

Reproductive Vocabularies: Interrogating Intersections of Reproduction, Sexualities, and Religion among U.S. Cisgender College Women

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Abstract Although feminists often examine the ways reproduction shapes women's lives, such research typically only focuses on the effects of reproduction after the fact while leaving reproductive decision-making beforehand unexplored. In the present article, we flip this pattern by outlining the “vocabularies of motive” (Mills 1940) cisgender women offer for wanting to engage in or abstain from reproduction. Based on in-depth interviews with 20 class-privileged, cisgender U.S. women in college who possess the resources to forego reproduction, we analyze how they define their reproductive intentions as (a) conforming to social expectations, (b) seeking fulfillment, (c) replicating past experience, and/or (d) rejecting reproduction and parenting. Further, we compare and contrast the reproductive vocabularies of motive offered by heterosexual and bisexual as well as religious and nonreligious cisgender women in our sample. In conclusion, we draw out implications for understanding women's reproductive decision-making and the social construction of reproductive norms.

Keywords Reproductive decision-making · Vocabularies of motive · Religion · Sexuality

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I think being a parent will be difficult, but also very rewarding in a sense that I would have created and raised this person and guided it into the world we live in today. I think that's pretty fucking awesome, but it'll be difficult because there will be a lot of crying and messiness and responsibility that I would have to handle and who knows if I'll even have help? And I want to do so much with my life like travel and constantly move and buy things and have fun that I think a child will directly limit me. I think every parent has regrets so I kind of want to do everything I want to do in life before I have kids. That way, when I do have them, I won't resent them (ID 1, see Table 1).

Like all the cisgender women whom we interviewed, the respondent quoted here must manage the contradiction of social norms advocating reproduction, on the one hand, and observations of the difficulties of having children on the other. She is well aware of contemporary arguments for and against having children. As Almeling (2015) noted, every American—and especially women—wrestles with presumptions about the importance of reproduction, parenthood, and children. Recent scholarship documents the regret with which some women grapple after having children as they come to recognize the ways their lives and agency are constrained by parenting (Donath 2015; Lupton 2000). The opening account also acknowledges that parenthood, even when it is actively pursued and desired, can impinge on one's lifestyle, freedom, and choices in ways women may find regrettable. Women's management of these presumptions unfold as they decide whether or not they wish to become parents.

The present study examines the ways in which U.S. cisgender college women, who possess the resources necessary to actively decide whether or not they want to become parents (unlike many women in U.S. society), discuss and imagine their future lives. Specifically, we explore their motivations around potential reproduction and childrearing. By examining a sample of class-privileged, cisgender women (i.e., individuals whose gender expression coheres with the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their gender identities; Schilt and Westbrook 2009), we expect that their social status and relative economic freedom will shed light on the normative societal expectations that shape their reproductive motivations and desires. Understanding the pathways that lead some people to reproduce and others to opt out is important for future research which must take into consideration how shifting gender norms, coupling patterns (Manning et al. 2014; Sweeney 2002), and educational and employment opportunities (Brand and Davis 2011) impact young women's meaning-making systems and reproductive intentions.

An emerging line of interdisciplinary research focuses on the reproductive decision-making of childfree women or women who voluntarily choose not to reproduce and do not wish to pursue motherhood as a life project (Agrillo and Nelini 2008; Blackstone and Stewart 2012; Gillespie 2003). These studies show that childfree women often face considerable stigma for violating notions of womanhood predicated upon reproduction and parenthood. Further, such studies demonstrate the many ways childfree women manage such stigma as well as the nuanced explanations they mobilize to justify their reproductive choices to others (Park 2002, 2005). Although these studies importantly reveal reproductive decision-making processes of childfree women, we know far less about the ways women who seek to one day reproduce and parent explain their desire to have children. How do class-privileged, cisgender women explain their desires, misgivings, and feelings of ambivalence toward childbearing and what lessons might we learn about normative expectations around reproduction from such responses?

The Value of Children or the Costs of Mothering

Scholars have long recognized the centrality of reproductive decisions and bio-social processes in the personal and political lives of women (Almeling 2015; Ginsburg and Rapp 1991; Luna and Luker 2013). Specifically, patriarchal and heteronormative systems rely upon people interpersonally and institutionally defining reproduction, caregiving, and motherhood as natural, normative, and ahistorical elements of womanhood, and these systems also limit the ability of women to make reproductive decisions (Butler 1999; Collins 2005; Schrock et al. 2014). Early research on reproductive

motivations sought to understand “the value of children” using a rational-actor paradigm, framing fertility intentions as a series of cost-benefit analyses (Hoffman and Hoffman 1973). Insights from Hoffman and Hoffman’s “value of children” studies revealed that individuals considered various social, cultural, and psychological factors when making reproductive decisions (Fawcett and Arnold 1973; Hoffman 1987), and this research was an important first step toward integrating cultural explanations for reproductive behavior. However, these studies did not take into consideration the taken-for-granted gendered expectations that frame women’s reproductive motivations, nor did they unpack pervasive pronatalist power structures that historically bind women to their roles as caretakers and mothers.

Contemporary gender and sexuality scholars have done much work over the years to document the ways that reproductive processes are shaped by gender and sexual norms. Often it is through reproductive processes that many forms of gender and sexual policing take place as evidenced by overt and politicized efforts to control women’s pregnant bodies (Bessett 2010; Paltrow and Flavin 2013) and by political campaigns opposing women’s access to abortion and contraception (Rohlinger 2015), as well as opposing lesbian/gay/bisexual (LGB) opportunities to produce and raise children (Ryan-Flood 2009). In addition to overt and hostile campaigns to regulate gender and sexuality vis-a-vis reproduction, other processes are more subtle and mundane—for example, heteronormativity in artificial reproductive practices (Almeling 2011) or the often unconscious gendered patterns of action in relation to reproductive decision making within relationships (Cragun and Sumerau 2017a). Gender and reproduction are entangled in a pronatalist culture that simultaneously valorizes and punishes individuals for their reproductive decisions. In a system where childfree women are commonly stigmatized (Agrillo and Nelini 2008; Park 2002), pregnant women who engage in non-normative behaviors are criminalized (Paltrow and Flavin 2013), and professional women who seek to reproduce and maintain their careers are penalized (Budig and England 2001), research bears out that the “choice” to reproduce and parent is fraught with risks and potential costs that only women with considerable social and economic capital are most able to manage.

