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# Choosing to be Childfree: Research on the Decision Not to Parent

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voluntarily childless and describe predominant explanations offered by researchers in the area. Next we describe work focused on issues of deviance and stigma management among voluntarily childless adults. Reflecting recent developments in the literature, we then briefly describe findings on how the voluntarily childless fare as they age. We conclude by offering several suggestions for future research in this area.

### The study of voluntary childlessness over time

The 1970s saw an emergence of research focused on voluntary childlessness. These studies appeared in the scholarly journals of a variety of disciplines, from sociology (Ritchey and Stokes 1974; Veevers 1973a,b) to psychology (Houseknecht 1979b; Russo 1979), from biology (Barnett and MacDonald 1976; Gustavus and Henley 1971) to economics (Marciano 1978), and in interdisciplinary journals as well (Houseknecht 1977, 1979a; Ory 1978; Silka and Kiesler 1977; Veevers 1979). By and large, early studies tended to frame voluntary childlessness as a form of deviance. These studies focused on the unique attributes of individuals who had chosen not to have children, such as their social class and educational backgrounds. This body of work largely asked why adults, and in particular adult heterosexual women, would choose not to have children. Early research also considered the economic and demographic consequences of increasing rates of voluntary childlessness (Bloom and Pebley 1982).

Moving into the 1980s, scholarship's focus on the unique attributes and demographics of the voluntarily childless continued (Bartlett 1996; Baum and Cope 1980; Boyd 1989; Bram 1984; Callan 1986; Kiernan 1989; Ramu and Tavuchis 1986). This decade also saw increased attention paid to voluntarily childless heterosexual couples (Baber and Dreyer 1986; Burgwyn 1983; Callan 1984). In addition, an emerging scholarship on older people without children developed around this time (Houser et al. 1984; Johnson and Catalano 1981). Moving into the 1990s, scholars also began to consider the role of religiosity in the decision not to have children (Heaton et al. 1992; Krishnan 1990).

By the 2000's, the aging population of adults without children become an increasingly popular point of focus for researchers (Abma and Martinez 2006; Albertini and Kohli 2009; DeOllos and Kapinus 2002; Dykstra and Keizer 2009; Kohli and Albertini 2009; Umberson et al. 2010; Wenger et al. 2000; Wenger 2009). While research on how childfree lives challenge gender norms appeared prior to the 2000s (Baber and Dreyer 1986; Bram 1984; Morell 1994), the past decade has also seen increasing attention to the gendered nature of voluntary childlessness (Gillespie 2003; Hird 2003; Hird and Abshoff 2000; Maher and Saugeres 2007). Further, recent studies have examined the impact of family-friendly workplace policies and cultures on people whose family forms do not match the traditional vision called up by the term "family-friendly" (Casper et al. 2007; Wood and Newton 2006).

In addition to the shifting points of focus outlined above, the terminology used to describe adults who choose not to have children has also changed over time. Early studies used the term "childless" to refer to adults without children (see, e.g., Houseknecht 1977, 1979a,b; Mosher and Bachrach 1982). This however left no way to distinguish adults who did not have children but wished to from those who had made an intentional choice not to have them. Studies published in the 1980s show increasing use of the terms "voluntarily" and "intentionally" associated chosen childlessness (Baum and Cope 1980; Barnett and MacDonald 1986; Bloom and Pebley 1982; Bram 1984; Calhoun 1980; Callan 1982, 1983, 1986; Den Bandt 1980; Feldman 1981; Ramu 1985).

Over time, as more individuals began making the choice to remain non-parents (Bachu and O'Connell 1998), some scholars began using the term "childfree" as a more accurate

1 expression of the choice it describes (Bartlett 1996; Defago 2005; Gillespie 2003). Today,  
 2 the terms “childless-by-choice” and childfree are more commonly seen than “childless”  
 3 when referring to individuals who have made the explicit and intentional choice not to  
 4 have or rear children. Because a predominance of the literature we review here uses the  
 5 term voluntarily childless, and because we also wish to acknowledge more recent termi-  
 6 nological developments, we use the terms voluntarily childless and childfree throughout  
 7 the paper to describe the individuals upon whom we focus.

