about "how family-friendly America cheats the childless" (Burkett, 2000). Although there has not been a wholesale move away from parenthood (Blake, 1979; Thornton, 1989) the rates of childlessness among cohorts born since the Baby Boom have reached record levels of about 20-25 percent (Morgan, 1996, 2002). Other social changes during this time have included increased ages at marriage, lower marital fertility, increased non-marital cohabitation, and greater proportions remaining childless and single or within marriage. Many people are consciously choosing to remain childless, though most find themselves inadvertently childless after repeatedly delaying marriage and/or child-bearing (Rindfuss, Morgan, & Swicegood, 1988).

The current paper examines attitudes about childlessness based on national survey data from the late 1980s and early 1990s. We examine attitudes about childlessness and their correlates as a window for assessing social change and the prevalence of different points of view. We are particularly interested in exploring the extent to which people holding "neutral" opinions about childlessness are similar to those with positive vs. negative attitudes. Further, although the link between early preferences and actual child-bearing is relatively weak (see Rindfuss, Morgan & Swicegood, 1988; Quesnel-Vallee & Morgan, 2004), supportive attitudes about childlessness may provide some insight into the characteristics of those who may be more likely to remain childless themselves. Neutral or supportive attitudes may be linked with increased odds of remaining childless either by choice or because of repeated delays in marriage or fertility.

Beyond its possible relation to individual decisions, attitudes may influence the behavior of others. For example, strongly negative attitudes about childlessness may be manifested through normative pressures to bear children. On the other hand, more neutral or positive attitudes about childlessness may encourage some adults to repeatedly delay or forego having children. Finally, attitudes about childlessness themselves may be related to other outcomes, including the extent of social stigma or pressures experienced by childless adults (Alexander, et. al., 1992) and assessments of psychological well-being among childless adults (Koropeckyj-Cox, 2002).

The current examination provides an update on the prevalence of attitudes about childlessness, with special attention to distinguishing among positive, neutral, and negative attitudes. Trent and South's (1992) research on sociodemographic predictors of other family-related attitudes provides a framework for our paper. Though not specifically on childlessness, their work examines the predictors of family attitude formation related to contemporary and past characteristics. The authors report that age, marital status, and gender are the strongest predictors of family attitude formation. This paper takes a similar approach, asking what factors predict the likelihood of holding positive, neutral, or negative attitudes about childlessness. We examine family background variables (family structure and socio-economic status) as well as current socio-demographic and economic variables, in an effort to discern which variables are most likely to predict certain types of attitudes. In particular, we focus on the important roles of gender, race-ethnicity, and age/cohort in predicting attitudes about childlessness and parenthood.

Changing norms regarding parenthood and childlessness

Social norms that value parenthood and child-bearing have changed in recent decades, but remain strongly rooted in American society. Morgan and King (2001) have posited that despite its declining economic returns for parents, child-bearing continues to be highly valued

because of its less tangible rewards, including pleasure and emotional bonds, enhanced social status, access to social capital (see also Astone, et al., 1999), reduction of uncertainty for the future (Friedman, Hechter, & Kanazawa, 1994), and a connection with larger, societal investments and concerns (Preston, 1987). The attainment and experience of parent status, affirmation and emotional support, and a sense of "immortality" through the transmission of genes and values are identified as important motivations of bearing children (Blake, 1979). During the postwar Baby Boom, strong family-oriented social values combined with overall economic prosperity and few alternative opportunities for women to create a pro-natalist environment that encouraged traditional marriage and child-bearing (Blake, 1972; May, 1995).

Since the mid-1960s, however, the availability of highly effective contraceptives, the decline in real wages, and decline in marital stability, among other social changes, have reduced the appeal and feasibility of child-bearing for many Americans. Bloom and Pebley (1982) have argued that voluntary childlessness, which they broadly define as anyone who is apparently fecund but childless, had become both more common and more acceptable by the early 1980s. Changing attitudes and opportunities have contributed to a sense that parenthood is optional – "a matter of preference." (Ryder, 1979: 361; see also Bumpass, 1990). More generally, the availability of highly effective contraceptives has allowed modern societies to "disconnect sex from reproduction" (Morgan & King, 2001: 5), allowing for the emergence of sexually active singles, non-marital cohabitation, delaying entry into parenthood, and child-free marriages.