Recent research also suggests that mothers who reproduce prescriptive notions of intensive mothering (i.e., the ideology which supposes that mothers should invest an ever-increasing amount of time, energy, and resources into parenting; Hays 1996) create a cultural standard which negatively affects women’s mental health and well-being (Rizzo et al. 2012), regardless of their adoption of intensive ideals (Henderson et al. 2015). In the context of women’s healthcare, the presumption that all women will one day reproduce affects healthcare provision so that all women, regardless of their reproductive intentions, are provided care that centers the

interests of a potential fetus over and above the interests of women (Waggoner 2015). As such, reproductive experiences have wide-ranging effects that extend beyond individual women and their personal choices and impacts individuals whether or not they seek to procreate or raise children (Almeling 2015; Waggoner 2015).

Despite the centrality of reproductive decision-making and pronatalist sentiment in the United States, this subject receives relatively little attention in existing studies (Blackstone and Stewart 2012, 2016). In her recent review of interdisciplinary studies of reproduction, Almeling (2015) noted that most of this research begins with pregnancy and the experience of having and then raising children rather than with the decision to have or not have children in the first place. Likewise, research exploring reproductive choice focuses almost exclusively on decisions about abortion services, contraception, or how to raise children who already exist (Fox and Neiterman 2015; Rohlinger 2015). At other times, scholars focus on the ways occupational (Bass 2015), religious (Czarnecki 2015), or other social factors (Almeling 2011) influence reproduction. The bulk of our understanding of reproduction, thus, emerges from the exploration of women's experiences *after* they have already decided whether or not to have children.

Reproductive Motivations of Nonparents and Childfree Women

Social and economic changes that occurred in 1970s and 1980s in the United States expanded the types of opportunities available to cisgender White middle class women, particularly in the workforce. Research of this era reflected cultural anxieties over the changing opportunity structures available to women and how such opportunities may conflict with their traditional roles as mothers and homemakers. A body of research emerged that examined the fertility motivations of college women. This research revealed that college women did not reject the possibility of future parenthood but, rather, incorporated reproduction and parenting into their future plans alongside work and career goals (Baber and Monaghan 1988; Hoffman and Hoffman 1973; Wallach and Matlin 1992). Early research on young women's reproductive motivations revealed that most women desired future childrearing because it provided a means by which they could establish their social identities and networks (Gormly et al. 1987), suggesting that while structural changes were expanding the kinds of careers and lifestyles available to women, many women still largely anchored their identities to their roles as caregivers (Hays 1996).

Today, most research examining reproductive motives focuses on individuals who voluntarily reject motherhood or choose to remain childfree (Agrillo and Nelini 2008). Studies on childfree women often explore the reasons women give for not wanting children and the ways these decisions

shape their interactions with people who made the opposite decision (Blackstone and Stewart 2012, 2016; Gillespie 2003; Mollen 2006; Park 2002). An emerging body of literature explores the reproductive motives of LGB parents as they make sense of heteronormative attempts to limit their reproductive options (Berkowitz 2009; Mamo 2007). In this way, current scholarship reflects existing cultural norms wherein people who choose to become parents are free from interrogation and examination unless they identify as LGB whereas people who violate this norm are subject to social *and* scholarly scrutiny (Blackstone and Stewart 2012). In the present article, we invert this pattern by asking why heterosexual and bisexual women capable of not reproducing (i.e., possessing the symbolic and material resources to develop childfree lives) might reproduce. Following feminist and queer approaches to, for example, masculinities (Martin 2001), heterosexualities (Schilt and Westbrook 2009), and cisgender populations (Sumerau et al. 2016), we place the normative option (i.e., wanting children) at the center of analysis to illuminate taken-for-granted aspects of reproduction.

The Present Study

To this end, we examine the “vocabularies of motive” (Mills 1940) cisgender class-privileged women capable of creating childfree lives provide to explain their desire to have children, uncertainty about having children, or decision not to have children. Following Mills (1940, p. 907), vocabularies of motive are “unquestioned answers to questions concerning social and lingual conduct.” Put simply, such vocabularies represent accepted explanations, justifications, excuses, and reasons people provide for a given course of action (Martin 1997; Scott and Lyman 1968). Although researchers have historically focused on actions deemed unexpected, negative, or otherwise marginalized, queer theorists have long advocated deconstructing taken-for-granted social expectations (Butler 1999). Recent studies have demonstrated some ways people's explanations for “normative” actions reveal taken-for-granted social norms (Sumerau 2014).

In the present article, we examine how young cisgender U.S. women with the resources necessary to more actively choose whether or not to reproduce explain their reproductive intentions, as well as the ways their statements reflect and challenge existing reproductive discourse. In so doing, we aim to unpack the complexity of women's reproductive decision-making and the ways broader social patterns influence such efforts (Blackstone and Stewart 2012). However, it is not our intention to evaluate the quality of our respondents' explanations (i.e., define their answers as somehow good or bad) or generalize our findings to the larger population of women. Rather, we use the data from our study to illustrate ways some ciswomen make sense of reproductive intentions

and provide a framework for systematic studies of “reproductive vocabularies of motive” in contemporary U.S. culture. Given the significant impact that reproduction and childrearing have on women’s lives (Budig and England 2001; Hays 1996; Lupton 2000; Paltrow and Flavin 2013), we consider how cisgender women who possess the resources to more actively make decisions about reproduction negotiate the normative option to have child(ren) in order to understand why and how pronatalist values are internalized, resisted, or rejected by young women.

Method

Participants

Participants in the current study include 20 cisgender women who were all pursuing bachelor’s degrees in the southeastern United States. Whereas participants vary in terms of sexual, racial, and religious self-identification, each currently possess the socioeconomic and educational resources necessary for engaging in active reproductive decision-making. Specifically, each of the women interviewed possesses access to quality medical care (i.e., contraception, abortion services, and regular examinations) and comes from middle- and upper-class economic backgrounds. Further, all respondents are in their 20s (ranging from 20 to 28). We sought this specific sample due to research indicating health and economic access, age, and college education as primary factors that influence the level of “choice” American women have about reproduction (Blackstone and Stewart 2012). However, we also acknowledge that the language of “choice” regarding reproductive decision-making often overly simplifies a process that is highly constrained even among the most socially and economically privileged individuals in U.S. society.

Although all of our participants identified as cisgender women and occupied middle- and upper-middle class social locations, it is important to note that our sample contains two populations rarely discussed in scholarship on gender or reproduction to date. First, our sample contains an equal split of 10 religious (i.e., five Catholic, three Protestant, one Jewish, and one Muslim) and 10 nonreligious (i.e., three Atheist, three Agnostic, and four non-religious) ciswomen. Research demonstrates that religious socialization is a predictor for future views toward reproduction and childrearing (Pearce 2002) but no known research to date considers the role of nonreligious attitudes. Considering that nonreligious people represent one of the fastest growing and most understudied populations in the United States (Langston et al. 2015), we note variations in reproductive vocabularies tied to religion and nonreligion to suggest further research. This focus may be especially useful because recent reviews note the lack of

women (and gender analysis) included in studies of nonreligious experience to date (Smith 2013).

