Book review

BEING CHILDFREE IN NEW ZEALAND: HOW COUPLES WHO CHOOSE TO NOT HAVE CHILDREN ARE PERCEIVED

Theresa Riley

Saarbrucken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011; 123 pp.

ISBN 978-3-8465-4022-0

Being childfree in New Zealand: How couples who choose to not have children are perceived is a timely discussion drawing on research about the choice to be childfree. The book is based on a qualitative study interviewing 10 heterosexual couples and 1 focus group for a Masters degree in Social Science that aimed to examine what some childfree couples experienced in the form of stereotyping, pressure and harassment. The objective of the book is to promote understanding and defend a childfree lifestyle.

Recent research indicates that approximately 1 in 6 New Zealand women born in the mid 1960s and 1 in 4 women born in the mid 1970s may not have children during their reproductive lives (Boddington & Didham, 2009). The figures are similar in Australia.

As Theresa Riley, the author of the book points out, the shift towards childlessness reflects a number of social trends: access to contraception and abortion, women's increased opportunity for education and labour force participation, and changing attitudes toward mothering and parenting generally.

Being childfree in New Zealand begins with a section clarifying terminology use, and the author gives reasons why she elects to use the term 'childfree' rather than 'childless' throughout the book. Although use of the term 'childfree' is not consistent throughout the text, Riley's decision to privilege the term rests on the argument that 'childless', 'non-mother', and 'without children' indicate deviance from an expected social norm and imply lack where there is simply choice. The author subsequently explains why the dominant social perception of voluntary childlessness is seen as a deviant and marginalised identity. From a feminist perspective, it is easy to see how mothers themselves are regarded as deviant subjects, and several of Riley's female interviewees sympathetically note the difficulties contemporary women must meet in order to negotiate perceptions of their multiple roles with competence (see p.48). As Riley's thesis shows, the deviant identity of the non-mother and the childfree person is often experienced as rather more acute. The stigma attached to this deviant identity, for both women and men as Riley's data show is historically aligned to the link between femininity and womanhood, and masculinity and immortality.

Being childfree in New Zealand documents people's experience of disapproval from others of their intentionally childfree status. According to Riley's interviewees, pressure to have children from family, friends, acquaintances and even strangers include the view that the voluntarily childfree will regret their decision in the future or that they will change their minds. Such

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comments are revealing of societal attitudes and values around heteronormativity and pronatalism. For instance, Riley recalls how her own decision to remain childfree was regarded by a family member with disbelief. As she put it, apparently 'the decision regarding how many children I wanted to have should not be made before I fell in love with a man and consulted with him' (p.21).

The book covers the dominant ideologies and perceptions of the childfree through four main themes that arose from the data (p.38). Like Jan Cameron's (1990, 1997) earlier studies with New Zealanders on the topic, Riley's data is illuminating. Sadly, it appears that attitudes have not changed much since Cameron's work was published in the 1990s. Childfree couples still experience social exclusion and isolation from a variety of social networks due to their chosen lifestyle as 'non-parents' (see pp.42, 45). According to Riley, her interviewees said childfree persons were frequently stereotyped as unfulfilled, immature, materialistic, career-oriented, anti-children, and lonely. Against positive characterisation of mothers as selfless and sacrificial, eight of Riley's couples acknowledged that women who do not mother are seen as selfish and individualistic. At the same time, some of the participants said they did not want to spend all their time in paid work; thereby debunking the stereotypical view of childless women as career-driven, and several resented pressure that they should work harder in their jobs to compensate for people who had children in 'family-friendly' workplaces. International data also show that while some childfree women may be more career-focused, they also affirm being childfree as enabling lifestyle flexibility, allowing them 'to come and go' as they please. Riley's study participants rightly rejected the label of selfishness. For these couples, bringing children into an already overpopulated world is selfish (see Chapter 4). Again, verifying the international literature on the subject, they also maintained that having children without seriously considering the implications bordered on social irresponsibility.

Riley's book provides a good resource for New Zealanders doing research on the topic of voluntary childlessness and the choice to be childfree. The book is based on academic study for a Masters degree, and this is reflected in the organisational format of the text. Chapter 2, for example, includes a section on methods and participant recruitment and the Conclusion incorporates a section on limitations and recommendations. Both chapters could have been condensed and reworked for the book version of the thesis. In addition, although Riley points out that there is a dearth of research on this subject in Australia and New Zealand, I was nonetheless surprised to see no mention of Leslie Cannold's work, in particular *What, No Baby?*, (2005) in the book. Lois Tonkin's New Zealand research on childlessness is another notable absence.

Finally, as stated above, the focus of Riley's book is on women and men who intentionally choose not to have children. As such it does not address questions of childlessness around fertility issues, although this is mentioned as a suspected reason why family and friends think some of the couples Riley spoke to were childless. More importantly, the book does not consider the experiences of women and men who do not have children as a consequence of life circumstance. The subject of (in)fertility and the desire for children is definitely a matter for another book. However, although Riley makes good the question of so-called temporary childlessness in terms of assumptions that intentionally childfree persons are delaying or postponing having children, the omission of discussion around contingent childlessness, where women do not in fact make conscious decisions to remain childfree, seems warranted. As other researchers have shown, the number of people who are childless by circumstance as a result of being busy with other life activities and demographic variables is rising in New Zealand. Mention of contingent childlessness would have added depth to the important debates around reproductive autonomy the author raises. Despite these minor reservations, the book provides much needed data and food for thought for further research in this area.

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