During this same time, it has become increasingly common and acceptable to acknowledge the negative strains and sacrifices associated with parenting (Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka, 1981), an ambivalence that has been echoed in the mixed picture of parenting in social scientific research. Among adults in midlife, parenting is associated with higher levels of

emotional distress related to the strains and demands of the parenting role as well as parents' self-assessments of their performance and the importance they place on parenting as an identity and social role (Thoits, 1992; Simon, 1992). Recent research has reported the greatest regrets among parents with large families (Groat et. al, 1997) and among childless adults who wanted to have children (Jeffries & Konnert, 2002). Overall, both parents and childless adults report high levels of satisfaction with their family lives, and the stresses of parenting may be reduced by the global integrative meaning that family represents in peoples' lives (Burton, 1998).

Concerns about the downsides of parenthood and the imperative to enter into parenthood have been particularly salient for women. The social expectations that have equated motherhood with womanhood, which Russo (1976) termed the "motherhood mandate," have exerted significant social pressure on women to become mothers. However, Ireland's (1993) study of the diversity among women without children has noted that women who see their childlessness as a choice and an opportunity, a "generative space" rather than an "absence," provide an alternative model that is "unlinking the necessity of motherhood from a fulfilling female identity." (Ireland, 1993: 125, 130) Women are choosing to remain childless for a variety of reasons, including aspirations to pursue fulfillment and economic opportunity through education and employment, concerns about the stability of marriage, a preference for a partner- or marriage-focused personal life, and the sense of greater freedom without the demands of parenting (see Houseknecht, 1987; May 1995).

Though most women expect to combine work and family in their adult lives, many women are putting off marriage and child-bearing in favor of pursuing educational and work opportunities. Even during the post-war baby boom when voluntary childlessness was regarded as "nearly extinct" (Whelpton, et al, 1966), there is evidence of higher rates of childlessness

among upwardly mobile couples, due to deliberate choices to remain childless or to repeatedly delay child-bearing (Boyd, 1989). Since the 1980s, concerns have been raised about negative consequences of childlessness and about low fertility in general, particularly among women with higher levels of education and careers (see Faludi, 1991; May, 1995). Most recently, Hewlett (2002) has voiced concerns that repeated delays of child-bearing in favor of work pursuits may lead to high rates of unintended childlessness, noting that contemporary workforce policies and norms may contribute to lower fertility and childlessness due to the incompatibility between work and family.

Despite the greater acceptance of childlessness, a number of studies have highlighted the stigma and stereotypes of childless individuals, whether they are childless by choice or as a result of involuntary circumstances. Those who are voluntarily childless are regarded as psychologically incomplete and socially deviant -- "selfish, immature, lonely, unfulfilled, insensitive, and more likely to have mental problems than those with children." (Seccombe, 1991: 192; see also Blake, 1979; Callan, 1985; May, 1995; Park, 2002). Those who are childless because of infertility problems or other circumstances also report feeling stigmatized, citing images of incompleteness, personal failure, or neuroses (Miall, 1986; Miall, 1994; Pfeffer & Woollett, 1983). Recent advances in assistive reproductive technologies may exacerbate the stigma because of the increased emphasis placed on biogenetic parenthood and the perceptions of failure that may result when highly expensive and often invasive medical interventions do not result in "successful" fertility (cite). The diversity among childless adults (Ireland, 1993; Koropeckyj-Cox, 1998; Letherby, 2002; May, 1995), however, may help to reduce negative generalizations about the childless population and may contribute to greater tolerance (i.e., neutral responses) even without large-scale acceptance; indeed, childlessness or parent status

may not represent a dominant categorization or "master status" of individuals in our society (Ramazanogle, 1993; Bhavnani & Phoenix, 1994; Letherby, 2002).

Correlates of Attitudes about Childlessness: Research questions and hypotheses

Although acceptance of those with "alternative" family statuses, such as unmarried childbearing or voluntary childlessness, is increasing, the level of acceptance varies. We examine socio-demographic factors and characteristics of childhood background to identify the correlates of positive, neutral, and negative attitudes toward childlessness. Following Trent and South (1992), we particularly focus on current and childhood family characteristics that are specifically related to formation of attitudes about childlessness, including childhood family structure and number of siblings as well as current partner status and parental status. We hypothesize that less traditional backgrounds – not having lived with both parents in childhood, coming from a small family, or being an only child – are related to more accepting attitudes toward childlessness. More liberal attitudes are also expected among respondents from more advantaged childhood backgrounds, including fathers with higher socio-economic levels and more educated mothers (Trent & South, 1992).