### 8 9 **Pathways to being childfree**

10  
 11 There are a variety of pathways adults may take to making the decision to remain child-  
 12 free. In this section we examine both *how* adults come to identify as childfree and expla-  
 13 nations for *why* some choose to do so. In terms of the question of *how*, some adults  
 14 choose early not to have or rear children and stick with this decision throughout the life  
 15 course. Others may postpone childbearing decisions for such a period of time that even-  
 16 tually biological reproduction is no longer an option. Still others may intend to bear or  
 17 rear children but never actually do so. Those in the latter two categories may eventually  
 18 come to identify as childfree, along with those who knew early on that they would not  
 19 have children.

20 In their study of childbearing patterns among a nationally representative sample,  
 21 Heaton et al. (1999) found that while some adults indeed remained “consistently child-  
 22 less” over time, others who initially intended to have children later changed their minds  
 23 and decided against doing so. Most quantitative investigations in this area do not distin-  
 24 guish between the voluntarily and involuntarily childless and this is sometimes intentional  
 25 (Keizer et al. 2008); yet these studies are nevertheless instructive for researchers interested  
 26 in those who explicitly identify as childfree. One pattern found in pathways to “childless-  
 27 ness,” be it chosen or not, is that this process may differ by gender (Keizer et al. 2008).  
 28 Quantitative investigations have also found that differences in transitions to adulthood  
 29 may play a role in pathways to parenthood and non-parenthood. Focusing broadly on  
 30 “childlessness” rather than specifically on voluntary childlessness, Hagestad and Call  
 31 (2007) found that two transitions in particular – leaving one’s parents’ home and  
 32 marrying – played a role in whether or not one would become a parent.

33 Quantitative findings, while generally focused broadly on both the childfree and involun-  
 34 tarily childless, suggest that childfree adults do not universally reach the decision to remain  
 35 so at the same stage of life or in the same way. Though qualitative studies are well suited to  
 36 examining processes such as how individuals come to identify as childfree, fewer qualitative  
 37 investigations focus specifically on pathways to the childfree identity. Such studies have the  
 38 potential to illuminate the quantitative patterns described in the aforementioned studies.

39 A large portion of the literature examines not how adults come to identify as childfree  
 40 but why they do so (Agrillo and Nelini 2008; Clausen 2002; Gillespie 2003; Housekn-  
 41 echt 1982; Letherby 2002). When examining why some adults remain voluntarily child- 5  
 42 less, explanations range from the impact of macro-social forces such as women’s increasing  
 43 labor force participation to micro-level motivations such as autonomy and freedom. Pre-  
 44 dominantly, explanations for increasing rates of voluntary childlessness focus on key social  
 45 changes such as the feminist movement of the 1970s, increased reproductive choice, and  
 46 women’s increasing labor force participation (Gillespie 2003; see also Bartlett 1996;  
 47 Campbell 1985; Ireland 1993; McAllister 1998). 6, 7, 8

48 Some of the literature in this area has shifted focus from the macro-level social changes  
 49 described above to more micro-level processes that explain individuals’ motives for and

1 consequences of remaining childfree (e.g., Gillespie 2003; Houseknecht 1987; Letherby  
2 2002; Park 2005). For example, Houseknecht (1987) found that the most commonly  
3 cited reason for not having children was “freedom from childcare responsibility and  
4 greater opportunity for self-fulfillment and spontaneous mobility” (350). In Gillespie’s  
5 (2003) research, themes that emerged in relation to the choice not to have children  
6 included personal freedom and the ability to develop relationships with other adults. In  
7 one qualitative study, Carmichael and Whittaker (2007) found that those had “chosen  
8 childlessness” cited the following reasons for not wanting children: an aversion to the  
9 lifestyle changes that come with parenthood, an explicit rejection of the maternal role,  
10 selfishness, and either feeling unsuited or proficient but unwilling to take on the role of  
11 parent.

12 In sum, both macro- and micro-level processes have been explored as potential expla-  
13 nations for how and why some adults come to identify as childfree. Triangulating findings  
14 from quantitative investigations of pathways to voluntary childlessness with qualitative  
15 examinations of the reasons childfree individuals themselves cite for their decision could  
16 lead to even greater understanding of the how and the why behind childfree people’s sta-  
17 tus as childfree. In addition to studies which focus on the choices and life course of child-  
18 free people themselves, the literature in this area also includes studies of others’ responses  
19 to and perceptions of the childfree.