Second, our sample includes five bisexual respondents (i.e., people who identify on the bisexual spectrum or as attracted to multiple sexes and genders and as practicing sexualities with same and different sexed bodies; Moss 2012). Whereas these five respondents identified as within the bisexual or bi + umbrella, three also noted that their bisexuality was on the pansexual end of the spectrum (i.e., attracted to multiple people regardless of sex) whereas the other two defined themselves in the same way but only utilized the bisexual or bi + identification label. As Blackstone and Stewart (2012) note, most reproductive studies focus only on heterosexual women coupled with increasing discussions concerning lesbian women and gay men. We note variations in reproductive vocabularies related to sexuality to facilitate further analyses of the reproductive lives of bisexuals and comparisons between bisexual/lesbian/gay/heterosexual reproductive decisions. This may be especially useful amidst growing recognition of gendered, sexual, economic, political, religious, and familial variation between bisexual and monosexual (i.e., lesbian/gay/heterosexual) individuals at present (Scherrer et al. 2015).

It is also noteworthy that our sample mirrors patterns in existing scholarship by being predominantly composed of White ciswomen (i.e., 18 of 20 respondents identify as White, one as Latina, and one as Middle Eastern). As other scholars have noted (Vinson et al. 2010), this may be due to ongoing racial disparities in economic, medical, and college access (Collins 2005). Because we specifically sampled people with the resources that facilitate more reproductive choice and did so in the context of a college campus, existing racial disparities in such areas likely limited the number of racial minorities who participated in our study. We offer our findings while recognizing that similar or different vocabularies may be present among women of varied racial and ethnic locations.

Finally, it should be noted that all demographics for our sample are the product of interviewees’ self-reports. Rather than selecting categories for our participants a priori, we allowed them to categorize themselves in both the pre-screening and interview process. Although this practice is in no way unusual in scholarship, it is important to note that, for example, religious identification among our participants does not suggest or reveal any particular level of religious activity, but rather that they simply identified themselves as members of a given nonreligious or religious group. In the same manner, our participants’ identifications as members of racial, classed, gendered, and sexual groups do not specifically tell us the meaning of these locations in their lives, but rather that they identify themselves as members of these groups regardless of other potential definitional and categorical frameworks utilized within and beyond scholarship.

Table 1 Participants' characteristics

ID	Race	Religious identification	Sexual identification	Reproductive intentions
1	White	Nonreligious (None)	Heterosexual	Yes
2 ^a	White	Nonreligious (Agnostic)	Heterosexual	Unsure
3	White	Religious (Protestant)	Heterosexual	Yes
4	White	Nonreligious (Atheist)	Heterosexual	Unsure
5	White	Religious (Catholic)	Heterosexual	Yes
6	White	Nonreligious (None)	Heterosexual	Yes
7	White	Religious (Catholic)	Heterosexual	Yes
8	White	Nonreligious (Agnostic)	Bisexual	Yes
9	White	Nonreligious (Atheist)	Bisexual ^b	Unsure
10	White	Nonreligious (Atheist)	Heterosexual	Unsure
11	Hispanic	Nonreligious (None)	Bisexual	Yes
12	White	Religious (Protestant)	Heterosexual	Yes
13	White	Religious (Catholic)	Heterosexual	Yes
14	Middle Eastern	Religious (Muslim)	Heterosexual	Yes
15	White	Religious (Catholic)	Heterosexual	Yes
16	White	Religious (Catholic)	Bisexual ^b	Unsure
17	White	Religious (Protestant)	Heterosexual	Yes
18	White	Nonreligious (None)	Bisexual ^b	Unsure
19	White	Nonreligious (Agnostic)	Heterosexual	No
20	White	Religious (Jewish)	Heterosexual	No

^a Had a pregnancy that ended in miscarriage

^b Identified as bisexual and pansexual

Recruitment and Screening

Purposive and snowball sampling strategies were used to locate potential participants for our study. As two childfree researchers (one a cisgender heterosexual woman and the other a bisexual non-binary transgender person), who often help students obtain medical, reproductive, and other health advice and care, we sought to understand the ways people who actually could make choices about reproduction, due to their possession of class privileges, made sense of such decisions. To this end, the second author circulated flyers with information about the study, announced the details of the study in zirconium childhood courses, and disseminated the details of the study through student organizations at a predominantly upper-class, private college campus. Students in the childhood courses as well as leaders of student organizations referred potential interviewees to the study ($n = 20$), and students who became interested due to the flyers ($n = 10$) contacted the second author by email. The second author then scheduled a time to talk to each potential interviewee about the purpose of the study and the inclusion criteria for the study.

During this informal meeting, the second author explained the informed consent process, the purpose of the study as an attempt to understand how people who had the

resources to choose whether or not to reproduce thought about such choices, and our attempt to specifically interview only those people with the resources to make such choices in our current social structure. Potential interviewees who remained interested after this discussion were then asked about (a) their own identification in relation to lower, working, middle, upper-middle, and upper-class social locations, (b) the average income and lifestyle of their parent or parents throughout their childhood, (c) their current and former access (or lack thereof) to healthcare, birth control, and other resources related to reproductive health, and (d) their current standing and grade point average at the university. Through this process, 25 potential participants were identified as possessing economic, health, and educational resources necessary for more actively making reproductive decisions for themselves (i.e., they were on path to complete bachelor's degrees with high standing; had career plans lined up with medical access; came from families and backgrounds including health education, access, and reproductive planning options; and were economically well off both individually and through their families). Although there were no incentives offered for participation, each of these 25 potential participants were invited to participate in the study, and 20 of them chose to do so. The five who chose not to participate each did so due to scheduling complications.

Data Collection

Each of the eligible participants who chose to participate in our study was interviewed in a place of their choosing. Interviews were conducted by the second author and took a conversational style to capture nuances, stories, and experiences related to reproduction, parenthood, and children. The interviews lasted between 1 and 2 h and followed a loose interview guide where-in respondents were asked a handful of direct questions about demographics and current standing vis-à-vis children and parenthood and then were asked open-ended questions about their thoughts on topics related to reproduction. Further, interviewees were probed throughout this process for stories, examples, and descriptions following their initial responses. In this way, respondents were given wide latitude to discuss any of these topics, and the interviewer maintained a focus on the target areas (reproduction, parenthood, and childbearing). Each interview was transcribed verbatim.