Among the socio-demographic variables, we identify and examine gender as a particularly important predictor of attitudes about childlessness. Numerous studies have reported that women have embraced social changes and hold more liberal attitudes, especially those concerning gender and families, compared to men. Observations of a "stalled revolution" (Hochschild, 1993) with regard to gender attitudes among men suggest that women are more supportive of childlessness, whereas men are more likely to hold onto more conservative attitudes. This greater male conservatism is evident in the 1988 and 1994 International Social Science Project surveys. Presented with the statement, 'People who have never had children lead

empty lives,' about equal proportions of men and women disagreed in 1988, but in 1994 about 56% of men compared to 45% of women disagreed (Thornton & DeMarco, 2001). Even among married couples without children, men hold more pro-natalist attitudes than women (Seccombe, 1991). Therefore, we expect greater acceptance of childlessness among women in general and among women who are single or childless compared to men in similar statuses. As higher rates of childlessness are observed among women who are white, more highly educated, and employed (e.g., Poston & Gotard, 1977; Jacobson, Heaton, & Taylor), we expect that these characteristics will also be associated with holding more positive attitudes about childlessness and that these factors will be more salient for women's attitudes compared to men's. We therefore examine both the direct link between gender and attitudes as well as interactions with age, race, family background, and socio-economic status.

Studies of attitudes among successive cohorts have shown an increased prevalence of liberal attitudes among younger cohorts, reflecting the social changes that have been a major part of their younger adult years (see for example, Thornton, Alwin, & Camburn, 1983; more recent Alwin work on cohort succession). Younger adults are generally found to hold more liberal attitudes about marriage and family issues than those at older ages (Trent & South, 1992). We therefore expect to find a similar age influence, with more neutral or positive attitudes toward childlessness found among younger respondents. Greater acceptance of childlessness among younger adults may also reflect the high prevalence of postponement of both marriage and child-bearing among current younger cohorts. Among younger childless adults, stigma and questions about their own childlessness may be deflected and minimized because of the potentially temporary nature of their status; these childless adults may sooner or later have children, making their current childlessness more socially acceptable (McAllister, 1998). In sum, we expect more

positive or neutral attitudes about childlessness among younger persons who have experienced an environment of increasing acceptance of diverse relationships and family life choices.

With regard to current marital and parental status, we expect that attitudes will likely be congruent with the respondent's current lifestyle and choices. Current situations in life affect attitude formation, reflecting early beliefs as well as adjustments to changes that occur in the life course (see Gerson, 1985). For example, divorced individuals are more likely to favor divorce and other less traditional family situations (Trent & South, 1992; Axinn & Thornton, 1996). Parents will favor parenthood while the childless will be more likely to hold neutral or positive opinions of childlessness. Cohabiting adults are also likely to be less conservative in their views and may favor the childless lifestyle (Axinn & Barber, 1997). We expect to see less favorable attitudes toward childlessness among married respondents and those who have had children.

Finally, beyond the individual and childhood background characteristics, we also examine one facet of social context, namely region of residence in the United States. We expect that individual attitudes about childlessness will reflect the contextual impact of living in an area with more conservative views regarding traditional family and child-bearing, with the most negative attitudes about childlessness related to living in the South (Moore & Vanneman, 2003) and the most positive among those in the West and Northeast (Trent & South, 1992).

Methods

Data

The National Survey of Families and Households was conducted in 1987-88 through face-to-face interviews and self-administered questionnaires completed by randomly chosen adult respondents from each household (see Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988). The NSFH has provided invaluable data on marriage and cohabitation, fertility and family histories, attitudes

about family life, and various indicators of adults' and children's well-being. Our analyses include adults aged 25 years or older who completed the self-administered questionnaire, resulting in a sample size of 10,648.

The second wave of the survey involved re-contacting and re-interviewing the same households and respondents in 1992-1994. For the current analyses, we use the second wave data for cross-sectional analyses with respondents aged 25 or older, including those from the earlier wave who were re-interviewed as well as respondents who had aged into the group at wave 2. The time 2 sample has been reduced because of sample attrition between the two waves of data collection, resulting in a sample size of 8,919. The initial NSFH includes over-samples of African Americans and other minority groups, as well as cohabiting couples and other specific living arrangements. All analyses therefore use sample weights provided with the data.

Our objective is to explore and describe the correlates of positive, neutral, and negative attitudes about childlessness, thus calling for a cross-sectional approach to the two waves of data. As the two survey waves use substantively different questions to measure attitudes about childlessness, we explore the correlates of each set of outcome variables separately.