### 21 **Deviance and stigma management**

22  
23 One line research in the childfree literature examines cultural perceptions of childfree  
24 adults (Copur and Koropecykj-Cox 2010; Koropecykj-Cox and Pendell 2007; Kor-  
25 opecykj-Cox et al. 2007; Lisle 1999; McAllister 1998; Vinson et al. 2010). From its  
26 beginnings, much of the scholarly literature on the childfree has considered whether, or  
27 the extent to which, the choice not to have children qualifies as a deviant act. As early as  
28 1973, Veevers (1973b) noted that perceptions of the voluntarily childless as emotionally  
29 unstable and maladjusted, while common among social scientists and the public more  
30 generally, were unfounded. In that same decade, Houseknecht (1977) found that  
31 although women who proclaimed a desire to remain childfree were aware of negative  
32 social sanctions associated with their choice, they were significantly less concerned with  
33 those sanctions than were women who desired to have children. Since these and other  
34 early studies that examine perceptions of the childfree (e.g., Callan 1985; Polit 1978;  
35 Rainwater 1960), researchers have continued to investigate issues of deviance and stigma  
36 management as they arise for childfree adults.

37 More recent research on perceptions of childfree adults shows that parents are per-  
38 ceived as warmer than non-parents (Copur and Koropecykj-Cox 2010), that women  
39 have more positive attitudes about “childlessness” (be it chosen or not) than men (Kor-  
40 opecykj-Cox and Pendell 2007), and that couples who are viewed as unlikely to have  
41 children are regarded more negatively than those who are seen as likely to become par-  
42 ents (Koropecykj-Cox et al. 2007). Race also plays a role in perceptions of childfree  
43 women; African American mothers are viewed more favorably than childfree African  
44 American women whereas perceptions of white women vary less based on parental status  
45 (Vinson et al. 2010). Interestingly, much of the aforementioned perceptions data come  
46 from samples of college students rather than parents or adults who themselves identify as  
47 voluntarily childfree.

48 Other perception studies focus on the stigma associated with remaining childfree (Mol-  
49 len 2006; Mueller and Yoder 1999; Park 2002) and attitudes about childlessness (Caron

1 and Wynn 1992; Koropecykj-Cox and Pendell 2007; Koropecykj-Cox et al. 2007).  
 2 Those who report feeling stigma as a result of being childfree note experiencing pity and  
 3 criticism (Mollen 2006), being criticized for being too involved with work activities  
 4 (Mueller and Yoder 1999), and being perceived as selfish, cold, and materialistic (Park  
 5 2002; see also Kelly 2009).

6 Beyond defining the childfree status as deviant, several studies consider how childfree  
 7 individuals manage the stigma of their “deviant” status. Veevers was among the first to  
 8 do so in her 1975 examination of the “moral careers of voluntarily childless wives” (see  
 9 also Veevers 1980). Veevers (1975) noted that voluntarily childless heterosexual wives  
 10 employed one of two strategies when subjected to negative social sanctions associated  
 11 with their status as childfree: either they engaged in symbolic gestures that suggested con-  
 12 formity such as noting adoption plans or they proclaimed moral views that were explicitly  
 13 at odds with motherhood. Years later, Park (2002) identified several other strategies that  
 14 voluntarily childless women and men employ to manage the stigma associated with the  
 15 childfree status. Noting that our cultural context of pronatalism leads to negative evalua-  
 16 tions of the childfree, Park (2002) found that the techniques childfree women and men  
 17 use to manage stigma range from defensive or reactive such as “identity substitution”  
 18 (33) to proactive (such as redefining “childlessness” in a positive way).

19 An additional strategy employed by some childfree adults to manage the stigma associ-  
 20 ated with their status is to surround oneself with supportive others. Houseknecht (1977)  
 21 noted early on the importance of forming a supportive reference group as one strategy  
 22 for managing the stigma associated with the childfree status. The “emerging childfree  
 23 movement” (Park 2002, 39) demonstrates that childfree adults recognize their status as  
 24 stigmatized and challenge the characterization of their choice as a deviant one. Increas-  
 25 ingly, the internet and social networking sites have facilitated efforts of the childfree to  
 26 connect with like others (Basten 2009). Of course, the extent to which members of  
 27 childfree groups share enough in common to support a continued movement remains to  
 28 be seen. While research indicates that these groups have the capacity to draw wide appeal  
 29 and that they have formed internationally (Basten 2009), it is possible that the heteroge-  
 30 neity of childfree organizations may make sustaining a larger movement challenging (see  
 31 Basten 2009’s discussion of Ramu 1985). In any case, this organized response to construc-  
 32 tions of voluntary childlessness as deviant is certainly notable and is likely to gain increas-  
 33 ing attention in the literature.