Each interview began with the respondent's demographic identifications (i.e., race, sex, gender, class, sexuality, and religion). Each respondent was then asked if they currently had children (none of the respondents in this analysis had children at the time of the interview), if they wanted children (12 respondents wanted children, 6 were uncertain, and 2 did not want children), and why they wanted or did not want children. Respondents were also asked about experiences with pregnancy, miscarriage, or abortion, but only one had such an experience (a pregnancy that resulted in a miscarriage) and four others mentioned friends who had these experiences. Respondents were asked to comment on what they thought life would be like with or without children. Interviewees were asked the following series of open-ended questions: (a) "What are your thoughts on reproduction?," (b) "How do you think people make decisions about whether or not to have children?," (c) "What do you think it would be like to be a parent?," (d) "What do you think it would be like to never become a parent?," (e) "Why do you think some people want to have children?," (f) "Why do you think some people do not want to have children?," (g) "In your experience, what are children like?," and (h) "Is there anything else you would like to share about parenting, children or reproduction?" Respondents were allowed to comment as much or as little as they wished on each topic. Throughout the conversation, the interviewer probed participants for specific stories and examples following their initial responses whenever relevant. Further, consistent with grounded theory traditions, the interviewer adjusted probes throughout data collection in relation to the ones interviewees typically responded to the most in prior interviews.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory strategies guided the data analysis process. Throughout data collection, the second author wrote memos

about the experiences and emerging themes that ze shared with the first author. The two authors deliberated on the emerging themes and what they might mean in relation to reproduction, parenthood, and children. We also explored existing literature on these topics for similarities and differences compared to our emerging data. Further, transcription of the interviews was accomplished as soon as possible after each interview, and the authors discussed the emerging patterns in these transcripts throughout the process. Initially, we utilized line-by-line and cluster coding strategies to gauge potential themes and patterns emergent in the interviews (Charmaz 2006). Following these initial elaborations, we engaged in constant comparative analysis to ascertain recurring elements and refine labels for these patterns. We continued refining and incorporating each new piece of data throughout the rest of data collection.

Following the completion of data collection, we went back through the entirety of the dataset outlining the patterns and themes that emerged across the interviews. From these patterns, we outlined typologies from the data, and we sorted responses into these typologies while noting demographic variation as well as variation in whether respondents did, did not, or were unsure about wanting children. We established four typologies (or vocabularies) that corresponded to the patterns that emerged in the data.

Results

What follows is an analysis of reproductive vocabularies of motive. First, we examine respondents' elaboration of reproduction as a method of conforming to societal expectations. Then, we explore the ways mostly nonreligious and all our bisexual respondents defined reproductive intention as a search for fulfillment. Next, we explore how some of our respondents defined reproduction as an opportunity to replicate positive experiences. Finally, we discuss other respondents who sought not to have children in hopes of not reproducing negative experiences. Rather than providing every single response, however, we use illustrative examples of the four reproductive vocabularies throughout our dataset. Although we treat these vocabularies as analytically distinct, respondents often utilized more than one in interviews. Specifically, nine of the 20 interviewees used more than one vocabulary in conversation. Additional information of each participant who is quoted can be found in Table 1 and Table 2 summarizes the final typologies or vocabularies we outlined in the dataset.

Conforming to Societal Expectations

Our respondents grew up in a social context wherein reproduction is generally defined as a necessary component of full

Table 2 Themes, definitions, and examples of reproductive vocabularies of motive

Themes	Definitions	Prototypical Responses
Conforming to Social Expectation	Reproductive motives are framed as an obligation or requirement handed down by social authorities; motives are described as prescribed and learned; reproduction is viewed as natural and expected	“It’s expected that you’re going to have kids one day. So I don’t really think about not having them. From your parents to romantic movies, we are constantly being told that it’s normal.”
Seeking Fulfillment	Reproductive motives are expressed as a pathway to fulfillment; reproduction is framed as natural for women; motives are focused on the ways women’s lives would be better or more meaningful as a result of caring for others	“I want to live a full life. That involves loving and caring for a child at some point.” “It’s natural to want to nurture someone, watch a child grow, and know, I did that.”
Replicating Past Experience	Women who used this vocabulary sought to re-create the context of their own life course via children of their own; reproduction is generally framed positively based on the respondents’ own relationship and family histories	“I had a really positive relationship with my mother and siblings growing up. I have so many great childhood memories. I want to share that with my own child.” “I want to leave a positive impact on the world by being the kind of mother mine was.”
Rejecting Reproduction and Parenting	Reproductive motives were framed as avoiding negative past life experiences; reproduction is framed as unnecessary, undesirable, and/or harmful	“There is so much wrong with society today. Why would I want to bring a child into this world just to suffer?” “My childhood was bad. I don’t want another child to go through what I went through.” “Children are too much responsibility and I want to keep some of my freedom.”

social participation (McQuillan et al. 2008). Contemporary U.S. institutions regularly emphasize the necessity of reproduction and present reproductive families as the ultimate ideal (Heath 2012). Within this pronatalist context, reproduction is established as an expectation for women in the United States. As a result, these discourses provide symbolic material for women seeking to explain their desire to reproduce. In this section, we outline some ways our respondents defined reproductive intent as an exercise in conforming to such societal expectations.

The women who offered this type of reproductive vocabulary of motive emphasized the lessons they learned as children and the ways such lessons suggested they “should” want children. Rather than personal desires, they conceptualized reproduction as an obligation or requirement handed down by social authorities:

That’s what I see and have been taught by society so that’s why I think I should have children, part of it, but also I hope I’d want to have children just because I want them. Like I said I don’t not want children like I feel like I will want them eventually, but it’s hard to think about right now. Like I’d *hope* I want them because I want my own children not just because society makes me believe I should want them. (ID 2)

Like others, this woman hoped she would want children on her own because she was “taught by society” that she should, left open the option of having children just because she was taught she should, and had trouble distinguishing between societal expectations and her own desires. Similar to some sexual minorities who struggle between societal expectations

of heterosexuality and personal same-or-multi-sex desires (Adams 2011), women’s desires for normative relationships and identities may come into conflict with their sense of having other authentic but less normative desires. Women may find themselves struggling to ascertain the difference between what they desire and what society “makes” them “believe” they “should want.”