Dependent variables: Attitudes about Childlessness

Questions assessing attitudes about childlessness are included among a set of attitudinal questions about family, gender, and other social issues. These questions appear in the self-administered questionnaires in each wave of the survey. The first wave of the NSFH includes one item with a 5-point Likert scale asking to what extent respondents agree with the following statement: "It is better to have children than remain childless." Responses range from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*), with 3 included as a neutral option indicating *"neither agree nor disagree*." We collapse these responses into three categories as they relate to the

overall perception of childlessness as positive (disagree or strongly disagree), neutral , or negative (agree or strongly agree).

The second wave of the NSFH includes with two separate items on attitudes about childlessness that are gender-specific. These items ask the respondent to what extent they agree with the following statements: "A woman can have a satisfying life without children," and "A man can have a satisfying life without children." Again, the responses use a Likert scale, with *1* for *strongly agree,* to *5* for *strongly disagree*, and *3* included as a neutral option indicating *"neither agree nor disagree*." As our focus is on overall attitudes about childlessness, we create a single, summed score of the responses to the two gender-specific items. We then use these scores (ranging from 2 to 10) to create three response categories for positive (score of 2-4), neutral (5-7), and (8-10) negative attitudes about childlessness.

Independent variables: Current socio-demographic characteristics

Sex is coded as a dummy variable indicating that respondent was female, with male as the reference category. **Age** is measured continuously and as a categorical variable, indicating three age-cohort groups: young (aged 25-44); middle (aged 45-64); and older (aged 65 or older), with older persons as the reference category. **Racial-ethnic group** is coded as a series of dummy variables for black, Hispanic, and white, with white as the omitted category. The white category also includes a small number of Asian and American Indian respondents whose numbers are too small to allow for separate analyses.

Current marital and cohabitation status are combined into a set of dummy variables for the following mutually exclusive categories: a) in a non-marital cohabiting partnership; b) separated or divorced but not cohabiting; c) widowed and not cohabiting; and d) never married and not cohabiting. Married persons are used as the reference category. The NSFH data from

Time 1 include a constructed variable that reflects this combined marital-cohabitation status. Cohabitation status at Time 2 is coded based on the household roster; respondents that list a lover/partner or spouse on the household roster but report their marital status at Time 2 as unmarried are coded as cohabiting at Time 2. Otherwise, their marital-cohabitation status is based on their current marital status, without cohabitation.

Own family status is measured at time 1 as the number of children ever born to or fathered by the respondent. Because of its conceptual importance and link to attitudes about childlessness, we also include a separate dummy variable indicating whether the respondent was both biologically and socially childless. Equivalent measures are used at time 2, based on updated information on family status.

Three variables measure current socio-economic and work status**. Completed education** is measured at each interview as the number of years completed. To allow for potentially non-linear relationships between education and attitudes, we include education as a series of dummy variables for education less than high school (less than 12 years), completion of 12 years (reference category), some college or technical school (13-15 years), and completion of college or additional education (16 years or more). **Total household income** is measured at the time of each interview. We include the natural log of household income in the regression models for both time 1 and 2. **Work status** is coded as a dichotomous variable indicating whether the respondent is working for pay at the time of the interview. Work status at Time 1 is coded based on the respondents' report of currently working full-time, part-time, or not working. Time 2 work status is coded based on the responses to two questions. If the respondent reports working any hours in the past week or if they reports being absent last week from a usual job, then they are coded as currently working at Time 2.

To account for possible contextual factors influencing attitudes, we include a set of dummy variables indicating the **region** of current residence in the United States: Northeast, Northcentral, South and West (based on Census categories for region).

Independent variables: Childhood family background

Childhood family structure is assessed at time 1 and coded with a set of indicator variables for a) never having lived with one's biological father; b) having lived with parents who were married and living together throughout the respondent's childhood to age 16 (reference category); and c) having lived in a family situation in childhood that included divorce, single-parenting, or other arrangements. We also include two measures of childhood family size based on the **number of brothers and sisters** reported (continuous measure of number of siblings, ranging from none to 8 or more) and whether the respondent was an **only child.**

Childhood socio-economic background is measured with two variables from the time 1 interview, **father's socio-economic status** when the respondent was 16 and **mother's level of education**. For respondents who never lived with their biological father, the father's socio-economic status is replaced with the mean, and a dummy variable is included in the models for never having lived with the father.