### 34 **Childfree into older age**

35  
 36  
 37 As increasing numbers of individuals choose to remain childfree, attention to the lives of  
 38 elderly people without children increases. As mentioned previously, the 1990s saw an  
 39 emergence of literature focused on older people who are childfree. This line of research  
 40 continued into the 2000’s (Abma and Martinez 2006; Albertini and Kohli 2009; DeOllos  
 41 and Kapinus 2002; Dykstra and Keizer 2009; Kohli and Albertini 2009; Umberson et al. **10**  
 42 2010; Wenger 2009; Wenger et al. 2000). These studies largely focus on the later-in-life  
 43 consequences of not having reared children such as quality of life, wellbeing, and support  
 44 of and by family. In general, research on older childfree adults finds few if any negative  
 45 consequences for these individuals.

46 Dykstra and Keizer (2009) found that fatherhood makes a difference in some realms of  
 47 older men’s well-being but it does not matter to the same extent across all life domains.  
 48 In particular, while fathers had higher incomes on average than men without children,  
 49 fatherhood was not found to have an effect on older men’s life satisfaction and mental



1 health. In her study of childfree older adults in Wales, Wenger (2009) found that aging  
2 individuals without children adapted their lives to accommodate their needs in ways other  
3 than the mechanisms used by aging parents. Wenger's (2009) study participants were  
4 found to fill "voids" that might be presumed to exist by relying on other family members  
5 or on engagement in community endeavors. Similarly, Albertini and Kohli (2009) found  
6 that the support networks of "childless" older people were more diverse than those of  
7 parents, and included stronger links with a broader range of relatives as well as friends  
8 and other non-relatives. Older adults without children in Albertini and Kohli's (2009)  
9 study also tended to be more actively engaged in charity work than their counterparts  
10 who had children, thus contributing to their communities in unique and important ways.

11 In sum, research on how childfree adults fare later in life shows that few regret their  
12 decision not to have or rear children and that many find alternative ways to connect with  
13 others and engage in their communities.

### 14 **Suggestions for future research: diversity, process, and consequences**

15  
16  
17 Notably, prior work on childfree adults focuses almost exclusively on women and does  
18 not consider men's decisions (Mollen 2006; Mueller and Yoder 1999; Park 2005; but see  
19 Lunneborg 1999). By and large, prior research focuses not just on women only but more  
20 specifically on heterosexual women (but see Berkowitz 2007; Berkowitz and Marsiglio  
21 2007). Future researchers should therefore aim to include a more diverse selection of par-  
22 ticipants in their studies of childfree adults. Though several recent studies of how race  
23 may influences choices or perceptions exist (Koropecjy-Cox et al. 2007; Umberson et  
24 al. 2010; Vinson et al. 2010), greater racial and ethnic diversity within study samples  
25 should also be a goal of future research in this area.

26 While literature from a variety of disciplines has examined trends in rates of and moti-  
27 vations for voluntary childlessness, questions of how, rather than why, such decisions are  
28 made remains. In particular, qualitative research on pathways to voluntary childlessness  
29 would complement the extant quantitative research on these processes. Further, few  
30 researchers have considered the extent to which decisions to not become parents may be  
31 linked to gender, sexuality, and perceptions of family more generally. Work framed  
32 within the study of families in particular could make important contributions toward our  
33 understanding of how individuals construct and perceive notions of what counts as "fam-  
34 ily." Prior research on gay and lesbian families could provide a useful starting point for  
35 studies of childfree family formations.

36 Future work might also move from finding explanations for voluntary childlessness to  
37 more deliberately examining its consequences, not just for those who choose not to have  
38 children but for their communities, for the lives of other children, and, as mentioned, for  
39 families more generally. The consequences of deciding to remain childfree specifically for  
40 the lives of children have not yet been considered. What role do childfree people play in  
41 the lives of children and how do those relationships differ from parent-child relationships?  
42 What does it mean for our cultural understanding of "family" if increasing numbers of  
43 families do not include children?

44 Though the 2000's saw some research on how family-friendly policies impact (or do  
45 not impact) the lives of childfree people, future research might continue this line of work  
46 by further investigating childfree people's perceptions of family friendly policies and con-  
47 sidering alternatives to such policies that might benefit childfree people and adults with  
48 children equally. Family-friendly workplace policies are just one just one area of policy  
49 relevant to voluntary childlessness. Early on, Veevers (1974) called attention to several of

1 the social policy implications of voluntary childlessness but this line of investigation  
2 remains in need of further study.

