

Deciding to never have children is mentally-emotionally healthy for some Black women

Objective:

To address complexity of Black women's reproductive choices and mental-physical health factors both contributing to and resulting from demographic and cultural variance in reproductive choices

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Reproductive health and rights

Aside from organizations such as Planned Parenthood, it is difficult to find information about reproductive health including permanent birth control

Source: Planned Parenthood sterilization

<https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/birth-control/sterilization>

Childfree websites such as lauracarroll and thechildfreelife have information and lists of childfree-welcoming gynecologists and medical doctors willing and legally able to provide permanent, surgical and non-surgical, birth controls

Most gynecologists and medical doctors locally, nationally, and internationally believe women cannot decide not to have children. Same assumption is not made for women who decide to have children

Pronatalism

- Reproduction is the default
- Reproduction is expected, required, and even forced
- Range of scrutiny includes: Morality, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and advancing the human race
- Historical and contemporary perspectives on reproductive rights, freedoms, and resources

- Adulthood, womanhood, and manhood defined through reproduction (and parenthood)
- All social institutions take part in pronatalism through social interactions and policies and practices
- There is greater pressure for girls and women: Girlhood and womanhood are placed in the context of motherhood (May 1997; Gillespie 2003)
- Boys and men are expected to reproduce but still have more diverse definitions of boyhood, manhood, and masculinity

Childfree-by-Choice

- People who have decided to not have biological or adopted children
- People who do not consider this to be a temporary or “for the time being” decision
- People who do not consider themselves to be lacking, hence “childfree” rather than “childless”
- “Childless-by-choice,” “childfree-by-choice,” “voluntarily childless”, and “voluntarily childfree.”

Dr. Dennis conducted first known study solely of childfree-by-choice people of (immediate) African diaspora (2013)

- What motivated me?
- Why is this historically and currently relevant?
- Excitement among African diaspora childfree-by-choice people
- Pushback from pronatalist African diaspora cultures and communities
- Pushback from white childfree people

More about Dr. Dennis's study

- Explore perspectives and experiences of African diaspora childfree people around the world
- Address interlocking self-identities and cultural identities
- Examine similarities and differences among childfree people across race and ethnicity
- Examine cultures in which parenting (motherhood, in particular) is widely expected and encouraged (includes sexuality and birth control)

Foundations of Dr. Dennis's study

- Interlocking (not “intersectionality”): The present study primarily focuses on identities and experiences formed, shaped, and influenced by race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, health, and informal social controls
- Black Feminism: African diaspora cultures and communities struggle, arguably more than white diaspora, with gender equity. There remains the belief that biological females only exist for reproduction

Previous childfree research

- Childfree are population size minority
- Childfree African diaspora are population size minorities within this minority
- Childfree African diaspora men are more elusive than childfree African diaspora women
- African diaspora women and men are either omitted or few respondents in most childfree research (Jamison et al. 1979; DeVellis et al. 1984; Somers 1993; Mollen 2006; Vinson et al. 2010)
- Scant research on the impact of race and ethnicity on the experiences of the childfree
- Most childfree people are of white diaspora (Jamison et al. 1979; Somers 1993; Mollen 2006)

Robyn Rowland. 1982. An Exploratory Study of the Childfree Lifestyle. Journal of Sociology. 18: 17

“Responses for both men and women were even divided on the importance or lack of importance of the financial cost of children, the fewer responsibilities without children, and freer sexual relations without children.”

Marsha D. Somers. 1993. A Comparison of Voluntarily Childfree Adults and Parents. Journal of Marriage and Family. 55: 3, 643-650

“...interest in the concept of nonparenthood grew as new contraceptive alternatives, changing sexual norms, and the women's movement presented childlessness as a choice for the first time”

Rosemary Gillespie. 2003. Childfree and Feminine: Understanding the Gender Identity of Voluntarily Childless Women. Gender and Society. Vol. 17: No. 1, pp. 122-136

“Liz, a 38-year-old solicitor, described how her lesbian sexuality ‘freed’ her from having to explain to her family that she did not want children.”

Ritgak A. Dimka and Simon L Dein. 2013. The Work of a Woman is to give Birth to Children: Cultural Constructions of Infertility in Nigeria. African Journal of Reproductive Health/La Revue Africaine de la Santé Reproductive. 17: 2, 102-117

“Infertility is affiliated with sexuality and sexual performance....”

Amy Blackstone.2014. Contexts. 13: 4, 68-70

"Janet said simply, ‘I don't want to give up my healthy sex life’.”