Statistical Analysis

We use bivariate statistics to compare the characteristics of respondents reporting positive, neutral, or negative attitudes in the two surveys and test for differences using Chi-square statistics for categorical variables and analyses of variance to compare the means of continuous variables. We use multinomial logit regression methods to assess the relative relationships between the three categorical outcomes and the independent variables. The multinomical logit methods compare the odds of being in one of the attitudinal categories

compared to each of the other categories, resulting in three sets of coefficients for each model -- positive compared to neutral, positive compared to negative, and neutral compared to negative. For each binary comparison, we run the models hierarchically, first including just age and sex, and then adding current socio-demographic characteristics, current marital-partner status and current family status, childhood family structure, childhood socio-economic background, and current region of residence. We also test for interactions between sex and the other variables.

Results

Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of respondents in the two surveys. The Time 2 sample is slightly older than the original sample, due to aging of the existing sample and attrition. The Time 2 sample is also slightly less likely to be married and more likely to be divorced or cohabiting compared to Time 1. Both father's socio-economic status and mother's education appear to be somewhat higher at Time 2, again probably reflecting selective attrition from the sample. Table 1 also shows the proportions in the samples with positive, neutral, or negative attitudes toward childlessness. In both surveys, substantial proportions give neutral responses, about 37% at Time 1 and nearly 44% at Time 2. The different phrasings of the questions should be kept in mind in reading the distributions. At Time 1, about one-fifth of respondents disagree that "it is better to have a child than to remain childless" (positive response) but at Time 2 over 43% affirm that a childless person can have a "fulfilling life."

[Table 1 about here]

Table 2 outlines the characteristics of respondents providing positive, neutral, or negative responses about childlessness in each survey. In both samples, all of the variables except childhood family structure are significantly related to attitudes about childlessness. Specifically, more positive attitudes are found among younger people, women, non-Hispanics, and working

adults. Negative attitudes are consistently more likely among older respondents, males, those with lower levels of education, and married or widowed adults. Regional variations and differences by partner status, parental status, and family of origin are more complex and vary between the Time 1 and Time 2 surveys. For example, childless adults report overwhelmingly positive responses to the Time 2 questions about fulfillment, but with the Time 1 question, childless adults are more likely to report neutral responses rather than positive attitudes about childlessness. Similarly, those with the highest means for income and fathers' socio-economic status are more likely to give neutral responses at Time 1 but positive responses at Time 2.

[Table 2 about here]

Results of multinomial logistic regressions of positive, neutral, and negative attitudes toward childlessness are summarized in Table 3. The variable with the strongest net relationships in all three paired comparisons of attitudes is being female -- women are much more likely to provide positive responses compared to neutral or negative, and they are also more likely to provide neutral responses compared to the negative. In general, respondents who give either positive or neutral responses are consistently different from those giving negative responses, with fewer differences between the positive and neutral responders. More negative attitudes toward childlessness are associated with having less than a high school education, being older, being unemployed, having children, and having a less-educated mother. Net of other factors, negative attitudes are also more likely at Time 1 among people living in the South or Northeast, compared to the West. In the Time 2 survey, the North-central region stands out as having less negative responses compared to the other regions. Hispanic respondents are much more likely to give negative responses compared to either positive or neutral, but there are few differences between White and Black non-Hispanic respondents. It should be noted that Black

respondents are more likely to have negative attitudes rather than positive or neutral in models that do not control for childhood socio-economic status; race differences in attitudes between Black and White adults are largely explained by childhood socio-economic circumstances.

Partner status is significantly related to attitudes in the bivariate comparisons, but these differences are no longer statistically significant when economic status, parental status, and family background are controlled. The importance of partner status in predicting attitudes appears to be explained mainly by the socio-economic variables. Not surprisingly, childless respondents are much more likely to report more neutral or positive attitudes about childlessness compared to respondents with children at Time 1 and more positive attitudes at Time 2. These results are even stronger when childhood socio-economic status is omitted from the model. The adoptive parents are more likely than biological parents to report positive attitudes at Time 1, but they are more likely to give negative rather than neutral responses at Time 2 -- they are less likely to agree that a childless adult can have a fulfilling life.

Respondents with college degrees are significantly more likely to report positive attitudes compared to either negative or neutral to the Time 2 question about leading a fulfilling life. The Time 1 question, however, mainly shows an educational difference at the lowest education level, with more negative attitudes reported among those with less than a high school education. Income is not related to attitudes in either survey, except that higher income is associated with a greater likelihood of being at the positive rather than negative pole at Time 1; the coefficients for income are greatly reduced when childhood socio-economic status is included in the model. Currently working is related to less negative attitudes at Time 1, but is not significantly related to attitudes at Time 2. Childhood family variables are not consistently related to attitudes, though only children are somewhat more likely to report positive compared to negative attitudes at Time

2 and those from larger families are less likely to report negative compared to neutral attitudes at Time 1. A more advantaged background in childhood, particularly higher levels of mother's education, is strongly related to more positive or neutral attitudes at Time 1, while father's socio-economic status is mainly important at the extremes of positive vs. negative attitudes.

