

Study finds participants feel moral outrage toward those who decide to not have children

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Data representing individuals from across the United States indicates that U.S. adults are increasingly delaying the decision to have children or forgoing parenthood entirely. Yet evidence suggests that voluntarily child-free people are stigmatized for this decision, according to a study published in the March 2017 edition of *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*.

Leslie Ashburn-Nardo, an associate professor of psychology at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, recently investigated this bias against those who choose to not have [children](#).

"What's remarkable about our findings is the moral outrage participants reported feeling toward a stranger who decided to not have children," Ashburn-Nardo said. "Our data suggests that not having children is seen not only as atypical, or surprising, but also as morally wrong."

The findings are consistent with other studies of backlash against [people](#) who violate social roles and other stereotypic expectations. When people violate their expected roles, they suffer social sanctions. Given that more and more people in the U.S. are choosing to not have children, this work has far-reaching implications.

Ashburn-Nardo believes these findings offer the first known empirical evidence that parenthood is seen as a moral imperative.

"Having children is obviously a more typical decision, so perhaps people are rightfully surprised when they meet a married adult who, with their

partner, has chosen to not have children. That they are also outraged by child-free people is what's novel about this work."

Participants read a vignette about a married adult person and then rated their perceptions of the person's degree of psychological fulfillment and their feelings toward the person. The vignette varied only in terms of the portrayed person's gender and whether they had chosen to have children.

"Consistent with many personal anecdotes, participants rated voluntarily child-free men and women as significantly less fulfilled than men and women with children," Ashburn-Nardo said. "This effect was driven by feelings of moral outrage—anger, disapproval and disgust—toward the voluntarily child-free people."

"Other research has linked moral outrage to discrimination and interpersonal mistreatment," Ashburn-Nardo said. "It's possible that, to the extent they evoke moral outrage, voluntarily child-free people suffer similar consequences, such as in the workplace or in health care. Exploring such outcomes for this demographic is the next step in my research."

Provided by Indiana University

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