

A generation 'up against the clock'

"SOME people want freedom. Some people don't want obligations. Their careers come first. Some people are concerned with the condition of the world. What kind of a world is this to bring children into? That's if there is going to be any world soon." Kay, talking about the first impressions of her study of intentionally childless men and women.

"Being a parent makes tremendous demands on your sense of commitment, time, money, emotions and privacy. We (my partner and I) are not prepared to make these sacrifices. What's more we feel the strain of parenting and working is incredible. It's an economic reality that two people have to work these days to support a reasonable kind of lifestyle." Doug, 34, discussing why he and his girlfriend, with whom he lives, have decided to remain childless.

There's a cloud over humanity. Timothy Leary said that when the first atom bomb was exploded it was recorded in the DNA of all living things. My generation definitely went a little cuckoo. The impending violence of war and the bomb is sensed by all. Consequently, a certain type of person, a minor percentage, decides to be childless." Steve, 36, explains why he has chosen to be childless up to this point.

To be or not to be a parent is a sensitive and much-debated issue. It's as though all the war boom babies (post-war generation) have reached the point where they are facing reproductive decisions which vary from a sense of crisis to exercising freedom of choice.

They are "up against the clock" to quote the title of Norma Wickler's best-seller about the intentionally childless who find themselves coming to the end of their reproductive cycles. They are reaching a point where biologically

and psychologically it will soon be too late to become a parent.

The question affects men as much as women. It's charged with emotion and many individuals feel guilt, anxiety, confusion and conflict related to their continual postponement of mother/fatherhood.

As a result self-help groups, counsellors and therapists specialising in guiding the non-parent or parent-to-be towards a final decision proliferate in the San Francisco Bay area. Childlessness by choice is the topic of many books, research projects and university studies, particularly in psychology and women's studies departments.

It is, as Gloria Steinem stated at a recent communications seminar, a question of reproductive freedom of choice.

"Intentionally Childless Women and Men — A Comparative Study" is the topic of 40-year-old Kay Tanehill's dissertation. It reflects the tip of a huge iceberg of changing values related to parenthood and suggests revisions of sex-gender roles, expectations and thinking.

Her study deals with men and women as individuals as opposed to partners or married couples, which is why her study is different.

According to Kay, childless-by-choice people fall into two major categories. They are "postponers" and "early deciders."

Postponers are those who keep putting off having children because their careers, their partners or their incomes don't match their desire to fulfil their parenting instincts. Early deciders are those who have known for a long time that they never wanted to have children.

"After thinking about it for nine or 10 years, say from age 23 to 33, a woman can decide that she really prefers the childless state," said Kay. "But the decision can also be made because the biological

clock is ticking. She is up against it. She has to go through a long decision-making process using whatever means she has at hand."

There are other reasons influencing fear of parenting. They include a lack of good parenting models to the point where the individual doubts his or her own ability to parent, and child abuse, physical and sexual.

Kay believes there are four major historical facts occurring since the 1960s affecting parenting.

They are the advent of the birth-control pill along with other advances in birth-control for women and men; the women's liberation movement with its emphasis on choice and questioning of roles; the recognition and concern for world-wide over-population and the arms build-up; the "sexual revolution" of the 1960s which gave permission for recreational as well as procreational sex.

Kay's study covers two main areas. The decision-making processes and the personality characteristics of men and women who choose to be childless.

It asks questions such as: Do women make child-bearing decisions earlier than men? Do men make their decisions based on their partners' (decisions) more than women? Is rejection of parenthood more stressful for women than men and if so is it related to the woman's sense of her sexuality or gender? Are women more pressured than men to conform to "normal" expectations to have children? Do women experience more regrets about the potential finality of their decision to have or not have children? When deciding to be childless are there different priorities for men and women?

Ellen Boneparth, 38, professor of political science, made the decision to be childless on her 37th birthday.

"I got sterilised. It was my birth day present to myself," she said.

"It was an alternative to the horrors of birth control. I found no birth-control methods which were acceptable and I didn't want to face abortion."

Ellen believes that there are plenty of women who would willingly be sterilised but they lack support.

"There are great social pressures on women to be mothers and remain biologically bound," she said.

The night before Ellen had the sterilisation operation she had dinner with a single father.

"He was shocked when I told him what I was going to do the next day," she said. "He said it was an irrevocable step. I agreed, adding that so was having children."

Ellen, who is currently researching single mothers, is also writing a book, *Home, Flesh, Work*, concerned with public policy or motherhood.

"Until men take a serious interest in family roles and society takes a long look at integrating work and family responsibilities and improving the status of women I don't think the conflict between career and family will end," said Ellen.

She believes this conflict is a product of the women's movement.

"When you look at increasing people's options you look at the traditional and the non-traditional roles and you try to work out another alternative.

"There has to be a middle ground where both choices can be combined. Women's roles are changing. Men's roles will have to change accordingly. And family styles will have to change.

"Parenting may become more of a community responsibility. In Sweden now there is no notion of the traditional nuclear family," said Ellen.

— New York Times

SMH-5.12.83