In order to explore the conditioning effects of gender on attitudes about childlessness, we have tested interaction variables with each variable in the regression models. Consistent, statistically significant interaction coefficients appear between gender and race and between gender and childlessness. Compared to white men, white women are 70% more likely to give neutral responses and nearly four times more likely to give positive responses compared to negative in the Time 1 survey. On the other hand, Black women are about 20% less likely to report neutral compared to negative attitudes but are more than twice as likely to give positive compared to negative responses; there is no race difference, however, among men's responses at Time 1. Women with a college degree are less likely than men to report neutral compared to negative attitudes at Time 1, but women who are currently working are more likely to give neutral rather than negative responses. Being young and having a higher father's socio-economic status have less pf an impact on women's attitudes compared to men's. In the Time 2 survey, the only significant interaction coefficients with gender are for mother's education, with the effect of mother's education on attitudes lower for women than for men.

Discussion

The current research provides an important new angle for understanding attitudes about childlessness or parenthood. First, by exploring the different predictors of positive, neutral, and negative responses, we begin to identify different factors that predict tolerance (neutral responses) compared to acceptance (positive). We also find that the three categories should not

necessarily be regarded as steps of equal distance on a continuum of acceptance; the predictors of neutral attitudes appear to be conceptually important and distinct in their own right. Second, we find that the wording of the questions appears to influence the distributions across the three categories and their correlates. The Time 1 question poses a direct comparison between the merits of parenthood compared to childlessness; a positive endorsement of childlessness therefore implies a negative stance with regard to parenthood. The Time 2 survey question, on the other hand, is phrased in terms of a more positive and potentially less binary, "either-or" assessment. The Time 2 question implicitly reflects normative assumptions about greater fulfillment found in parenting but allows for responses that accept the potential for fulfilling lives regardless of parental status. This difference is noticeably highlighted in the responses of childless individuals, with a predominance of neutral responses to the Time 1 question but more positive endorsement at Time 2. The different questions preclude any measurement of changes in attitudes across the two surveys, but the differences in the questions may provide important clues to understanding different dimensions of attitudes toward childlessness and family-related issues.

Our hypotheses that women, young adults, and childless adults are more likely to have liberal – positive or neutral -- attitudes are also supported. The influence of education and income on attitudes is less definitive than we had expected. The Time 2 survey data indicate that those with higher educations (i.e., college degree or more) are distinctly positive in their attitudes towards childlessness. At Time 1, the key differences occur at the lowest level of education, predicting more negative attitudes, but there is less difference among the higher gradations of completed education. Contrary to our expectations, childhood family variables have very little relationship to attitudes about childlessness in either the bivariate or the regression analyses.

Future research should expand beyond the socio-demographic factors to explore other social factors that influence attitudes. For example, religious upbringing and current religious affiliation and beliefs likely play a significant role in the formation of attitudes toward childlessness. Assessing the dimensions of religion and their relative influence on attitudes compared to the more structural predictors may provide additional leverage for understanding the processes that shape attitude formation. Further, the impact of social context needs to be more closely examined; beyond individual characteristics, the prevalence of particular beliefs or of a high level of conservatism likely plays an important, separate role in influencing individual attitudes (see Moore & Vanneman, 2003). Finally, understanding attitudes about childlessness may help us to better understand how particular intentions and decisions are formed at younger ages and how attitudes may shape the consequences of childlessness later in the life course.

A final note concerns the importance of gender in shaping attitudes about childlessness. In an effort to construct a single indicator of attitudes at Time 2, we have combined the responses to two gender-specific questions that appeared in the survey. These gender-specific questions merit closer examination, as acceptance of childlessness and attitudes about childless individuals likely vary with the gender of the subject. Further analyses will begin to explore the potentially different correlates of attitudes toward childlessness among men compared to women.

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Table 1: Sample Characteristics, National Survey of Families and Households, 1987-88 and 1992-94.