3 In sum, the literature on childfree, or voluntarily childless, adults is rich, representing a  
4 diverse array of disciplinary perspectives and methodological approaches. Though further  
5 questions remain about voluntary childlessness, researchers in this area will find much  
6 insight and many interesting questions raised within the existing literature on adults who  
7 make the choice not to become parents.  
8

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12 the National Council on Family Relations and the University of Maine. Thank you to  
13 Robert Jackson and Elleena Petersen for research assistance.  
14

### 15 **Short Biographies**

16  
17 Dr. Amy Blackstone is Associate Professor and Chair of Sociology at the University of  
18 Maine. Her research includes studies of workplace harassment over the life course, child-  
19 free adults, and activism in the breast cancer and anti-rape movements. Her work has  
20 appeared in journals such as *Gender & Society*, *American Sociological Review*, *Journal of Con-*  
21 *temporary Ethnography*, and *Law & Society Review*. She is the author of *Principles of Sociologi-*  
22 *cal Inquiry: Qualitative and Quantitative Methods* (Flat World Knowledge, 2012).

23 Mahala Dyer Stewart is a doctoral student in Sociology at the University of Massachu-  
24 setts Amherst. Her research interests include social inequality, family, education, gender,  
25 race and social class. Her current study is a content analysis of the childrearing ideologies  
26 held within homeschool and conventional parenting magazines.  
27

### 28 **Note**

29  
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32

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# Author Query Form

Journal: SOC4

Article: 496

Dear Author,

During the copy-editing of your paper, the following queries arose. Please respond to these by marking up your proofs with the necessary changes/additions. Please write your answers on the query sheet if there is insufficient space on the page proofs. Please write clearly and follow the conventions shown on the attached corrections sheet. If returning the proof by fax do not write too close to the paper's edge. Please remember that illegible mark-ups may delay publication.

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Query reference	Query	Remarks
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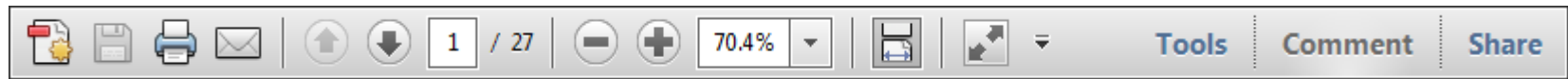


USING e-ANNOTATION TOOLS FOR ELECTRONIC PROOF CORRECTION

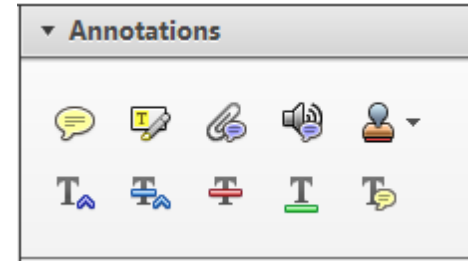
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**1. Replace (Ins) Tool – for replacing text.**

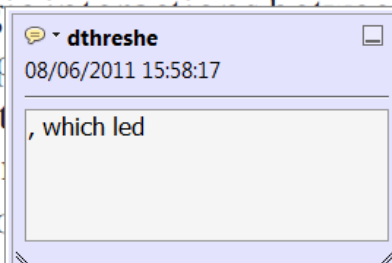


Strikes a line through text and opens up a text box where replacement text can be entered.

**How to use it**

- Highlight a word or sentence.
- Click on the [Replace \(Ins\)](#) icon in the Annotations section.
- Type the replacement text into the blue box that appears.

standard framework for the analysis of microeconomic activity. Nevertheless, it also led to the emergence of a new paradigm of strategic interaction. The number of competitors in the industry is that the structure of the main components of the model, are exogenous. Important works on this by Shirasaka (1987) and henceforth) we open the 'black b



**2. Strikethrough (Del) Tool – for deleting text.**



Strikes a red line through text that is to be deleted.

**How to use it**

- Highlight a word or sentence.
- Click on the [Strikethrough \(Del\)](#) icon in the Annotations section.

there is no room for extra profits and the number of firms is zero and the number of firms (net) values are not determined by Blanchard and ~~Kiyotaki~~ (1987), perfect competition in general equilibrium. The classical framework assuming monopoly is not consistent with the classical framework assuming monopoly. An exogenous number of firms

**3. Add note to text Tool – for highlighting a section to be changed to bold or italic.**



Highlights text in yellow and opens up a text box where comments can be entered.