Dr. Dennis's study: How respondents were located

- Word of mouth
- Childfree blogs and websites
- Childfree sociologist Dr. Amy Blackstone
- Childfree authors Laura Carroll and Laura S. Scott
- Childfree Meetup.com groups
- Face-to-face meeting childfree African-Americans
- Recorded phone interviews, in-person interviews, and email surveys
- Pre-interview scheduling consists of:
 - ✓ Filter questions to ensure potential respondents fit criteria
 - ✓ Phone or in-person confidential interview
 - ✓ Open-ended interview items
 - ✓ Post-interview demographic items

Dr. Dennis's study: Demographics

- 62 respondents: 59 women and 3 men
- Various states in the United States of America and 5 additional countries: Canada, England, Kenya, Sweden, Switzerland
- Age range: 21-60
- Education range: High school – Doctorate
- Salary range: \$15,000 – \$250,000
- Relationship status: Single, live-in partner, live apart partner, married, and divorced
- Most have siblings; a few are an only-child
- Some from two-parent households; some from single-parent households
- A range of political ideologies and political parties
- A range of religions: Christianity is most prevalent but agnosticism and atheism are represented

Dr. Dennis's study: Findings

- ❑ Similar to most childfree who are not of African diaspora:
 - Tendency to feel at an early age ambivalence or lack of desire to have children
 - Tendency to feel at an early age a requirement and expectation to have children

- ❑ Most consider their childfree status and experiences to be impacted by gender and race and ethnicity—in obvious ways and more subtle ways

- ❑ Some feel alienated and ridiculed based on their decision. Perhaps these feelings are stronger for the childfree whose choice defies a number of norms and expectations, including racial and ethnic norms and gender norms

- ❑ Some respondents feel confident and stable in their decision, have a strong support system, and are in environments conducive to diverse perspectives and lifestyles

- ❑ Support system: friends or family or living in more diverse cities

Dr. Dennis's study: Findings

- ❑ Perhaps African diaspora are less likely to have a strong support system
- ❑ Some respondents spend majority of time in racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse or predominantly white environments
- ❑ Some respondents are in interracial relationships and spend majority of time around people who are not African diaspora
- ❑ Men respondents expressed a sentiment similar to childfree white men in previous research: do not get many negative responses and do not feel as much societal pressure

Dr. Dennis's study: Findings

- ❑ Two men respondents have difficulty dating because the majority of women across all cultures, and especially African diaspora women, either aspire to be mothers, are mothers, or are “on the fence” (undecided)
- ❑ One woman respondent has considered having an “open relationship” because she finds it difficult to find an African diaspora man who does not anticipate having children
- ❑ Included in appendix: without-child-by-circumstance woman (age: 50s) who admitted she preferred to have children but a “mate” was never found
- ❑ Included in appendix: without-child-by-circumstance man (age: late 30s) who admitted he does not want children but is open to having children if a woman insists or if the woman's birth control fails

MARVIN, CF RESPONDENT: “I think sometimes it’s just a case of I mean – where I grew up it was a matter of maturity. So in some cases maybe some of those guys didn’t want to have kids or in some cases maybe they became fathers before they were really ready to become fathers. All they knew was ‘oh well I like this girl I’m having sex with her’ and then they don’t think about ‘oh well what happens when you get her pregnant and what happens after the child is born’.”

ALICIA, CF RESPONDENT: “...and she (ALICIA’s friend) was trying to get with this guy and he said ‘well, do you have kids’ and she said ‘no’ and he said ‘well, how did you get to do that’. And she said ‘well, what do you mean, I have safe sex or I don’t have sex at all’.”

JESSICA, CF RESPONDENT: “...I've been having a very uncomfortable conversation about unprotected sex with my husband...but with a complete stranger that I just met, at a wedding.”

BERNICE, CF RESPONDENT: “...I do think people can have protected and active sex lives and not have children. But I know ones that do have really active sex lives and they don’t know how to control themselves and they do end up with children....”

COURTNEY, CF RESPONDENT: “...someone also told me ‘what’s the point of having sex if you don’t want to have kids’.”

EMILEE, CF RESPONDENT: “And let’s not even get onto the whole ‘why did you have sex’ thing, that’s the thing people get into ‘well, we’re here to procreate’ and all that other stuff again. You know what about people who can’t have kids, for example? What happens to those people? You know? So just because I choose not to have a kid, again, doesn’t mean that I can’t be intimate you know with an individual or anybody else?”

NICOLE, CF RESPONDENT: “...it would be great if they were doing sex education, talking about birth control and so forth...about children...and discussing this is a choice and you can decide not to, but I can see that not going over well with parents”

PATRICE, CF RESPONDENT: “...I never really desired to have a child. It was more of a connection to sexuality. And general in regards to a man”

Interlocking identities—interlocking experiences—health outcomes

Despite world changes in women's liberation, women's reproductive rights, and civil rights for racial and ethnic minorities, there remain pressures and stigmatization of liberation and reproduction for women, in general, and African diaspora women in particular

Can African diaspora people balance self-identity and self-love with cultural identity and cultural love?

How does this influence relationships, physical health and mental health?

During the interview and since the interview, we created a private childfree African diaspora network:

Respondents and other childfree people of African diaspora expressed need for mental health services, physical health services, and balancing “sense of relief” with life stressors

Thank You Questions? Comments?

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Dr. Dennis conducted first known study solely with childfree people of African diaspora

Dr. Dennis created and teaches first known college course about childfree-by-choice

Find Dr. Dennis on various childfree media outlets, suicide prevention media outlets, and mental health media outlets