	NSFH 1, 1987-1988	NSFH 2, 1992-1994
Age		
Young (25-44)	51.6%	49.0%
Middle (45-64)	30.3	32.4
Older (65+)	18.1	18.6
(N)	10644	8919
Gender		
Female	46.7%	47.4%
Male	53.3	52.5
(N)	10648	8919
Race-Ethnicity		
Black	10.4%	9.9%
Hispanic	6.3	8.0
White or other	83.3	82.1
(N)	10641	8913
Completed Education		
Less than high school	22.1%	16.1%
High school	37.5	36.7
Some college	19.3	22.5
College or more	21.1	24.7
Mean years (s.d.)	12.45 (3.13)	12.93 (2.91)
(N)	10648	8919
Partner Status		
Married	68.4%	65.7%
Cohabiting	3.3	4.3
Divorced/Separated	10.3	11.8
Widowed	8.5	8.7
Never married	9.5	9.5
(N)	10647	8919
Parental Status		
Childless	19.1%	19.3%
Adoptive parent	1.6	1.8
Biological parent	79.4	78.9
Mean children ever born (s.d.)	2.24 (1.92)	2.18 (1.81)
(N)	10648	8919
Mean Household Income (s.d.)	37475 (44444)	46865 (44677)
(N)	8427	8447
Working	63.2%	63.9%
(N)	10604	8919

Table 1: Sample Characteristics, National Survey of Families and Households, 1987-88 and 1992-94. (continued)

	NSFH 1, 1987-1988	NSFH 2, 1992-1994
Childhood Household		
Both parents	71.5%	71.7%
Mother only	23.8	23.5
Other	4.7	4.8
(N)	10648	8919
Family of Origin		
Mean number of siblings	3.26 (2.41)	3.24 (2.69)
Only child	9.60%	9.13%
(N)	10600	8883
Socio-economic background		
Mean father's ses (s.d.)	3026 (1822)	3129 (1860)
(N)	10111	8809
Mean mother's education (s.d.)	10.357	10.77 (3.47)
(N)	8791	8009
Region		
Northeast	21.6%	20.5%
North-Central	25.2	24.5
South	34.3	33.8
West	18.9	21.2
(N)	10648	8897
Attitudes about childlessness	Not "better to have a child than to remain childless"	"Can have a fulfilling life without children"
Positive	22.4%	43.5%
Neutral	37.0	43.7
Negative	40.6	12.8
(N)	10648	8919

Table 2: Percentages of Adults Who Report Positive, Neutral, or Negative Attitudes about Childlessness, National Survey of Families and Households, 1987-88 and 1992-94. [a]

	NSFH 1, 1987-1988			NSFH 2, 1992-1994		
	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Age	***			***		
Young	33.9	40.9	25.2	11.5	43.4	45.1
Middle	40.8	37.3	21.9	13.7	43.7	42.6
Older	59.3	25.5	15.2	17.2	45.1	37.7
Gender	***			***		
Male	44.7	37.3	18.0	15.5	45.8	38.7
Female	37.1	36.8	26.2	11.2	42.0	46.8
Race-Ethnicity	***			***		
Black	47.2	31.9	21.0	13.2	42.0	44.8
White	37.9	38.8	23.3	12.0	43.8	44.2
Hispanic	62.8	24.1	13.2	25.7	46.7	27.6
Compl. Education	***			***		
Less than high school	59.0	25.7	15.3	18.4	44.3	37.2
High school	39.0	37.2	23.8	12.6	49.1	38.3
Some college	32.8	42.6	24.6	12.0	43.8	44.3
College or more	31.5	43.4	25.1	10.1	35.2	54.7
Partner Status	***			***		
Married	40.9	37.5	21.6	14.8	44.9	40.3
Cohabiting	40.1	34.4	25.5	11.8	39.9	48.3
Divorce/Sep.	38.8	36.5	24.7	11.1	44.6	44.3
Widowed	53.5	29.2	17.3	13.5	41.9	44.6
Never Marr.	29.4	42.1	28.5	5.8	38.6	55.6
Parental Status	***			***		
Childless	26.7	41.4	31.9	6.4	34.4	59.3
Adoptive parent	35.4	36.2	41.4	15.6	33.8	50.6
Biological parent	43.8	35.8	20.4	14.3	46.2	39.5
Mean # of Children	2.53 (2.06)	2.09 (1.80)	1.95 (1.78)	2.79 (2.20)	2.26 (1.70)	1.91 (1.76)
Mean Household Income	32963 (42715)	41714 (49900)	38426 (36707)	43680 (39502)	44907 (42003)	49334 (48252)
Working	***			***		
Yes	35.4	40.3	24.3	12.2	43.1	44.7
No	49.8	31.3	18.9	15.0	45.1	39.9

Childhood Household	n.s.			n.s.		
Both parents	40.5	37.2	22.3	12.8	43.4	43.8
Mother only	40.9	37.2	21.9	12.7	44.0	43.3
Other	41.7	33.0	25.3	13.8	45.5	40.7
Family of Origin						
Mean # of siblings	3.62 (2.56)	3.01 (2.30)	3.01 (2.23)	2.49 (2.50)	3.11 (2.31)	2.95 (2.18)
Only child	36.1	38.7	24.4	10.3	44.2	45.5
Socio-economic background	***			***		
Mean father's ses	2886 (1765)	3161 (1865)	3061 (1835)	2968 (1852)	3036 (1723)	3275 (1978)
Mean mother's educ.	9.49 (4.03)	10.83 (3.34)	11.03 (3.23)	9.77 (4.22)	10.63 (3.39)	11.21 (3.26)
Region	***			***		
Northeast	41.6	36.3	22.1	13.0	43.0	44.0
North-central	37.3	37.8	24.9	11.5	42.8	45.7
South	44.3	35.3	20.4	12.9	45.0	42.0
West	37.4	39.8	22.8	16.2	44.0	39.8

[a] Attitude questions were presented with the following wording: Indicate the extent to which you agree with this statement. "It is better to have a child than remain childless" (NSFH 1); "A man/woman can have a fully satisfying life without children" (NSFH 2).

Chi-square significance levels for categorical variables. + .10 < p <= .05 * .05 < p <= .01 ** .01 < p <= .001 *** p < .001

Table 3. Predictors of More Favorable Attitudes about Childlessness: Multinomial Logistic Regression Results, National Survey of Families and Households, 1987-1988 and 1992-1994.

	NSFH 1, 1987-1988			NSFH 2, 1992-1994		
	Neutral vs. Negative	Positive vs. Negative	Positive vs. Neutral	Neutral vs. Negative	Positive vs. Negative	Positive vs. Neutral
Gender						
Female	.313 ***	.800 ***	.487 ***	.021 *	.668 ***	.647 ***
Age						
Young	.747 ***	.678 ***	-.068	.197	.121	-.076
Middle	.636 ***	.629 ***	-.007	.118	.233	.115 +
Older (ref.)						
Race-Ethnicity						
Black	-.200 *	-.107	.093	-.012	.131	.143 *
Hispanic	-.716 ***	-.843 ***	-.127	-.512 **	-.557 **	-.045 *
White/other (ref.)						
Partner Status						
Married (ref.)						
Cohabiting	-.008	.159	.167	.364 +	.493 *	.130
Divorced/Sep.	.036	.118	.082	.436 **	.487 ***	.052
Widowed	-.102	-.130	-.028	.223	.423 *	.200 *
Never Marr.	.123	.023	-.100	.630 ***	.741 **	.112
Parental Status						
Childless	.354 **	.738 ***	.384 ***	.045	.741 ***	.696 ***
Adoptive parent	.076	.573 +	.497 +	-.700 *	-.226	.474
Biological parent (ref.)						
Children ever born	-.033	-.084 **	-.050 +	-.108 ***	-.127 ***	-.019
Completed Education						
Less than high School	-.543 ***	-.371 ***	.172	-.118	-.080	.038
High school (ref.)						
Some college	.038	.063	.026	-.110	.209 +	.319 ***
College or more	.089	-.012	-.101	-.137	.555 ***	.692 ***
Log of income	.027	.045 *	.019	.020	.016	-.005
Working	.220 **	.321 ***	.101	-.002	.099	.101

Childhood Household						
Both parents (ref.)						
Mother only	-.019	-.025	-.006	-.251	-.395 *	-.144
Other	.056	-.143 +	-.199 *	.019	.084	.065
Family of Origin						
# of siblings	-.042 **	-.024	.018	-.013	.012	.025
Only child	-.013	.094	.017	.270	.399 *	.129
Childhood socio-economic background						
Father's ses	-.003	-.006 **	-.004 *	-.004	-.002	.001
Mother's educ.	.029 **	.043 ***	.014	.029 *	.040 **	.011 +
Region						
Northeast	-.219 *	-.235 *	-.016	.086	.036	-.050
North-central	-.021	.092	.113	.287 +	.234 *	-.053
South	-.194 *	-.243 *	-.049	.106	.067	-.040
West (ref.)						
Intercept	-1.030 ***	-2.108 ***	-1.104 ***			
N	6713	6713	6713			