Other respondents noted the pervasiveness of societal expectations for women’s reproduction and suggested that their own reproductive intentions were heavily influenced by, as one respondent put it, the “constant encouragement to have babies” (ID3) many women experience throughout U.S. media and education. Respondent 4 explained:

It’s kind of something we are taught. When we are growing up you see that for a majority of people they will go to high school, then college and during that time you are dating and meeting people and eventually you find someone you really care for—you eventually get married, and buy a house and start a family. It’s something we see, something we view as normal. You also see it in movies, like romantic comedies. You meet the person, you date the person, you move in with the person, marry the person, have kids with that person—all in that order. That’s what you think you should do. (ID 4)

This respondent notes reproductive expectations embedded throughout her social world. In much the same way that many people explain conforming to established gender norms as a result of witnessing the constant enforcement, suggestion, and policing of gender and heterosexuality (Martin 2001), these respondents explained reproductive intent by noting the ways

this lesson was taught to them throughout their lives. Even if they were unsure about having children, they felt pressure to, as the respondent quoted here noted later in the interview, “follow the rules” (ID 4) about reproduction set out by society.

At other times, our respondents adopted common social discourses concerning reproductive choice to explain their desire to reproduce. In such cases, they defined reproduction as natural and expected by American society, and then they distinguished this from the “preference” or “choice” not to have children. Considering this type of confirmation of social expectations was only offered by religious women, this may represent an example of people internalizing long standing religious discourses suggesting that all heterosexual people should have children whether or not they are able to reproduce biologically (Heath 2012). Respondent 5 offered a typical example. After defining her own decision to have children as natural, she discussed her impression of childless and childfree people without any prompting:

I think it’s a preference, well it depends on their reasons too. If they don’t want to have children because they are afraid of the pain or whatever, adoption is always an option but the people who just don’t want to have kids, again it also depends on if they can’t afford to have kids, then that’s up to them as well. But in my opinion, I think that everyone should have kids at some point regardless of how they get them. (ID 5)

Echoing religious discourses that naturalize sexuality (Cragun et al. 2015), religious women who utilized “conforming to social expectations” as an explanation for reproductive intent often separated out the “preference” of non-conformists from the natural pathway of social conformists. In so doing, they symbolically elevated reproductive intent above other reproductive options that could be available to them and other women.

In sum, respondents defined reproductive intent as an example of conforming to social expectations. They argued that society taught them to want children, and they felt compelled to follow these conventions in much the same way people often learn how to do race, class, gender (West and Fenstermaker 1995) and sexualities (Schrock et al. 2014). Rather than some innate desire, they located the source of reproductive desire in the mechanisms of existing social expectations transmitted to young people throughout their lives.

Their vocabularies of motive also suggest some potential tensions between norms and desires rarely addressed in previous literature. All of the respondents who utilized this type of explanation, for example, were heterosexual and may thus have seen reproductive intent as essential to their sexual-identity claims. On the other hand, the respondents who utilized this type of explanation were equally religious and non-religious, which suggests an area of potential common ground

within two populations scholars often only discuss in oppositional terms (Smith 2013). Interestingly, all the nonreligious women were uncertain about whether or not to have children whereas all the religious women were certain they wanted children. There is no way to empirically ascertain the scope or mechanism behind this pattern in our sample at present, but existing literature on religious and nonreligious populations suggests a couple hypotheses. First, this pattern may suggest that nonreligious women feel pressure to conform to societal expectations in other ways as a result of their religious non-conformity (Langston et al. 2015). By the same token, this pattern might also suggest that religious women are potentially “doing” their religion (Avishai 2008) as well as their sexuality by conforming to reproductive expectations taught by their faith traditions and the broader society. Although only systematic empirical research can test and further tease out these potential explanations and others, our observations suggest there may be much to learn from the conformity-based reproductive vocabularies offered by some ciswomen.

Seeking Fulfillment in Life

Alongside societal expectations for people to reproduce, U.S. institutions typically define reproduction as necessary for living a full life (Blackstone and Stewart 2012). Although increasing awareness of childfree people already demonstrates this is not an accurate depiction, many people do find fulfillment in having and raising children (Malacrida and Boulton 2012). Consequently, women grow up in a social context wherein not reproducing is often defined as a deficit. In contrast, reproducing is defined as, for example, a status passage from girl to woman and a marker of moral value (Davis-Floyd 2004; Gillespie 2003). In this section, we outline some ways our respondents drew upon these notions of reproductive fulfillment.

In contrast to longstanding feminist elaborations of the socially constructed content of reproduction (Margolis 2001), respondents who defined reproduction as a pursuit of fulfillment saw reproductive intent as a natural and necessary part of life. As Respondent 6 noted, they explained their intention to have children by defining it as “part of life, part of being happy” (ID 6). Respondent 7 added: “It would be a very fulfilling part of life, and I like taking care of people. I believe taking care of people is fulfilling” (ID 7). Likewise, Respondent 8 noted:

I feel like at some point in adult life, to be fulfilled and be able to add something to the world, you need to bring a child into this world. I would ideally like to have one girl. I just feel like I’m not into sports and it’s more likely that a girl wouldn’t like sports? But I would love my child no matter its sex, sexuality, or personality. I don’t

really see myself going through childbirth so I may adopt if it comes to that. (ID 8)

Echoing societal notions of the importance of reproduction (Almeling 2015) and normative conceptualizations of cisgender interests and abilities (Sumerau et al. 2016), these respondents argued that people “need” to bring children into this world to live a full life. In so doing, they suggested having children was a necessary part of life and achieving a reproductive self rather than simply a sexual option anyone could—if given the option—adopt or do without based upon their own desires and needs.

Whereas the above examples come from women who expressed a desire to have children, uncertain women also often utilized fulfillment vocabularies. In so doing, however, they often discussed fulfillment via reproduction in more nuanced ways. Specifically, as illustrated in the following example from Respondent 9, they often drew distinctions between one type of fulfillment and other types (e.g., biological, religious, social, economic):

It’s a little bit of nature, like my body wants children but by nature I am probably supposed to have children by now. I feel like, I am 28 and when I see pictures of kids and when I see people with children, I get a little bit more emotional now because I feel that is something I might want, you know that connection with something like a being I have made...and the whole taking care of somebody is important to women in general. You know, we all feel like we are motherly to friends, we are motherly to other people, and we want to be motherly to our children, and it’s about something to nurture. This is complicated, but do I think men think about this? Yes, I do. Men definitely think about this you know wanting to have children and have a family and provide for them, but for women I think it’s a nurturing thing. For men, I think it’s a providing thing—like this is my family and I provide for these people, with women I feel like its more nature. My body is telling me to have children. (ID 9)

Although their conversations were more “complicated,” women uncertain about having children echoed their counterparts who wanted children by defining reproduction as a need to be fulfilled. Further, their statements, as illustrated in the prior quote, often mirrored cisgender assumptions offered by women who wanted children. In fact, gender often played a prominent role in fulfillment:

I’m not really sure. I have always wanted a family since I was little. “House” was my favorite thing to play when I was little. My friends call me the mom of the group; I am always worrying about everyone and what is going

on in their life. I am the one all of my friends come to talk to when they need advice. (ID 10)

Throughout their responses, women uncertain about having children who utilized fulfillment vocabularies tied the potential of having children to their previous experiences as the “mom” of a friend group or their internalized notions of “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Another way women utilized fulfillment vocabularies involved stressing the desire to “take care” of others:

I really do want babies. I want to take care of another human being and teach them things that are not stereotypically correct. I just want to build a life with love and care and passion and share a life with another person—connection between parent and child; specifically a mother and a child. I want to give them love, care, and no judgment. (ID 11)

Likewise, another respondent noted:

I’ve always wanted children and it will fulfill a part of me. I don’t know. I’ve always really enjoyed children, being around them through babysitting and whatnot. It’s very rewarding to watch a child grow. They are like these amazing little drunk people. I’m sure society’s influence has had you know like, “you need to get married, you need to have kids, like that’s how you should... that’s life.” That’s the American Dream. I’m sure that definitely played a huge role but after learning about that and knowing how it affects people, it’s still a big desire of mine to have, at least one child. (ID 12)

Even after noting awareness of societal expectations and how they influence individuals’ desires, respondents often defined reproduction as a pathway to fulfillment, and they focused on the ways their lives would be better or more meaningful as a result of caring for others. In fact, they often suggested, as noted by Respondent 13, that having children would “give back to the world” because it was “just the natural life span that people are supposed to have kids and make the world grow” (ID 13). In all such cases, they explained their reproductive intent by defining reproduction as a source of fulfillment that would, as Respondent 13 said later in the interview, “give a purpose” (ID 13) to life.

In sum, the second reproductive vocabulary offered by our respondents involved defining reproduction as a source of fulfillment. Whereas a few religious women and a few heterosexual women utilized this framework, it is noteworthy that this was the most common vocabulary offered by nonreligious women and the only one regularly offered by bisexual women. Once again, it is difficult to interpret what these patterns in our data might mean without further studies, but existing

literature suggests a few possibilities. In the case of nonreligious women, for example, this may represent a situation wherein the source of social beliefs is equally distributed across scientific and religious sources (Cragun and Sumerau 2017b). Considering that previous studies reveal some ways nonreligious people draw upon science for meaning and sometimes do so in similar ways to religious people's use of scripture (Cragun 2015), nonreligious people may gravitate to this vocabulary due to its prominence in both secular and religious teachings.

In the case of bisexual women, this pattern may arise as a result of their position in society. As researchers have noted, bisexual people often experience significant marginalization in American families (Scherrer et al. 2015), which would make bisexual women interested in reproduction less likely to adopt the vocabulary outlined in the next section. Likewise, bisexual people have been shown to lack supportive resources and recognition in both lesbian/gay and heterosexual social spaces (Moss 2012). Bisexual women's reproductive motives could also reflect an explicit desire for "woman-identified experiences" (Rich 1980) where certain relations and identifications are sought for their potential to yield opportunities to have woman-centric experiences (such as being able to care for others, nurturing relationships, supporting the growth of others). Although there is no way to tease out and test such answers without further study of bisexual (and nonreligious) experiences, these observations interpreted through the lens of existing literature on these populations lend more weight to recent calls for further incorporating bisexuality into gender scholarship (Compton et al. 2015).

Replicating Past Experience

Almeling (2015) notes a lack of studies exploring reproduction over the life course and the ways lived experiences influence reproductive decisions. This insight became especially relevant when respondents reached back into their prior experiences to explain their reproductive intentions. Rather than innate desires or broader social patterns noted in previous sections, such women conceptualized reproductive intentions as the result of role models. They suggested they wanted to have children (all of the women who utilized this vocabulary wanted children) because they wished to replicate elements of their own childhood.

Respondents who sought to replicate their prior experiences generally emphasized the role of mothers or families in their reproductive decision-making. In relation to mothers, for example, they generally defined these people as role models they sought to emulate. They wanted to have children

so they could give them the experiences their mothers had given them:

I feel like when you have kids, you learn lessons about life and it helps you figure out about you and about them and about procreation, I have great genes (laughs). I always knew that I wanted to have kids. I think it's because my mom had four kids, so I grew up with three sisters and I always had someone to play with and I had a really great childhood, I think that because I had such a great childhood, I want to give that to a child. (ID 14)

Likewise, Respondent 1 explained she wanted children so she could live up to the example her mother set for her:

The desire came from my mother. My mom is my best friend and she has always been there for me. She does everything she can for my sisters and myself. She is the strongest woman I know. My desire to be a mother one day came from the relationship I have with my mother and how she raised her children. I one day hope to be half the mother she is. (ID 1)

These respondents sought to replicate their own childhoods and relationships with their mothers by having their own children. Rather than an innate desire to reproduce, they explained their desire for children as a byproduct of positive childhoods with maternal role models who shaped their own lives in positive ways. Similar to women who sought to conform to broader social representations, they wanted to become the parents they admired.

Whereas the aforementioned examples focus on motherhood, other family dynamics and experiences with children also provided fuel for this type of vocabulary. In such cases, respondents noted positive experiences with, for example, siblings, children at workplaces, and the children of friends to explain their desire to have the same type of experiences:

I like taking care of kids and being around them because they make me happy and I grew up with three brothers and I think it's nice to grow up with a big family. I think I have a good idea because I have a lot of experience with babysitting and I think that I have, since I have brothers that are younger than me, that I've had to take care of them a lot growing up which I think has given me a sense of what it could be like. (ID 15)

Likewise, Respondent 6 explained that her experiences with her siblings facilitated her desire to have children: "I love children. I have two younger brothers and I have watched them grow up and helped them grow up and I love the idea of being a role model to kids" (ID 6). Respondent 17 added:

I have always loved kids from all my moments of life. I think that it's important to have kids so that you can raise them to be good members of the community and good people who can help others and have a positive impact on the world and a positive impact on the people around them. I think I want a family dynamic maybe because I've always loved having a family when I was a child and I was at home and then I don't want to live my whole life and move away and have a career and not have that anymore. (ID 17)

These respondents said they wanted children because they sought to replicate the experiences that characterized their lives. Simply put, they sought to re-create the context of their own life course via children of their own. In so doing, they sought to replicate their own positive experiences by adopting the reproductive choices of others.

The third reproductive vocabulary of motive embedded within our respondents' discussions thus involves replicating past experience. Importantly, for people who did have positive childhood experiences, this may be a very common motivation for reproduction rarely mentioned in the literature. This explanation may also be readily understandable from a wide variety of perspectives because many people engage in specific social practices due to their desire to fit in with or replicate the experiences of their families. These observations, thus, echo Almeling's (2015) call for exploring the ways life course experiences shape motivations and interpretations of reproductive options and experiences in later life.

These observations may also be useful for emerging studies of heterosexualities. All of the respondents who utilized this reproductive vocabulary identified as heterosexual. As a result, their positive childhoods may be inextricably linked to heterosexual and cisgender privileges because studies have shown non-heterosexual (Adams 2011) and non-cisgender (Sumerau et al. 2016) children often have more difficult childhoods and more trouble locating positive role models. This is especially interesting because respondents' explanations for reproductive desire mirror studies showing that heterosexual (Schrock et al. 2014), lesbian/gay (Adams 2011), bisexual (Scherrer et al. 2015), and transgender (Sumerau et al. 2016) people often delve into childhood to explain their sexual and gender identities to others. This suggests the narrative construction of reproduction may operate similarly to that of sexual and gender identification. Exploring this possibility could generate substantial scholarship on the social construction of reproductive selves and the influence prior life events have upon such development.

Vocabularies Rejecting Reproduction and Parenting

Although our sample only included two ciswomen who expressly did not want children, the reproductive vocabularies

provided by these women further illuminate the importance of the life course in reproductive decision-making. In contrast to the women who wanted children as a way to replicate positive prior life experiences, these two women did not want children because they sought *not* to replicate negative life experiences. We thus provide their explanations to direct attention to the ways life course experiences may both facilitate and deter reproductive desire. It is also important to note that, like their counterparts in the previous section, each of these respondents identified as heterosexual while differing in terms of religious identification.

Respondent 19, for example, focused on socio-political problems in the United States. Specifically, she suggested that bringing children into a world with so many problems might be irresponsible and bad for the child. Further, she noted a "child like her" would be the last thing she wanted to bring into this world:

I would hate to bring a child into a world where so many people are so awful and unkind. I think the main reason to not wanting a child would be because society is so fucked up and America right now is a shit show and most of the children today aren't being treated as children, I think we're forcing them to grow up too fast and have their lives in order too fast and I still think I'm a child, so how am I suppose to raise a little me? I don't want a kid to be anything like me and face the same problems I did. I mean I feel like I came out okay and survived, but the shit I went through definitely shaped me into who I am today and I would never want to go through that again so why would I create a person to just go through all the shit me and a bunch of other people went through. (ID 19)

In much the same way positive life events encouraged some respondents to want children, negative life events and interpretations of current issues provided a rationale for women to not have children. As Respondent 20 put it: "I don't want to be in charge of somebody else's life. I don't want to be in charge for fucking someone over like physically, emotionally or any of the other things I've seen" (ID 20). These respondents suggested avoiding negative experiences encouraged them not to want to have children.

Like the respondents in the previous section, these women also mobilized their observations of children and parenting to explain their desire not to have children. Whereas women who wanted children focused on positive aspects of reproduction and child rearing, women who did not want children focused on negative aspects:

Have you seen children? Childbirth is disgusting and babies are parasites growing inside you. I think children are gross and disgusting, and I don't want to have to

change diapers, be woken up in the middle of the night by a screaming baby, have to feed it, clean up after it. I never see myself as a parent, never wanted to be a parent, I just don't want that for my life. I don't want to be responsible for another human being. I don't want to financially support a child. They are way too expensive. (ID 20)

Respondent 19 added: "Children are way too much work. I can just talk forever about why I don't like them and why they are not for me. I just don't want to be responsible for anyone but myself. Not having kids gives me freedom parents I see don't have" (ID 19). Rather than highlighting positive experiences, respondents who did not want children emphasized the ways children negatively impact and impinge on people's lives. In so doing, they explained their reproductive intentions by defining reproductive experiences—as well as past and present observations of children and parents—as something to avoid rather than replicate.

Discussion

Most research concerning reproduction investigates how people experience processes of having or obtaining children, how people make decisions about abortion and contraception, or about the ways childfree or childless people explain their violation of societal expectations (Almeling 2015; Blackstone and Stewart 2012). Such research has invigorated—both theoretically and empirically—social scientific understanding of the complexities of reproductive politics, experiences, and processes. However, it leaves unexplored the reasons people offer for wanting children in the first place, as well as the ways people explain their intention to reproduce. Although studies of childfree and childless people importantly demonstrate interpretive work many people do in relation to reproduction, they reveal little about people who seek to one day reproduce and raise children but who have yet to experience hurdles on the way to this goal. We have drawn on insights from queer methodologies (Butler 1999; Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Schrock et al. 2014) to invert this pattern by asking women, who are both able to more actively make reproductive decisions due to class privileges and seeking to fulfill societal reproductive expectations, their self-identified reasons for doing so. Specifically, we outline four reproductive vocabularies women may utilize when they seek to or are asked to explain their desire to reproduce or not.

The reproductive vocabularies provided by our respondents took the following four, sometimes overlapping, forms. First, some of our respondents (all of whom identified as heterosexual) defined their desire to have children as an extension of social lessons they learned. In much the same way that people conform to race, class, gender, sexual, and religious

teachings in many cases, their reproductive intentions mirrored what society has taught them they were supposed to desire. Second, all of our bisexual respondents (as well as a few heterosexual respondents) explained their reproductive intentions by defining reproduction as a source of fulfillment. This was also the most common explanation offered by non-religious respondents. Third, some of our heterosexual nonreligious and religious respondents explained reproductive desires as the result of prior experience. They sought to replicate the positive childhood they had with parents and family members by creating their own family. Finally, the two heterosexual respondents who did not want children flipped this vocabulary by rejecting reproduction and parenting, framing these as undesirable life goals based on their own negative family and relationship experiences and based on their desire to avoid the burdens and responsibilities of raising children. In addition, by including indicators such as sexuality and religion into our interpretation of reproductive vocabularies of motive, we have demonstrated a novel approach by which to examine reproductive intentions in relation to other status markers and identities.

Limitations and Future Directions

As we noted in the introduction, it is not our intention to generalize our findings to the larger population of cisgender women or women more broadly. In fact, this is especially the case with the fourth vocabulary because we would need more than two examples to even further outline and develop this potential explanatory practice. Rather than generalizing to the larger population, our efforts here outline four reproductive vocabularies of motive women (regardless of other social identities they may claim) might use to explain their desire to reproduce or their desire not to reproduce (i.e., generalizing to processes in which people may engage at different times and in different settings). Rather than an exhaustive list of potential reproductive vocabularies of motive, however, we see these four as the beginning of more systematic and comparative studies of the ways women in varied social locations make sense of reproduction prior to engaging in or abstaining from this social process. As such, it is important to note limitations of the current study as well as the ways these limitations could encourage future investigations into reproductive vocabularies of motive.

First, our study is limited in the scope of its findings and sample. We intentionally sampled women with the ability to more actively choose between reproductive options both to ascertain potential motivations offered when reproduction is actually a possible choice with fewer constraints and to incorporate these women into literatures that more often focus on hurdles the vast majority of women face in relation to pronatalist and other structural patterns that limit reproductive autonomy in contemporary society. As such, our sample

focuses specifically on U.S. cisgender college women with the economic resources to facilitate at least some active reproductive decision-making, and thus we cannot tell how similar or different reproductive vocabularies might be among Women of Color, working and lower class women, transgender and non-binary identified women, and other women occupying more marginalized social locations. We thus suggest that a next step in this research program would be to explore the reproductive vocabularies of motive among women in marginalized social locations and those with less access to “choice” or facing even more constraint concerning reproduction while comparing and contrasting such vocabularies to the ones provided by our respondents.

Second, our study utilizes a sample of 20 in-depth interviews with cisgender women who currently attend college in the southeastern United States and come entirely from Midwestern, Southeastern, and Northeastern parts of the country. As such, there may be regional variations that do not show up as a result of either the small size of our sample or the lack of Western or Southwestern respondents in our sample. We would thus suggest researchers seeking to extrapolate beyond the findings presented here may devise interview and/or survey studies exploring the reproductive vocabularies and intentions of women occupying different regions of the United States, other countries, and the regions captured in our sample for comparative purposes. In so doing, researchers could begin to ascertain the scope and propensity of the reproductive vocabularies embedded within the responses of our interviewees.

Finally, we should note that although our analysis includes discussions of religious and sexual variation rarely noted in existing studies of reproductive experience or decision-making, the findings from our study may only be viewed as preliminary observations for the purposes of broader hypothesis testing and. As noted in our analysis, even these preliminary observations appear to speak to existing hypotheses within literatures focused on nonreligious and religious variation as well as literatures concerning sexual variation. As such, another future line of research concerns further integrating reproductive scholarship with religious, nonreligious, and sexual scholarly traditions to map the contours whereby these social locations impact reproductive experience, decision-making, and processes more broadly.

Practice Implications

Our study has implications for understanding reproductive intentions over the life course, and it suggests that developing studies of women’s reproductive experience at varied times throughout the life course may be especially important for practical and scholarly interests and interventions. As Almeling (2015) suggested, reproductive intentions, experiences, and choices develop in relation to biological and social

experiences people face throughout their lives. Among our respondents, social factors played a powerful role in their explanations for wanting or not wanting children. Our results suggest there may be much to learn from expanding reproductive studies beyond the moments in which people are: (a) in the process of creating, having, or managing children; (b) coming to terms with their inability to have children; or (c) describing the experience of living a childfree life. Likewise, almost half the women in our sample were not yet certain if they wanted children or not, and life course approaches could tease out how, when, and why people ultimately come to one decision or another through active decision making or as a result of constraints that play out in later life. Further, our results offer four explanations researchers and practitioners could explore in the case of other cisgender, transgender, and non-binary women/people reacting to and making sense of reproduction. Although we do not mean to suggest that these four reproductive vocabularies are in any way exhaustive, as sensitizing concepts (Blumer 1969), they may provide an opening for more systematic study of the reasons people give for reproducing or not.

Alongside systematic study of reproductive intentions, our analysis also provides opportunities for counselors and other practitioners working in intervention settings. Specifically, counselors may draw upon the reproductive vocabularies of motive offered by our respondents to make sense of issues faced by clients seeking help with reproductive options, constraints, and decisions in their own lives. Further, counselors and other health practitioners working with women navigating stress related to childbearing, rearing children, and emotions tied to reproductive experience before, during, and after birth may utilize the reproductive vocabularies captured in our study both to contextualize what their clients are feeling within broader social patterns and to facilitate awareness for their clients about the complexities of reproductive experience many women experience. In so doing, counselors may be able to use these insights to help clients recognize their relationship to other women navigating reproduction, as well as combat feelings of isolation and stress that may be tied to concerns that they are the only ones feeling and experiencing complicated experiences related to parenting.

Finally, our study has implications for studying diversity in the sexual and reproductive experiences among cisgender women. Rather than claiming innate or biological causal factors, our respondents noted varied aspects of social experience (e.g., mainstream reproductive norms, ideological assertions about the value of having children for one’s own well-being, and experiences as a child or with children) that influenced their reproductive intent. Likewise, rather than a uniform response, they reveal religious and sexual variations in reproductive decision-making. Especially because studies of non-religious (Smith 2013) and bisexual (Compton et al. 2015) experiences remain less common than studies of religious

and lesbian/gay/heterosexual populations in contemporary science and clinical practice, these variations may provide important avenues for further developing social scientific understandings and clinical interventions for women navigating complex interactions among gender, reproduction, and sexuality throughout their own reproductive and/or childfree lives as well as the ways people may shift their reproductive desires over time.

Conclusions

Reproductive politics and decisions impact—to varying degrees—every person regardless of whether or not they desire to have children (Almeling 2015). Put simply, the ways people make sense of reproduction have far ranging consequences for all beings. Ciswomen, in particular, must make reproductive decisions in a sociopolitical environment where reproduction is viewed as both increasingly imperative (Waggoner 2015) while the task of mothering has become increasingly intensive and burdensome (Hays 1996). Our analysis of reproductive vocabularies shed light on the ways that young ciswomen internalize and negotiate these contradictions surrounding reproduction and childrearing. These findings also may provide an opportunity for scholars to de-naturalize and de-normalize (Butler 1999) many of the assumptions that lie at the heart of ongoing sexual, gendered, and reproductive rights debates. Because assumptions about reproduction underlie much contemporary sexual and gender inequality (Almeling 2015), their disruption may also provide the keys to challenging societal patterns of sexual and gender inequality.

Compliance with Ethical Standards This research was conducted in compliance with ethical standards and received institutional board approval prior to collecting data from human subjects.

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