**How to use it**

- Highlight the relevant section of text.
- Click on the [Add note to text](#) icon in the Annotations section.
- Type instruction on what should be changed regarding the text into the yellow box that appears.

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**4. Add sticky note Tool – for making notes at specific points in the text.**



Marks a point in the proof where a comment needs to be highlighted.

**How to use it**

- Click on the [Add sticky note](#) icon in the Annotations section.
- Click at the point in the proof where the comment should be inserted.
- Type the comment into the yellow box that appears.

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USING e-ANNOTATION TOOLS FOR ELECTRONIC PROOF CORRECTION

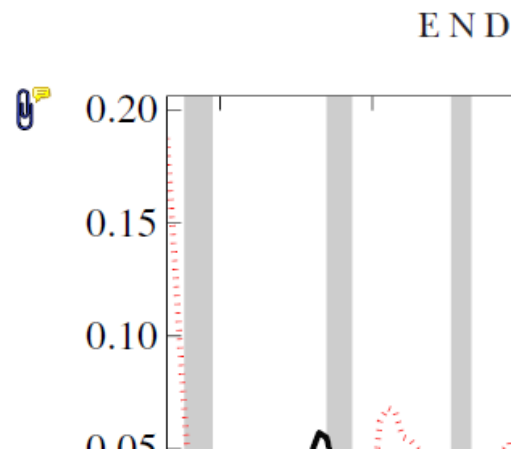
**5. Attach File Tool – for inserting large amounts of text or replacement figures.**



Inserts an icon linking to the attached file in the appropriate place in the text.

**How to use it**

- Click on the [Attach File](#) icon in the Annotations section.
- Click on the proof to where you'd like the attached file to be linked.
- Select the file to be attached from your computer or network.
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**6. Add stamp Tool – for approving a proof if no corrections are required.**



Inserts a selected stamp onto an appropriate place in the proof.

**How to use it**

- Click on the [Add stamp](#) icon in the Annotations section.
- Select the stamp you want to use. (The [Approved](#) stamp is usually available directly in the menu that appears).
- Click on the proof where you'd like the stamp to appear. (Where a proof is to be approved as it is, this would normally be on the first page).

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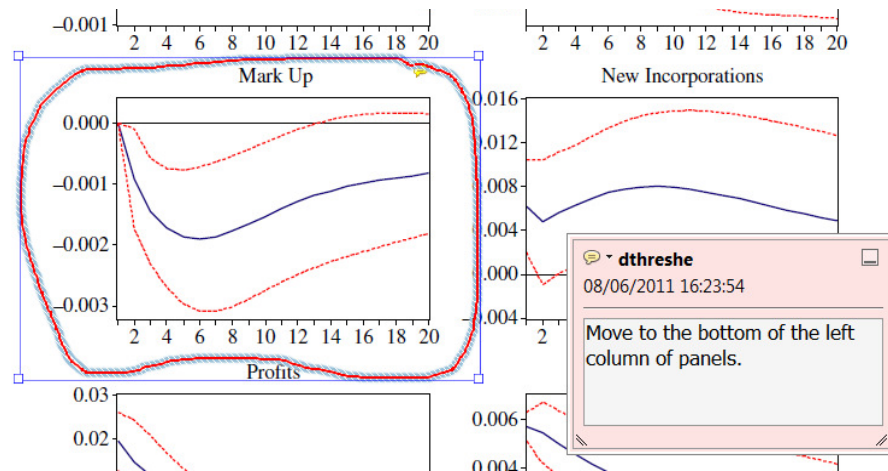


**7. Drawing Markups Tools – for drawing shapes, lines and freeform annotations on proofs and commenting on these marks.**

Allows shapes, lines and freeform annotations to be drawn on proofs and for comment to be made on these marks..

**How to use it**

- Click on one of the shapes in the [Drawing Markups](#) section.
- Click on the proof at the relevant point and draw the selected shape with the cursor.
- To add a comment to the drawn shape, move the cursor over the shape until an arrowhead appears.
- Double click on the shape and type any text in the red box that appears.



For further information on how to annotate proofs, click on the [Help](#) menu to reveal a list of further options:

