"BEING THE PERSON PEOPLE CAN'T HANDLE": A GROUNDED THEORY EXPLORATION OF

BRITISH WOMEN'S CONSTRUCTIONS OF LIVING CHILDFREE THROUGH CHOICE.

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"What you can do, or dream you can, begin it;

Boldness has genius, power and magic in it"

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Thank you to those who have supported me in my dreams -

and helped me stay bold.

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Abstract

In Britain, there are increasing numbers of women not having children (ONS, 2013), however there is very little writing or research exploring or giving voice to the lived experience of the women who choose to be childfree. As a childfree woman herself, the researcher was committed to producing a piece of research to explore and illuminate the ways in which childfree women construct this way of being and their actions around this. A key tenet of counselling psychology is to focus on social justice and action, therefore this topic is relevant and significant in defining women as first and foremost human. A qualitative approach was adopted, in order to explore the constructions of being childfree through choice by British women who self-identified with this term. A grounded theory methodology was used to analyse the rich narratives provided by the participants. These narratives were gathered firstly through a focus group of seven participants and an additional seven semi-structured interviews. The key question of 'how being childfree by choice was constructed by the participants' was answered, including how being childfree through choice influenced respondents' views of themselves, how it impacted on key aspects of their lives, and how they talked about their choice to be childfree. Literature across feminist psychology, psychology, sociology and psychoanalysis focused on theory related to gender, identity and reproduction were considered. The project concluded with a proposed grounded theory, based on the research findings. The theory proposed that culture, context, actions and consequences combined to create a socially-constructed view of the self and others. This was constructed through strategies to defend against *Being the person people can't handle*; *Reflections on motherhood*; and supporting *Living a fulfilling life.* The research explored aspects of gender and power within a social context, considered

aspects of class, race and transgenerational experience, and offered a bridge between academic third wave feminism with fourth wave social activism. Implications for counselling psychology practice as a result of this research were oriented around navigating a tension between defending against a culture experienced as harmful and the exploration of fulfilment, creativity and generativity. Additionally, the identified implications for research were directed towards education, social justice and activism; the need to consider the role and function of acceptance, shame and cultural norms associated with gender, reproduction and power in the recruitment of participants; and also the opportunity to explore ideas of family, community and policy in the context of a 4th wave feminism.

Key words: grounded theory, childfree by choice, reproduction, identity, feminism, social activism, gender, power, social constructionism, counselling psychology.

Introduction / Statement of Objectives

The inspiration to research the experiences of women who were childfree through choice came to me in a research methods seminar. A similar question was posed as part of an exercise, and in response I felt a frisson of excitement; the eponymous lightbulb moment. I knew this was an area I was going to look at, it resonated with me as I was also childfree by choice, but until that point, this was a part of my life I didn't talk about. It felt shameful; almost as if I was odd for not wanting children. I discovered there was so little written about it in the academic literature. Additionally, in terms of popular culture this pre-dated much of the discourse that was to come in the media (such as Jennifer Aniston being shamed for her reproductive choices (Time Magazine, 2014), Kim Kattrell speaking on Woman's Hour (BBC, 2015) and the attempt to use motherhood as leverage in the 2016 Andrea Leadsom versus Theresa May Conservative Party leadership contest. I felt very powerfully that this was a conversation that needed to happen. I wanted to provoke a conversation that didn't seem to be happening academically, socially or politically.

I initially approached the research intending to explore the narratives and experiences of women who were childfree through choice. However, in my reflections on possible research questions I came to something of a crossroads; to decide if I want to look at the *lived experience* of childfree women, or rather *how* these women came to identify themselves in this way. I had a sense that there was something about living a life as a childfree woman in a culture of pro-natalism that was inherently 'other' than the prescribed norm. However, the 'norm' is increasingly shrinking in the UK; the Office for National Statistics (ONS) data

illustrate this (in 2013 it was 1:5 women are childfree, compared to 1:9 of my mother's

generation). And yet, the prizing of motherhood is ever-pervasive. The narrative of what it is

to be a mother is powerfully alluring. To be a mother is to be portrayed as the 'ultimate'

woman; caring, bountiful, productive and righteous; a more highly prized woman than a

non-mother. I started to wonder how living a life in this context, where one explicitly makes

the choice not to be this prized individual, impacts on a person's views of themselves; to

consider the extent to which it influences actions and language about choices, passions, self.

It was this exploration of the constructions, the way that a person colours and shapes their

lives that really appealed to me for this project. Additionally, it was important to me that I

spoke to women who were actively living through the impact of their choices. Given that the

average age in the UK of the first-time mother is 32 (ONS, 2013), I wanted to speak with

women who were the peers of those women most enmeshed in life transition of embodying

motherhood. I therefore invited participants for my interviews who were between 35 and

49.

This project is an original piece of research, in which I have created and interpreted new

knowledge through my own research and an examination of the existing literature in this

field. In the Literature Review section I have critically evaluated the published literature and

theory relevant to this subject. In the Design, Method and Ethics section I have outlined my

research process; the design and implementation of this project which builds on the existing

knowledge in this area and my rationale for adopting a social constructionist grounded

theory methodology. In response to the central research question of 'how being childfree by

choice is constructed by British women who self-identify with this term', and the deeply

personal nature of the research process for both the participants and myself, I chose a grounded theory methodology. This was an approach designed to focus on the actions and processes of the participants, rather than to describe or interpret their lived experience. Whilst other methodologies such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) or narrative analysis would have been consistent with a social constructionist epistemology, a grounded theory approach aligned very closely with the research question and enabled me to develop a theory in response which was grounded in the data. The Analysis section contains the results and outcomes of this research project, and finally the Discussion section expands on how these results add to the existing research and develops new insights relevant to Counselling Psychology and the wider social sciences. At the end of the project, I have critically reflected on my work, assessing its strengths and weaknesses, as well as making recommendations for further research and practical applications to the therapy room.

As well as adding to the existing (though somewhat sparse) body of literature in this field, this research project has provided me with the opportunity to reflect upon and develop my personal identity as a woman who is childfree through choice, and as a Counselling psychologist. I have brought into discussion aspects of women's lives which have so far been little explored or understood. Additionally, I have considered the constructions of my respondents (and myself) in the context of a number of different theoretical models and how this experience and insight has shaped my practice and cultural awareness. I have considered how people can be injured by the culture in which they live; and offered

suggestions to the practicing Counselling Psychologist for use in the therapeutic space, as well as in actions supporting social justice.

Recent UK population data (ONS, December 2013) shows that increasing numbers of women are not mothers, and those who do raise a family are doing so later in life and raise fewer children. The reasons behind these trends are many and varied (McAlister and Clarke, 1998). However, given that the UK benefits from a long period of sustained good quality health care, access to contraception and increasingly relaxed social attitudes to the structure of family, marriage and partnerships, it would be reasonable to suggest that an increasing proportion of women are choosing not to parent. This research project looks at the ways in which women who define themselves as childfree by choice and therefore part of this growing minority group construct their views and experiences of living in UK society.

Counselling Psychology and feminism hold a shared set of values, oriented around social justice, social action and social transformation; there is a commitment to action aimed at social change. Fundamental to the views of both Counselling Psychology and feminism is the principle of egalitarianism; that of an equal right from one person to the next to have a voice, to have authority, to take up space. This is a project exploring the experiences of women whose voice, authority and capacity to take up space continues to be influenced by the culture in which they live, and in so doing, I seek to contribute to the body of work in support of creating positive social change.

The use of the word 'childfree'

Throughout this research project, unless stated by other researchers, I have chosen to use the term 'childfree' over other terms such as 'voluntary childlessness', or 'un-childed'. This decision was taken deliberately, acknowledging the power of language to create or maintain perceptions of our world. Coming from a social constructionist epistemology, underpinned by feminist and Counselling Psychology values of social justice and equality, I wanted to use language which supported choice, agency and respect. It seemed to me that other commonly used terms to me symbolised absence, lack, or subjugation. I see this research as contributing to the body of work oriented towards action and social change, and I therefore chose not to use terms which I consider to be oppressive. This research project is a challenge to the dualities of power (the 'doers' and done-tos', Benjamin 2013). Therefore, the language I have used recognises the damaging impact of maintaining the dynamic of shame and fear associated with normativity and regulation.

In this project I consider the meaning of the word 'childfree' to participants, along with the concept of 'choice. This consideration is looked at in the context of participants own personal experience, as well as culturally, socially and politically. Whilst the precise meaning of 'childfree' may vary from one participant to the next, what is common is an identification with this term.

The research project

Relatively little research has been conducted on the experience and actions of women who are childfree through choice, and it is interesting to me to see that the existing research bears out what the social commentary suggests; i.e. that the voice of these women is overlooked in favour of maternalism and the continued interest in the experiences of motherhood. My main research question therefore centres on that which has not yet been considered in the literature; how is being childfree through choice constructed by British women who self-identify with this term? As part of addressing this central research question, I explore the following sub-questions; how does being childfree through choice influence participants' views of themselves; how does being childfree through choice impact on key aspects of the participant's lives; and how do the participants talk about their choice to be childfree? The research suggests that where core differences are perceived on an interpersonal level, defensive strategies are employed to protect the self. This research gives consideration to the experiences of difference, as well as the strategies employed. I consider this research project to be a valuable and original contribution to the field of Counselling Psychology, by updating the practitioners' awareness of social change, attitudes and awareness of social identity. This research builds on the existing research by exploring how it is to live childfree by choice through the voices of women who identify with this term. It thereby makes a valued contribution to clinician's therapeutic awareness in a culture where we are sensitised to gender, choice and conflict.

Holding an insider-researcher position

'Insider research' has been defined as "contexts in which the researcher identifies as a member of the social group or culture that is being studied" (Greene, 2014). Within a feminist approach, insider research can be considered as adding potential value to the knowledge arising as a result of the enquiry. Indeed, participatory and emancipatory paradigms (such as feminist research) go so far as to privilege the 'practical knowing', or lived experience over other kinds of knowing, seeing this approach as a way of conducting ethical and effective research (Heron and Reason, 1997). However, whilst there are strengths to what is considered 'insider' research, Merriam et al (2001) reflect on the tendency and potential pitfalls of oversimplifying the distinction between 'insider' and 'outsider', with particular reference to power and positionality in defining each player's place on a continuum within a given research context. They suggest that whilst there may be shared factors of commonality between the researcher and researched, there are aspects which by their nature influence the degree to which there is a shared experience. For example, when applied to this project, whilst both the participants and I have considered ourselves to be childfree by choice and also white British, there may be elements or degrees of difference, such as around sexual orientation, education or class. I acknowledge that my experience of being childfree by choice is influenced by my positions of privilege, such as my white-ness, being middle-class, well-educated, able bodied, heterosexual and cis-gender. As such, Merriam et al's ideas suggest my position as an 'insider' is not static; it has flexed and changed in relation to the field of research. As my research has progressed, I have at times experienced a close resonance with certain

individuals, and indeed, struggled at other times to truly connect with the experiences being shared or opinions being expressed. This has offered an opportunity for self-reflection and growth, and something I will reflect on in later sections. However, my personal experience has certainly seemed to mirror that proposed by Merriam et al; that there is a continuum of 'insider-ness' which is far from static. It seems that consistent with the social-constructionist framework of this research, the concept of 'insider-ness' is also in constant construction between researcher and participant.

Chavez (2008) has critiqued the value of 'insider' research, considered through the lens of qualitative research. She identified some of the benefits 'insider' research offers; including ease of access to and building rapport with research subjects; the capacity to collect data in a nuanced and culturally sensitive way; and the potential for a rich understanding of the contextual content of the data. However, she also identified some of the pitfalls such a position may present, such as; a truncated discussion of important concepts because of assumed shared understandings, and the inherent risk of pre-existing relationships between researcher and participant preventing exploration of important topics through a desire to reduce risk or discomfort of the other. Building on the existing body of work on 'insider' research, Ross (2017) explored the impact of being an 'insider' further, focusing on emotion-related benefits and challenges. Through her own experience as a researcher, she recognised the role of empathy and validation in providing her the opportunity to gather rich data. She reported experiencing the ease of rapport building through a shared experience and contextual understanding Chavez (2008) suggests. She also reported experiencing the sense that this offered the participants comfort and reassurance when

sharing deeply personal or sensitive information and provided the same for her when hearing reflections on similar painful or shaming experiences. However where being an 'insider' proved challenging on an emotional level, was in recognising the powerful pull of personal interest or concerns, which at times led to the interview deviating from the intended path. This led to gathering data not directly relevant to the research question or restricting the amount of time available for research-focused dialogue as a result of exploring tangential ideas. Particularly pertinent to this research project are two ideas Ross identifies in her conclusion; that shared experiences of discrimination appear to offer a particularly powerful focus of commonality in a research relationship; and that the pervasiveness of emotionality associated with motherhood (and therefore presumably non-motherhood) provides the potential to create a powerful emotional connection in 'insider' qualitative research. This research is an exploration of how participants experience and make sense of choosing a life which does not conform to traditional gender roles and are therefore at risk of oppression and discrimination. Ross' research therefore highlights important aspects of relative 'insider' status; the importance of recognising my positions of power and privilege, as well as recognising the degree to which these factors may have influenced how participants viewed my 'insider-ness' and the consequent impact on their offered narrative.

Literature Review

In this project I have explored how living as childfree through choice is constructed by British women who self-identify with this term. As part of this exploration, I looked at how being childfree through choice influenced respondent's views of themselves, the impact on key aspects of their lives, and how they talked about their choice to be childfree. In this section I consider the present enquiry in the context of the existing literature as well as explore the literature and theory relevant to findings within the data. This study looks at the constructions and actions of women who are childfree by choice; an area which has enjoyed relatively little direct psychological research to date. I have therefore considered writings from feminist psychology, psychology, sociology and psychoanalytic researchers looking at theory related to gender identity and reproduction.

Feminism and researching being childfree by choice

The basic principles of feminism are grounded in the recognition and acceptance that women are oppressed and have inferior status to men (Tindall et al, in Woolfe et al, 2012, p.217). Feminist research approaches have the experiences of women at the centre of their work and seek to expose and comprehend the difficulties women face, as well as to highlight women's strengths and potential. From a social constructionist perspective, the experiences of being a woman, or being female (not necessarily the same thing) are aspects of gender as they relate to the meaning attributed to this experience. Feminist approaches acknowledge that the experiences of being female occur in a culture informed by patriarchal social values; a set of socially constructed values and prescriptions about what it means to be female. Feminist research seeks to understand the social and political problems

experienced by women, and highlight their strengths and potential. I therefore consider this to be a piece of feminist research; in this work I not only unmask the experiences of childfree women, but also explore the difficulties they face, as well as recognise areas of strength and potential, oriented within the values and practice of Counselling Psychology.

The language around feminist research often refers to the different 'waves' of feminism. Although these 'waves' progress across time, the defining features of each wave seems to be the goals and mechanisms associated with them. For example, the first wave of feminism was primarily oriented around women's suffrage and the right to vote. The involvement of women in World War II and the civil rights movement were precursors to the second wave feminism known as the Women's Liberation Movement, and which was a feature of the political and social debates and challenges of the 1960's and 70's (Shebar, 2018). This wave of feminism focused on 'women's issues' and sought to fight the oppression experienced by women across society; in marriage, in the workplace, in sex and sexuality, and in the experience of violence against women. It was around this time that the dialogue around women's rights and equality started to diverge; with groups of feminists motivating for equal rights, whilst others sought a more radical shift in patriarchal society. However, this second wave of feminism did not account for all women; often criticised as failing to recognise the experiences of the non-white, non-middle class and those women who did not conform to a heteronormative or gender-binary paradigm. This led to a third wave feminist movement which has sought to redefine what it means to be a woman, acknowledging the intersectionality between different forms of oppression connected to race, gender, class and cultural backgrounds. At the time of writing, it seemed as though we

were witnessing a fourth wave of feminism, focused on micro-politics such #metoo; with the goal of taking feminism out of the academic world and into the public spotlight through social media and the internet. This enquiry explores aspects of gender and power within a social context, thereby connecting aspects of class, race and transgenerational experience. I therefore consider this study to occupy a transitional position, bridging academic third wave feminism with fourth wave social activism.

Feminist research aims to take a corrective, non-ghettoising stance; to highlight how the experiences of women are relevant to all society, not solely to women. In 'Breaking Out Again' (Stanley & Wise, 1993), the writers identified how the foundations of looking at the experiences of women were overlooked, distorted and biased in the research undertaken in the social sciences. For example, in criminology, women were perceived as different to men by reason of their body's reproductive role. In psychology, women were constructed as 'non-men'; where females were the opposite of males, aggression was constructed as a male construct, with the female therefore non-aggressive. Historically, when social scientists had studied society, this was in effect only studying men in society, and those studying men, were also men. As a counter-action and redress, feminist research proposed to 'fill in the gaps' of this research by conducting research which is done for, by and on women. Stanley and Wise (1993) critiqued these propositions; identifying the fallacy of assuming that these endeavours would erase the misdemeanours of previous research. What they did support though, was the premise that feminist research was about broadening our understanding of the world around us. Rather than being oriented to the male-world, or the female-world, and the potential for maintaining a separation and perceived irrelevance of one world to the

other, they argued that feminist research was about being relevant and an engaged contributor to the social sciences. In their critique, they highlighted the potential danger and limitation of excluding men from feminist research. They stated that in the exploration of the experiences of women, it was necessary to also explore the contribution of men to this experience. However, whilst I accept that both men and women have valuable contributions to make to research on the female experience, I consider there to be many other ways in which we experience difference, separateness and suppression, which is not limited solely to gender. Therefore, I consider feminist research to go beyond the experience of gender; rather, the experience of being a woman must also include the experience of being a woman of race, of class, a sexual being, a physical being and all areas in which we experience dynamics of power and access to opportunity.

More recently, in The Handbook of Counselling Psychology, Tindall et al (2012) (in Woolfe et al, (2012) acknowledged that the tension illustrated by Stanley and Wise in the 1970's-80's (Stanley and Wise, 1993) in terms of what constituted feminist research has continued to be part of the debate until much more recent times. Tindall et al suggested that psychology has a history dominated by patriarchal values and attitudes, but that within the challenge of this setting, a feminist approach could offer a set of values and principles to allow for a creative interpretation of experiences, views and phenomenon. They described a key principle of feminist research; that it places women at the centre of the work, and that it holds a positive vision for the future. However, within this framework, there remains a tension between the social constructionist lens of feminist research, and the individualisation of distress prevalent in much of the publicly funded approach to mental health treatment such

as Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT). The diagnostic model IAPT uses has

been derived from National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines

(Timimi, 2018). When psychological support is offered within a diagnosis and treatment

model, risk is created that that process-driven protocols become central to the work, with

the result that context, culture and relational issues are viewed as secondary factors to be

negotiated to enable satisfactory compliance with the required 'correct' treatment (Timimi,

2018, Rustin, 2015; Loewenthal, 2017). What I find interesting about this tension is how it

relates to the key premise of this research project; being childfree 'through choice'. If there

is a recognition that the political and social context in which a person lives influences their

access to choices, and shapes or limits the range of choices available to them, doubt is

therefore created as to what extent choice is an individual one. As I have expanded upon

further in this section, reproductive choice is an emotive subject and one which has

provoked strong opinions, judgements and assumptions. If looked at from a feminist

perspective, there is an acknowledgement that a person's choice is not a choice separate

from or absent of the political or social context. I therefore recognise that the term

'childfree by choice' may be something of a fallacy; that there is less 'choice' in this action

than one may assume. This project explores the concept and constructions of choice

further. However, as this was a term which resonated strongly with my research

respondents and which connected with how they saw themselves, it is the term I have

chosen to adopt for the purposes of this research.

The influence of experience and power on the researched and researcher is a significant

factor to consider. Within feminist research there is the capacity to create a collaboration

between these parties; the researcher is not an impassionate, distant 'expert'. They are involved in the research, they have an interactive role in this process. Therefore, adopting a reflective stance is a vital part of this process, to recognise the degree to which personal interactions shape or influence the research. Alison Kelly (1978, cited by Stanley & Wise 1993) considered the extent to which feminism can influence research. She suggested that at the design and interpretation stages there is legitimate capacity for feminism to enter and shape the research. However, she suggested that there is no place for feminism in the analysis stage, and that by rejecting notions such as 'objectivity' and 'rationality' by reason of their 'maleness', the researcher risks missing out on the opportunity to make use of our fullest intellectual capabilities. The argument around the 'maleness' of positivism, 'hard' data or quantitative methods was taken up by David Morgan (1981, cited by Stanley & Wise 1993), in that he argued that whilst there is potential to challenge the use of 'hard' and 'soft' and the implied associations to 'male-' and 'female-'ness, he considered there to be no conflict in adopting quantitative methods in feminist research. Rather, he proposed that sociology is a social construct, and it is the way in which 'maleness' and 'masculinity' is constructed within this sphere which should be the focus of intellectual challenge and exploration. The feminist psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin has written extensively (2004, 2013) on how the use of 'the third' in relational psychoanalysis offered a way of thinking and working which challenged punitive and damaging inter-subjectivity; considering how the duality of patriarchal views of maleness and femaleness translated to experiences of the 'doer' and 'done-to'. In recognising the presence of a third space (i.e. the relationship between the researcher and researched, the therapist and client, and for this research perhaps the parent and childfree) a mutuality of understanding is created; developing a sense of "there are other minds out there" (Benjamin, 2004, p.6). By emphasising the power

of the relational frame in psychoanalytic practice and academic research Benjamin's work offered a structural approach to work which was compassionate, inventive and liberating.

In exploring a feminist research approach to the subject, I recognised I felt a fear that I didn't know enough to write about this area. I felt that I needed to start 'at the beginning' and develop a contextual awareness of the history of feminism to feel qualified to be part of the conversation at this stage, but I quickly discovered that the more I read, the more I felt I did not know enough in order to begin. Reflecting on this further I came to the realisation that I was qualified to be part of the conversation because I was researching something I have experienced in my own life and recognised in the lives of others. Additionally, I had identified that this area was under represented in the research, and that I had approached this enquiry with rigour and curiosity. However, I also acknowledged that there was a huge body of literature in the field of feminist research. In order to move forward with this project, I needed to make choices, and therefore placed limits on what I was able to consider.

Choosing language; being 'childfree'

The experience of 'childlessness' or being 'childfree' has been the subject of feminist oriented sociological commentary (Morell, 1994; McAllister, 1998), whereby the modern cultural phenomenon of 'maternalism' or 'pro-natalism' was described; tracing the portraiture of women as nurturing and 'mothering' as a natural result of sexual maturity, arising from the birth of the modern industrial middle classes in European and American

cultures. In the mid-to-late 20th century, much second-wave feminist argument was in

support of women having an active choice to be both career oriented and to be mothers,

and to value the work involved in 'mothering', rather than to perceive it to be of little worth

and an assumed part of a woman's natural duties. However, Morell described how the value

placed on the role and work of mothers became "the source and ultimate expression of

women's capacity for care, relational identities and superior values". (1994, p.10).

More recently, Edwards (2016) outlined some of the tensions between the use of the words

'childless' and 'childfree' to reflect the voluntary or choice-based position of people who

subscribed to these identities. I noted that she proposed 'childless', 'un-childed' or 'non-

parents' to all be connotations of lack or less-than. She also suggested that the word

'childfree' could appear glib, smug or superior to "the child-bearing majority" and therefore

she elected to use 'voluntarily childless' in her work to bridge any divide or tension between

these groups. As I reflected on this tension, it seemed insensitive to me to elect to use a

word to appease the dominant group, rather than a term which was a preferred option of

those it sought to describe. In contrast, I was struck by how Park's (2002) research regarding

motives for being childfree talked to a perception of parenting as being a compromise and

constraint of the pursuits which are important aspects of identity such as work or leisure

activities. I considered the word 'free' to therefore represent the felt-sense of the speaker,

i.e. that they were not constrained by the perceived entrapment of parenthood and were

free to pursue their generative-ness, rather than being suggestive of a dismissal of the

endeavours of parents. Connecting with the work of Blackstone et al (2012) addressed later

in this section, I wondered if the use of 'voluntary childless' was perhaps a strategy to

manage or accommodate the unease of the dominant group; i.e. that although the word

may have felt the most appropriate to describe the speaker's identity, it was not used for

fear of contributing to tension already threatened by the dominant other.

Ngoubene-Atioky et al (2017) stated that the term 'childfree' originated in the UK as an

"empowering outlook for the commonly stigmatising connotation of childlessness (Bartlett

1996, in Ngoubene-Atioky et al 2017). They echoed the statement of other studies

(Koropeckyj-Cox & Pendell, 2007; Letherby, 2002; Park, 2005, in Ngoubene-Atioky, 2017)

that "voluntarily childfree women often suffered societal marginalisation and stigma as a

result of their choice and disclosure of their childfree status" making reference to the

existing research which identified negative perceptions of voluntarily childless women such

as being materialistic, selfish, less nurturing and less socially desirable. Additionally, they

highlighted that studies had noted that marginalisation of childfree women became more

predominant the greater the age of the woman (Mollen, 2006; Park, 2005; Vinson, Mollen &

Smith, 2010; Yang, 2012).

Research and theory: being childfree by choice.

Research on women who choose not to have children has taken off over the past 30 years

or so, but what is noticeable to me is that the focus of the research to date has been around

certain facets of the childfree; who they are, why they choose as they do, what the

consequences of these choices are, and the reaction to stigmatisation of these choices

(Shapiro, 2014). Additionally, the choice not to birth children has received attention in the

theoretical literature; seeking to understand and theorise around reproduction, as well as to

consider difference or deviance and gender identity in the context of reproductive choice. However, one area where the research has been noticeably light, has been around the consideration of what it is like to *be* childfree, and to give voice to the women who lived in ways the research has sought to understand. This chapter outlines aspects of the theory and research relevant to being a childfree woman, and critically evaluates these contributions in the context of the present study.

Psychoanalytic theories of reproductive choice

It could be considered that parenthood represents a life stage experienced by most adults; a rite of passage which embodied the notions of generativity, identity, meaning, and worth (Erikson, 1950; Frankl, 1964; Rogers, 1967). However, recent thinking on adult development has viewed human development as "multi-directional, plastic and guided by human agency… Parenthood is now viewed as only one way to experience growth, maturity and well-being in adulthood" (Rothrauff and Cooney, 2008).

In exploring the history of women's oppression Chodorow (1989) observed that this subjugation well preceded the inception of class society or remained limited to specific spheres of work. This led her to conclude that the act of women's mothering generated a defensive masculine energy in men, and a "compensatory psychology and ideology of masculine superiority" which maintained a culture of male dominance (Chodorow, 1989, p. 2). This directed her to turn to psychoanalysis as a basis for formulating feminist theory, recognising the centrality of exploring the impact of sex and gender in both psychoanalysis

and feminism. She suggested that the experiences of being a man or a woman came from deep within, informed by our pasts and the unconscious meaning and fantasies experienced in our day to day emotional relationships. Chodorow demonstrated that men and women tended to form constructions of self and their identity differently; that women tended to be open to relationship and attuned to separation from others, whereas men tended towards being available to being left, based on firm boundaries and denials of self-other connection. In her 1989 work, she alluded to the limitations of psychoanalytic theory at the time; acknowledging its tendency towards universalism, and the loss of insight that accompanied an assumption that there existed a psychological commonality among all women and among all men, but without acknowledging the different challenges and oppressions experienced by people connected to aspects of race, ethnicity or class. Indeed, whilst she acknowledged feminist psychoanalysis considered gender, this appeared to be within the paradigm of a gender-binary. Chodorow's writing hinted at the dawn of third wave feminism, and the recognition of a need for intersectionality. Where her writing connected with this enquiry was in her recognition of the constructions of self, psyche and identity of women and of men. The epistemological assumption that identity is constructed is consistent with a social constructionism based grounded theory approach.

Erna Furman's essay 'Mothers have to be there to be left' (Furman, E. 2001, p.39) was based on the observed interactions between mothers and their children she witnessed at the therapeutic school at which she worked. She suggested that the relationship between mothers and their children could be considered to be experienced as a series of separations; birth as the first potential separation where the child left (or rejected) the mother, then

weaning where the child rejected the mother 'object' whilst simultaneously showing interest in other 'objects' (i.e. solid food) and how this is experienced by the mother. She made the observation that the mother, if robust enough, could tolerate the pain of the rejection by her child, and was soothed by the joy of watching them grow and mature. However, Furman described how difficulties arose when the mother found the abandonment or rejection too painful, and therefore sought to either control the separation (i.e. introducing weaning on her terms rather than the child's, or perhaps taking a job meaning she was not there to drop off at nursery, etc), or that she delayed the separation (e.g. dismissed the child's cues for weaning until the child gave up and continued to breastfeed). Furman's hypotheses perhaps connected to the ideas of Chodorow (1989), in respect of the ways in which the experience of mothering contributed to the development of a defensive energy in men; leading to a rejection of women and a distancing from the importance of self-other relations. Furman (2001) suggested that when children are not made to feel guilty about their growing up, they allowed themselves to perceive and sympathise with their mother's task. They may thank her and show concern for her. She referred to the work of Donald Winnicott (1957a, 1963a) who also discussed the importance of the development of concern for and appreciation of the mother's role. Furman's research illustrated how the dynamic between mother and child was enacted in their relationship, whereas Winnicott's work predominantly focused on the intra-psychic actions of this process within the child. Both these theorists seemed to be considering the same concepts; that the relationship with key caregivers was important in how a child developed, became independent and matured into adulthood. In becoming independent a child developed (or constructed) an image of themselves as a separate being, shaped by their experience of being in relationship with others around them.

In Lisa Baraitser's article 'Psychoanalysis and Feminism and …' (Baraitser, 2015) she charted how her thinking about sexual difference was impacted by the original work of Juliet Mitchell's 'Psychoanalysis and Feminism' some 40 years ago. By adding a further 'and' to the title, she invited the reader to consider how their understandings of power, sex and gender connected with their understandings of psychoanalysis in partnership with their understandings of feminism. Recognising the evolution of feminist thinking in such a way seemed to create a space for the conversation to continue to evolve and develop. As I read, I wondered how psychoanalysis and feminism and being childfree might be considered in this context. What became clear to me was that there was little thinking or research done in this field to date, articulating an opportunity for further research, and which this research project takes steps to address and contribute to. I appreciated the acknowledgement made in Baraister's essay of the challenges of keeping pace with thinking and research; that she noted she "seems to come too late to the conversation, catching up with the debates of the previous decade as they are seemingly overtaken by the next (p. 152)." I could certainly resonate with this experience, particularly as I reflected on the process of completing this project. This enquiry invited me to undertake an academic exploration of power, sex and gender. As an academic endeavour, it was not out of place with a piece of third wave feminist research. However as a practicing Counselling Psychologist and a woman engaged in society, it seemed that as a researcher I sat within what at times felt like a building crescendo of activism, where power imbalances, sexual and gender violence in the non-academic sphere were highlighted through such movements as #metoo and #everydaysexism; embodying a surge towards a fourth wave of feminist movement.

Theorising deviance, difference and otherness

As observed by the second wave feminist movement, if it could be accepted that humans share the same biological necessity for reproduction as other animals (Storr, p.xiii) then the stage was already set to perceive the human who does not feel the need to reproduce as 'abnormal'. Indeed, as Maaret Wager refers (Wager, 2000), "women are supposed to have maternal instinct which destines them to have children and to subordinate their own interests to those of their offspring."

Mira Hird (2003) recognised the feminist project of seeking to articulate the experiences of women but noted that there was little research around the experiences of women who chose not to mother. She suggested that maternity was so closely associated with the experience of being a woman that it was this experience (or the experience of not being able to become a mother) which had received the most focus, and that the childfree woman had been overlooked. She made the observation that in the existing research, women who chose to reject motherhood (as evidenced by the demographics of those participating in the research) were portrayed as white, well-educated and middle class, and that therefore the research only captured a small sliver of the experience of being childfree and female. She suggested that in many ways childfree women have often been described as wanting to be like men; devoting themselves to their paid career and viewing motherhood in a dim light. As with other writers, Hird framed psychoanalytic theory as an approach to exploring both the representation of the body, as well as the psychic development of identity. She

identified competing theories within psychoanalysis, as well as within the feminist

responses to these theories, ultimately deconstructing these theories and identifying the

limitations of these ways of understanding gender in the context of women who elect not to

mother. She adopted an ontological psychoanalytic approach to understanding gender,

associated with the French Lacanian tradition, which viewed the body as pre-social. The

body was therefore considered to be the 'raw material' which interacted with the social,

cultural and political discourses; developing into the psycho-social representations of men

and women recognised within society. Underpinning this approach was the assumption of a

sexual aim, oriented towards reproduction. Hird observed that as a consequence of the

degree to which women are so closely associated with reproduction, studies of women

within this tradition had been theorised in terms of being delayed, or 'deviant' in their social

development. In contrast, she proposed an alternative psychoanalytic theory of gender as

one of concepts of identification and desire, often associated with the British and American

Psychoanalytic Societies. This theory was based on Freud's 'infantile polyamorous

perversity', i.e. the idea that an infant acquired a male or female gender over time, and in

the process forgoes elements of the other gender. Hird acknowledged that a common

feminist critique of both these theories was the centrality of maleness inherent in both

concepts, against which femaleness is compared and found to be either deviant or absent.

Hird praised the work of Luce Irigaray, in that whilst Irigaray's theory of sexual difference

was based on the recognition of two distinct ontologically distinct sexual bodies, Hird

argued that Irigaray was able to demonstrate that women's conditions of being was not

limited to reproduction. However, there were aspects of Irigaray's theory which posed

difficulties for women who chose not to mother. In essence, Hird criticised Irigaray's theory

as distinguishing women from men on bodily differences, and that female sexuality is plural;

arising from vagina, uterus, breasts etc. Hird highlighted the inability of this paradigm to include women who do not either have these body parts (such as breast cancer survivors), or those who opt not to make use of them (such as women to choose not to use their uterus).

Theoretical ideas around gender identity and reproduction

Competing theoretical voices from within feminist psychoanalytic and post-structural traditions proposed the notion that bodies were constructed through social, political and cultural discourse. Within this frame, the body was always historical and available to change. For example, Hird identified the work of Judith Butler, who argued that gender was "an outcome of the struggle to define presence and absence, inclusion and exclusion from and on the body (Hird, 2003)". Hird suggested that Butler identified childless women as transformative in terms of gender identity, in that they challenged several stereotypes associated with womanhood; such as a woman's body as a producer of children, along with her desire for and liking of children, as well as men's bodies and the inability to 'mother', and men's assumed lack of desire for children. Butler suggested that childfree women challenged the social constructions of what it is to be a 'woman', not only because they do not have the necessary child, but that also their identity is not the opposite of 'man' (thereby threatening the stability of male gender identity). Ultimately, Hird's work raised some interesting contrasts, and identified some gaps in understanding of the childfree woman in the context of psychoanalytic gender theories. As I reflected on Hird's work, I saw connections between the evolving constructions of 'being' a woman, and the ideas outlined by Furman (2001). These theoretical proposals, grounded in object relations and

psychoanalytic theory, suggested the construction of self as an evolving process, undertaken over time, and changing as understanding of oneself takes place in relation to others. I found these to be intriguing concepts, and in this enquiry I had the opportunity to turn a research lens towards these theoretical ideas. Additionally, what was striking to me was the potency and power of the existence of a woman who chose not to reproduce and who rejected common notions of womanhood.

In her 1981 essay 'One is Not Born a Woman', Monique Wittig considered the meaning of gendered labels from a feminist perspective. She made the point that the 'mark' of womanhood, i.e. the label or categorisation of such, was given by the oppressor (e.g. men) to the oppressed (e.g. women), and that the category, race or species of 'woman' is merely a myth which originates with oppression of one by the other. She suggested that sex (as with race), was taken as a given, granted based on a number of different "physical features". However, she posited that these physical features were as neutral as any other others, but because of the social system, certain features were seen to be less neutral than others, and this influenced how they were perceived. For example, because someone was seen as black, therefore they were black; because someone was seen as a woman, they were a woman. To be constructed as 'black' or a 'woman' the critical features must be 'seen' and socially constructed; i.e. 'made' that way.

One of the key tenets of feminist work (Tindall et al, 2012) is the acknowledgement of an imbalance of power, and that the work focuses on exploring aspects of power, powerlessness and the gaining of power. Power can be considered to exist at the personal,

interpersonal and societal level, and that each power dynamic is shaped by historical and cultural contexts. Within feminist research it has been accepted that the external power shaping these historical and cultural contexts is patriarchal, and that it is the socially constructed values, principles and expectations of patriarchy which if unexplored and unconsidered may continue to shape the power dynamics experienced by women. Central to the work of feminists is the aim of helping women to gain a sense of worth, and to be recognised as valuable persons in their own right. In the context of this project, of relevance is the acknowledgement that recognition and value for women may be outside of traditional gender role expectations as shaped by patriarchal values. It therefore provides an opportunity to reflect on the at times conflicting role of women in maintaining, and challenging, the discourse connected to the traditional gender roles of women, such as motherhood.

In her personal reflections on being childfree, Carolyn Morell (Morell, 1994) identified a silence in the research at the time of her writing and in the wider media; she described the lack of voice and inspiration for childfree women. She articulated this as "being childless means simultaneously to be reminded of your second-rate life and to be ignored. As I grew into my middle years I went to the midlife literature for information and inspiration. What I found is that writers and researchers simply assume all adult women are mothers." (Morell, 1994, p.xv). One aspect of assuming that all adult women are (or would wish to be) mothers, is the assumption that 'real women' are mothers. My research supports that which Morell suggested; that there are but few people talking about women "having viable lives without children of their own" (Morell, 1994, p.1). The absence in the literature highlights a

gap in our understanding of what it means for a childfree woman to take a valuable place in society, to have personal agency and feel heard and represented. This project therefore directly addresses this gap in the research. Whilst Morells' commentary is twenty years old now, it seems her observations are echoed in the later research including this project, connecting to aspects of gender, power and alienation.

Qualitative research on being childfree by choice

American researchers Amy Blackstone and Mahala Dyer Stewart (2012) explored the decision not to parent from a feminist sociology perspective. Mirroring similar demographic trends as observed in the UK, they noted that women (and men) in the US were less likely to opt to birth or raise children than previously, observing that by 2006 20% of women aged 40-44 did not have children; an increase of 10% since 1976. They identified four key areas of existing research; firstly the development of research in this as an area of study and how the focus had shifted away from childlessness to the distinction of voluntary childlessness or choosing to be childfree; secondly the main sets of explanations offered for being childfree; thirdly how ideas of deviance and stigma connected with being childfree; and finally the research done on childfree adults as they age. The authors positioned the research they reviewed in this field as originating with the second wave feminists of the 1970s. They saw that much of the early research framed being childfree as a form of deviance; that over time, the focus had shifted, moving towards demographic interest around the factors leading to choosing not to parent, or the consequences of such a decision over the lifespan. Additionally, they considered the literature around being childfree in the context of

challenging assumptions around gender. As this enquiry was focused on explorations of how

childfree women talk about and construct their experience of being childfree (albeit in the

UK, rather than the US), I was able to build on Blackstone et al's insights in this project.

However, I felt it was worth noting that the rationales given for being childfree identified in

the literature included "freedom from childcare responsibility and greater opportunity for

self-fulfilment and spontaneous mobility" (Houseknecht, 1987 cited in Blackstone et al). A

later study (Carmichael and Whittaker, 2007, cited in Blackstone et al) discovered the

following reasons cited by childfree women; "an aversion to the lifestyle changes that come

with parenthood, an explicit rejection of the maternal role, selfishness, and either feeling

unsuited, or proficient but unwilling to take on the role of parent." Perhaps of most

relevance in the Blackstone article was the thinking done around deviance and stigma. What

was clear was that the literature bore out differences in the perceptions of 'otherness'

between those who are parents versus those who are not. For example, (Copur and

Koropeckyj-Cox, 2010, cited in Blackstone et al) showed that parents were perceived as

warmer than non-parents, and that couples who were perceived to be unlikely to become

parents were viewed more negatively than those who were perceived to be more likely

(Koropeckyj-Cox et al. 2007, cited in Blackstone et al). One interesting observation made

was that when race is considered in how childfree women are viewed, it seemed as though

there was greater difference in favourableness between the perception of mothers and

non-mothers from a Black African-American background, than between the perceptions of

White American mothers and non-mothers. Therefore, the Blackstone et al research

suggested that if there was negativity levied towards white non-mothers, there appeared to

be even more negativity levied towards black women in the same situation; thereby

suggesting a relative safeness offered to the white woman to express her differences in

contrast to those with other racial backgrounds. It was therefore important to recognise how this imbalance impacted on the limited research undertaken so far; that a white woman was seemingly 'safer' to speak of her experience in contrast to a non-white woman. Therefore a criticism of the existing research was of only exploring the experiences of white women due to their increased participation, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of the 'whitewash' of psychological research. In many ways, this mirrors a critique of earlier psychological research, only rather than the research being done by men, about men, feminist research (including this piece) was often done by white women, about white women.

Blackstone et al considered the ways in which childfree women manage any 'stigma' in connection to their 'deviant' status. Early research done by Veevers (1975, cited in Blackstone et al) identified two key strategies adopted by heterosexual voluntarily childless women; to either conform (e.g. through harnessing narratives of being open to adoption); or to express moral views at direct odds with motherhood. Much later, Park (2002, cited in Blackstone et al) identified further strategies used by childfree women to manage stigma associated with being childfree. These techniques ranged from defensive or reactive (such as identifying as something other than childfree), to proactive (such as redefining 'childlessness' in a positive way). Blackstone et al identified how technology provided another route to managing stigma; recognising the role of online communities for the childfree. Indeed, it was through these forums and communities that I was able to connect with the majority of my research participants, but also through these groups that

participants described gaining a sense of belonging, compassion and validation they otherwise struggled to experience in day to day life.

In 'Choosing Childlessness', Kristin Park (2002) explored the motivations of women, and men, for choosing childlessness. As a sociologist she framed the observable changes in demographics as an effect of social change on individual behaviour, such as the changing ideologies of women's roles, of increased access to higher education, and greater opportunities in the world of work. Additionally, she reflected on how changing attitudes to the notion of 'family' impacted on the capacity for people to become parents; noting that the raising of children was not limited to within the parameters of heterosexual marriage. However, despite these changes, she also acknowledged the continued experience of tension between parents and non-parents in regard to perceived imbalances in the allocation of benefits and expressed evaluations of social value (Belkin, 2000; Burkett 2000; Lawlor, 2000). In the context of continued pronatalism; "an ideology that 'implies encouragement of all births as conducive to individual, family, and social wellbeing" (pp. 375) she stated that many men and women engaged in information control and stigma management in order to manage their "deviant identities" (pp. 375). In terms of motivations towards childlessness, she observed that women, more than men, were often influenced by the observed parental models of significant others such as their own parents or within their social networks, frequently producing fear or anxiety in connection to the experience of parenting. Park noted the emotional content of these motives; yet the participants rationalised their decision as a means to an end goal of a happier life, by avoiding the perceived negative outcomes of the parenting experience. Additionally, Park identified that

many women perceived motherhood as compromising on career and leisure identities that were currently experienced as satisfying and something to be continued. Building on the work of Park (2002) Blackstone et al (2012) recognised the childfree movement as one responding to an experience of being stigmatised, and a challenge to the characterisation of their actions as being deviant. Perhaps connecting to a perception of deviance there appeared to be a tension between the social perceptions held on adult development and the wellbeing observed under research conditions within adult groups. For example, "childless adults [were] widely regarded as lonelier, less happy and well-adjusted, and more likely to suffer from psychological disorders than parents" (LaMastro, 2001; Park, 2002). The Blackstone et al research addressed findings connected to the childfree in older age. What became clear was in challenge to the common trope of the 'lonely childless person', the research suggested that there are few, if any negative consequences for these people connected to their childlessness (Rempel, 1985; Wu and Hart, 2002; Silverstein, Conroy et al, 2002). Rather it suggested that childfree adults were adaptive in their creation of strong support networks; raising interesting questions around the notion of 'what is family'. In this enquiry I have the opportunity to consider the constructions of family and the role of the childfree in family life, challenging the traditional view of the nuclear family unit, and acknowledging the different ways in which childfree adults contributed to society and community.

The Blackstone et al (2012) research therefore provided a bridge between that which had been theorised in psychoanalytic terms, and that which had been observed sociologically. Identifying as having chosen to be childfree was something which had previously been

classified as deviance and therefore treated as a social threat to be defended against. The existing research suggested that where core differences were perceived, such as those associated with gender, sex or power, strategies were employed to protect the self. Where the literature has not yet gone, and where this enquiry takes the research further, is to consider current psychological theory and sociological understandings of being childfree through choice in the context of the narratives of those very women these ideas sought to describe.

When couples described their choice to be childfree, they often traced their commitment to this choice to their childhood or adolescent perceptions of parenthood. Participants described the parenting role as "monotonous, unrewarding, a sacrifice of control... and a threat to one's personal identity" (Nave-Herz, 1989, cited in Gold & Wilson, 2002). However, in their 1998 couples' study, McAllister and Clarke described a continuum of decision making; i.e. that for many couples this was a process, rather than "a once-and-for-all event." (McAllister & Clarke, 1998, p.27). Both these pieces of research were completed using data gathered from heterosexual couples, presumably raised by heterosexual parents. My interest was piqued around the extent to which observed gender roles featured in the construction of these decisions. What the research did not expand on was the difference (if any) between male perceptions of parenting (by mothers or fathers) and the female experience of the same. Building on the psychoanalytic ideas previously discussed, I was left wondering if the perceptions of monotony and threat to self was an interpretation of the actions of a mother who struggled with being 'left'. Given the oft-punitive social experience of choosing to be childfree, the question of how do women talk about this decision-making

process remains open to be explored. Additionally, my research considers the ways in which, as Blackstone et al suggested, strategies change in response to the perceived safety of the situation or narrative.

Quantitative research on being childfree by choice

The statistical data suggested that in the UK not only are fewer women (as a percentage of the population) having children and the average number of children born to each woman is falling, but the mortality rate is reducing and therefore more women (whether as mothers are not) are living longer (ONS, 2013). More often than not, women have been viewed as the primary carers of the very young and the very old (Tindall et al, 2012). This means that the changes in UK demographics are likely to have a significant impact on the experiences of women.

Whilst the ONS data (2013) evidenced that fewer women are having children than previously, this data does not clarify the proportion of women who are childfree by choice. A number of studies have sought to identify the 'kind' of woman who is more likely to be childfree by choice. For example, Tanturri and Mencarini (2008) surveyed childless Italian women, identifying that within their surveyed population approximately a third were childfree by choice. They identified that these women chose to be childfree, and that they did not consider their decision to be one which would be swayed by generous family-

friendly policies. These women were also identified by the researchers as a cohort who were described as less religious, to come from smaller families, and that they were less bound by traditional constructs such as marriage. This research mirrored outcomes from other research which suggested that women who lived in urban areas and described themselves as less religious are more likely to be childfree (DeOllos & Kapinus, 2002; Heaton et al, 1992; cited in Shapiro, 2014). These research conclusions are important in relation to the present study, in that whilst the researchers observed that these factors correlated with being a childfree woman, they do not show the extent to which the choice to be childfree was influenced by, or conversely, contributed to, these factors.

In trying to identify the 'kind' of woman who chooses to be childfree, Avison and Furnham (2015) used 'Big Five' personality traits alongside various other socio-demographic characteristics to explore the desire for parenthood. Although their survey was not limited by participant nationality or location, it was written in English and limited to those over the age of 16, thereby orienting the results towards Western attitudes of adults. Their research bore out that of Tanturri and Mencarini (2008), identifying that low levels of religiosity correlated with low desire for parenthood. Additionally, they also identified that childfree respondents scored comparatively more highly in the trait of Independence, and lower in Agreeableness and Extraversion traits than parents and those who desired children. Their research sought to identify a correlation between childfreeness and other observable factors, and thereby adopted a reductionist epistemological stance inconsistent with a piece of feminist social constructionist research. However, it also stood out to me as a valuable

contribution to the sparse body of quantitative research which was grounded in a recognition of the personal preferences and differences of the individual respondents.

Mixed methods approaches to research on being childfree by choice

In considering the extent to which a woman has choice over her childfreeness, the work of Bos et al (2005) recognised the social and cultural impact of population policy and political approaches to reproductive health. In their review of qualitative research undertaken in non-Western and Western countries, they identified trends with stark differences in approach. They concluded that in the 'developing' world, approaches to reproductive health were oriented towards family planning, anti-conception and abortion; childlessness either through choice or not, is a neglected topic. They suggested several rationales for this, based on cultural assumptions. However, they noted that in Western countries, the approach to reproductive health was far more oriented towards choice and action in the face of infertility, the availability of treatments and the promotion of success rates of new technology. The Bos et al research therefore suggested a socio-cultural dynamic around reproductive choice; that the background cultural narrative to my research was one of choice, but a choice which valued pro-natlism and favoured the elimination of infertility. To be childfree by choice was therefore a direct challenge to that narrative, which connected to other research around deviance and being 'othered'. Bos et al also recognised the difference in cultural attitudes towards being childfree in different countries, acknowledging the taboo nature of not having children in certain cultures and nationalities. The suggested impact of this was one of creating a sense of shame, mistrust and silence around this

subject. Whilst my research does not directly address this point, I have observed that all my respondents were white British, which resonated with Bos et al's observations of cultural attitudes and approaches to childfreeness.

Previous studies have explored aspects of wellbeing and life satisfaction in people who are childfree (Callan, 1987; Somers, 1993; McMullin & Marshall, 1996; Park, 2005), with the outcome that the results were mixed and inconclusive (Rothrauff and Cooney, 2008). The number of studies of this kind (and the funding provided) indicated to me a persistence to 'prove' or find an answer to the 'problem' of choosing to be childfree which was not forthcoming. The ambivalent outcomes of these research endeavours were suggestive of a theory that human development was fluid and guided by human agency; that in adulthood living a fulfilling life may not be linked to being a parent or not; rather that it is possible to live a fulfilling life irrespective of your childbearing status.

In undertaking a critical review of the childfree literature, what became clear to me was the clear and stark space for research from the perspective of the women this research sought to understand. Whilst there had been endeavours to understand and theorise being childfree, what this seemed to have achieved was at best to identify correlations of factors, and at worst to problematize the act of being a woman who chooses not to birth a child. What this indicated to me was an assumption of parenting to be the 'norm' and to effectively marginalise a growing minority of the population. In exploring being childfree, the research had in many ways perpetuated the 'othering' of childfree women, and to exert control over women's bodies and reproductive choices. As I explored the literature, I

concluded that there had been a lack of research from the lived experience of women who

identified as being childfree by choice, and it was this absence which I sought to redress. My

research therefore makes an important and impactful contribution to Counselling

Psychology and the wider social sciences.

Design, Method and Ethics

Research Design

The fundamental aim of this research project is to show how, through enquiry, new knowledge has been created and interpreted. In this section I illustrate my research design and methodology, and outline the approach and care taken with regard to research ethics. I demonstrate how I developed this project from the initial concept, through to design and then implementation, taking into account insights and considerations as they emerged. I begin by outlining the aims of my research and subsequent research questions. I then expand on the research approach adopted, including the rationale for this choice, and the rationale for deselecting alternative possibilities.

The principle research question for this project is to explore how being childfree through choice is constructed by British women who self-identify with this term. As part of this exploration I consider how being childfree through choice influences participant's views of themselves, impacts key aspects of their lives, and how they talk about living childfree; in essence, the processes, constructions and actions involved in being childfree by choice.

I share a number of commonalities with the women at the centre of this research as I am a British woman, am within the same age range as the participants, and identify as childfree through choice. I recognise that I also hold a number of positions of privilege, in that I am white, cis-gender, able-bodied, identify as heterosexual, have been well educated, and was

raised in a stable middle-class family. Increasingly, and particularly since experiencing

divorce, working with survivors of domestic violence, and a wide diversity of clients through

my work in NHS primary care and the charity sector, I have found my personal politics,

research and critical thinking are framed by perspectives of feminism and social justice. I

feel it is also important to position the language I have chosen to use throughout my

research. Unless I have quoted directly from another author or researcher, I use the term

'childfree' over 'childless' or other similar-meaning terms. One of the areas I intend for my

research to challenge is in regard to perceptions of the childfree woman as being

incomplete or lacking in the fulfilment of her potential. By referring to women as child*less*

the language infers a comparison to another woman, who by default must be a mother, and

that the childfree woman is *less* than her. I consider this to be the antithesis of a woman

having agency over what she believes to be right for her life, identity and body.

In his paper, "Sturdy Roots for the Graceful Eucalyptus", Peter Martin describes the

emotional and intellectual search for a cohesive and lucid framework upon which a

researcher may pin their work (Martin, 2005). He argues that to fail to identify a suitable

way of approaching research from the outset, the credibility of the work may be threatened

either philosophically, academically or personally (e.g. if the researcher fails to consider

their own needs in this process). It is therefore imperative that I consider the

epistemological paradigms which my research question infers and seek to identify clearly

and robustly a design methodology which fits coherently within these concepts.

Rationale for the research design

My main research question; to explore how being childfree by choice is constructed by British women who self-identify with this term, is primarily concerned with exploring experiences, narratives and actions. Therefore, I chose to adopt a qualitative over a quantitative research approach, consistent with the paradigmatic differences identified by Braun and Clarke (2013). They suggest that qualitative approaches provide a research lens to examine data as words rather than numbers; to consider complexity and contradictions in the data whilst also making sense of patterns of meaning within the data, without seeking to generate generalisable 'truths'. I was particularly drawn to a qualitative approach which provided the opportunity to generate a theory from the data (i.e. a 'bottom up' approach), as opposed one which tested hypotheses or 'deducted' theory, which it seemed to me had been a feature of the existing literature.

Through this research I have not sought to discover or validate a universal 'truth' about all women who are childfree through choice. Rather, I was interested in connecting with the experience of sense-making by women whose lives are intimately influenced by the dynamic ways in which they, and the culture in which they live, continually construct meaning around their childfree-ness. I have experienced first-hand the impact of some of the harmful 'universal truths' perpetuated about childfree women in the UK, and I was therefore drawn to balance this experience by conducting research aimed at illuminating lived experience and sense-making on an individual basis. It was the recognition that meaning is relationally

constructed that lead me to take a social constructionist position (Burr, 2003), and which I will expand on later in this chapter.

Consistent with the principles of qualitative research, particularly when underpinned by feminist research principles, I have made use of and valued the contribution of personal reflexivity throughout the project. Reflexivity has acted as a vehicle for me to recognise and attempt to hold myself accountable for aspects of power and positionality, not only in my role as researcher, but also connected to the degree to which I consider myself an 'insider' researcher. I identify as a woman who is childfree through choice, and so approach this research as an 'insider', i.e. I consider myself to share some similarities with the research participants. However, I also recognise that my role of 'researcher' has placed me in an 'outsider' position, and that in this potentially conflicted role, there has been a tension to negotiate and manage in order to critically reflect upon potentially emotive experiences.

The philosophical substructure of my research consists of three elements; paradigm, ontology and epistemology. The paradigm, or the world view through which knowledge is filtered (Kuhn, 1962 cited in Leavy, 2014) is feminist, constructivist. The ontological position, or philosophical belief system about the nature of social reality, or what can be known inherent in qualitative research is that knowledge is built and continues to be built through the progressive pursuit of research and inquiry; there is a recognition that there is not an absolute truth to be discovered, but rather there are multiple truths dependent on context, experience and perspective, and it is this subjectivity that is acknowledged and valued (Leavy, 2014). Leavy (2014) suggests that if the ontological question is 'what can be known?'

the epistemological question is 'who can be the knower?'. In qualitative research, the 'knower' or researcher, work with participants to co-create knowledge, and are not considered to be neutral or objective observers. Rather, researchers acknowledge the impact of their personal, professional and political affiliations influence all aspects of the research endeavour.

The praxis of this research, i.e. the practice I have adopted to complete it, required me to identify the genre (grounded theory), and the research methods appropriate for this genre for data collection (focus group interview followed by semi-structured interviews). My project draws from a collection of theoretical perspectives including; post-positivism, symbolic interactionism, social constructionism, feminism, intersectionality theory and queer theory. As a grounded theory project, the aim of this work was to develop theory inductively out of the research process; i.e. a theory built directly out of the research data. The methodology section provides details of the plan for the research, combining methods and theory, including how considerations of ethics and values shaped the study and the actions taken. As a qualitative researcher and Counselling Psychologist, considerations from a social justice standpoint are central to this work, and as such ethical considerations have been linked to preventing harm or exploitation of the participants, plus attention has been paid to the power dynamics inherent in the research; those of privilege and biases.

"We are all interpretive bricoleurs stuck in the present working against the past as we move into a politically charged and challenging future." (Norman K. Denzin, 2010, p.15 cited in Leavy, 2014, p. 5). This quote particularly resonated with me; I found that in this enquiry it

has indeed felt as though I was building and crafting, working with the foundations, insights and thoughts of past social scientists and researchers. I have then taken what the participants generously left me in their data, to create further theory and insight relevant to the subject, heightened by the increasingly politically charged and evolving future. It therefore made sense that at times I was struck by how dated some of the reading I was doing seemed to me, particularly with regard to theory and views of gender, and how tense I felt with regard to 'getting it right' as an insider-researcher and someone who fundamentally believes in the right to live with respect and dignity however one gender-presents or identifies.

Post-positivism

Post-positivism, as with positivism, retains the belief that there is an observable external reality and that a universal truth exists, but puts forward the assumption that it is never possible to discover and represent these fully or with certitude. Post-positivism recognises that our knowledge of the world is socially constructed, and as such, bias is unavoidable on an individual and cultural level. Although accepted that it is never possible to get to the complete and accurate truth, post-positivism aims to get as close to this as possible, through careful research design and methodologies. It is from a post-positivist frame that the original grounded theory approach evolved, spearheaded by Glaser and Strauss (1967, cited in Leavy, 2014). Grounded theory was developed as a systematic approach to qualitative data collection and analysis, in order to develop theory from the ground up, rather than by deductions derived from hypothesis testing. In this way, this post-positivist approach to

grounded theory accepted the existence of a 'truth' to be analysed, explained and predicted.

Social Constructionism

The psychologist Vivien Burr (Tindall et al, 2012, p.217) describes social constructionism as having four key tenets. First, that "a critical stance [is adopted] towards taken-for-granted knowledge; second, "the importance of historical and cultural specificity" to understanding; third, she emphasizes knowledge as sustained by social processes; and fourth, that knowledge and social action go other". Social constructionism can be viewed as a framework, within which it is possible for many approaches to sit, including grounded theory.

The social constructionism approach came into use in the early 1960s as an alternative to the traditionally positivist experimental research designs (Leavy, 2014). The concept of social constructionism first took hold in the US after the publication of Berger and Luckmann's (1966, cited in Leavy, 2014) book *The Social Construction of Reality*. In this book they argued that all our knowledge and understandings are socially constructed, by which they mean that we create our own realities through social interactions, relationships and experiences. They explain that the ontological perspective of reality in social constructionism is that it is context, i.e. socially relative, and that therefore many realities can simultaneously exist. On this basis, if reality is constructed, then so is knowledge and meanings. Additionally, as this awareness is socially constructed in relation to others and

the world around us, it is constantly open to negotiation, fluid and changeable. This clearly

then has implications for how we consider information and insights from the past, as how

we view this information is through the lens of interpretation, and interpretations come

about as a process of ever-changing meaning making dependent on context, culture and

community. Therefore, the data studied as part of the research does not reveal anything,

rather it is the way the researcher makes use of the data which reveals a meaning. This

meaning is merely 'a' meaning which was created whilst interacting with the data and their

social environment, rather than 'the' meaning inherent within the data. As Leavy (2014)

suggests, social construction highlights the way in which identity and self-worth is socially

created and is something in which we are constantly engaged in as individuals, shaped and

moulded by continual testing and reappraising of these ideas in the context of others and

the culture in which we live.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism "stresses that people create, negotiate, and change social meanings

through the process of interaction" (Sandstrom et al, 2006, cited in Leavy, 2014). Our past

interactions and experiences shape our current experiences and our predictions about the

future. This package of past and present is constantly evolving, with feedback from our

interactions and environment shaping how we interact socially and institutionally,

influencing the meaning we make and the actions we take. It is a process, rather than a

strategy or set plan. Leavy (2014) suggests that qualitative research methods appropriate

for both social constructionism and symbolic interactionism are ethnography, grounded

theory and narrative analysis, because they allow themes to be constructed from the data; thereby preserving the individual experiences and realities. She suggests that these methods "more readily address the question of how people make meaning out of their experiences in their lives and do not allow the researcher's assumptions and own set of meanings to dictate the findings that emerge from the data." (p. 87)

Feminist theories

Feminist theories evolved, at least in part, as a response to the critique of more traditional scientific methods of inquiry which tended to exclude women, and in so doing, to deny them the opportunity to contribute to the body of theory and knowledge (Anderson, 1995, cited in Leavy 2014). There is often an association between feminist theories and critical theory (the way in which the values of the researcher and those studied impact the social world), although not always. Where critical theory and feminist theories generally overlap is regarding the objective of turning thought into action (Marshal and Rossman, 2010, cited in Leavy, 2014), such as by focussing on the issues faced by women and other often marginalised groups. One of the core premises of feminist theory is the understanding that ways of knowing, or epistemologies, are constantly evolving as both the body of knowledge, and scope of research grows. Leavy (2014) cautions that as a consequence of adopting a feminist lens, increased awareness of the social complexities inherent in the study increases the complexity of the problem being explored. In this way, I consider this project to be feminist in its orientation; I have sought to turn thought into action, for the promotion and empowerment of women. I have also used qualitative methods grounded in the lived

experience and narratives of women, and that yes, indeed, I not only expected that this project would increase the level of complexity of the problem studied but considered it an objective of the study to do so.

Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory is an approach to qualitative research developed by US sociologists Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s. This approach was developed in response to what was felt at the time to be a predominantly essentialist focus by sociologists, oriented towards testing 'grand' theories. (Braun & Clarke, 2013) Glaser and Strauss aimed to cultivate a contextual research approach, focused on giving rise to theories which were relevant to the lives of the people being studied. Glaser and Strauss eventually went on to establish their own different methods of Grounded Theory, and several other approaches to Grounded Theory have been developed, spanning the epistemological spectrum, including an approach devised by the social-constructionist sociologist, Kathy Charmaz (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz studied under the direction of Strauss, and like him, her version of Grounded Theory methodology is situated within the symbolic interactionist tradition. In so doing, Charmaz's approach considers not only the implicit meanings and views of participants, but also the finished grounded theory of researchers, to be constructions of reality. Her approach to Grounded Theory places an emphasis on the processes and actions within the data central to the analysis; thereby allowing the researcher to develop creative and interpretative understandings of what they see within the data. Charmaz considers Grounded Theory "to offer a way of learning about the worlds we study and a method for developing theories to

understand them" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 17). My research questions are directly focused on the processes and actions of participants around being childfree by choice; how being this way is constructed, how this influences participants' views of themselves, the impact on key aspects of their lives and how they talk about their choice to be childfree. It was the emphasis Charmaz's approach places on developing nuanced and contextualised understandings of social processes which led me to select this methodology. I felt that it offered a way of connecting deeply with the narratives of the women who contributed to this study, and developing a contextualised way of understanding living childfree by choice.

Deselection of other methodological approaches

The central research question for this project; to explore how being childfree by choice is constructed by British women who self-identify with this term, is by its nature concerned with exploring constructions and actions in the narratives of the participants. This primary focus on constructions therefore suggested a qualitative approach, oriented towards a social constructionist (Burr, 2003) epistemology. In order to respond to the key question, I needed to select a research methodology compatible with the suggestion that our worlds are constructions grounded in experience and interpretation. As identified above, within the social constructionist frame, several qualitative research methods would be appropriate, most commonly Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Thematic Analysis, Narrative Analysis or Grounded Theory.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Initially I considered adopting IPA for this project. I found it appealing on a number of levels, firstly as a qualitative methodology designed to explore experience, understandings and perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). I was particularly drawn to the focus of this approach on the lived experience and meaning making of the participant, looking at what was being communicated beyond the explicit words. However, as the project unfolded, and in reflection following early progression exams, my research methodology was revised. As the main research question for the study solidified around how being childfree by choice is constructed by women who identify with this term, the limitations of IPA became clearer. IPA is oriented around interpretation of experience and the ways in which an individual reflects and interprets their own lived experience. It is therefore oriented around the meanings made by the individual. Exploring constructions and actions in the research narratives required the capacity to examine areas of commonality both *across* and *between* accounts, as well as areas of discord. Additionally, as the focus of the research crystallised around constructions and actions; i.e. what was *happening* for the participants, and what they were *doing*, rather than looking to describe their lived experience, the incompatibility of IPA as an approach for this project became clear. Given the approach's focus on lived experience and the limits within this approach to look at differences within accounts, I identified that IPA was not a best-fit methodology for the research question I intended to answer.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) is a method for categorising themes and patterns of meaning across a set of data. Although this method of data analysis offers a great deal of flexibility in terms of research question and sample size, in the context of my research question, it did not appear to be an appropriate approach for this study. The main reason for deselecting this approach was the focus this methodology places on patterns across datasets. In so doing it seemed to me to limit the scope to explore aspects of commonality or contradiction within individual accounts, and as the authors acknowledge, the individual 'voices' of participants can get lost. In my explorations of the literature, it had seemed to me that the voice of the childfree woman had been somewhat overlooked, and therefore, I felt very strongly that a methodology incompatible with nuance and complexity was not appropriate for this project, and I deselected it as an approach.

Narrative Analysis

Narrative Analysis has been described as a "family of qualitative methods for making sense of 'storied' data" (Smith, B. in Braun & Clarke, 2013). These approaches to qualitative analysis focus on lived experience, meaning making and actions, so potentially had a lot to offer this project. However, unlike other approaches such as Grounded Theory or Thematic Analysis, they seek to keep the 'story' of the narrative intact, rather than breaking it into fragments as these other approaches are wont to do. Whilst I recognised a number of strengths of Narrative Analysis in responding to the question of how being childfree by choice is constructed by British women, I also held a number of concerns. Narrative Analysis

potentially provided an opportunity to explore what each participant's story communicated and responded to for the individual respondent. However, as Smith (in Braun & Clarke, 2013) acknowledged, in practice this approach rarely deals with the interactions in people's everyday storytelling; rather there is a co-construction of a story between respondent and researcher. As I reflected on my approach to and intentions behind this research project, I recognised that I felt strongly that I wanted to select a methodology which placed a value and focus on the actions of the respondents as far as possible. Whilst Narrative Analysis held an attraction, it held risks too. Given my insider researcher position, selecting a methodology of potential co-construction seemed to risk diluting the analytical power of the research. Rather, I felt drawn to a methodology which had structure designed to place the focus on the participants' constructed worlds and what was happening for them. It was for this reason that I felt Grounded Theory offered a closer fit to this research project.

Phenomenology

"Phenomenology is rooted in the notion that all of our knowledge and understanding of the world comes from our experiences" (Hein & Austin, 2001, cited in Leavy, 2014). "At their core, there are similarities between phenomenology and symbolic interactionism in that both focus on the ways our engagement with society affects our worldviews. However, whereas symbolic interactionism focuses on the ways that social interactions affect our meaning, phenomenology takes the broader aim of studying experiences… and the ways in which we experience things and the meanings these experiences create for us" (Leavy, 2014). Therefore, it seems to me that in relation to this project, the difference would be as

follows: in a social exchange, symbolic interactionism looks at how that exchange shapes the meaning made by the individual, however, phenomenology would take a broader view, and look at how previous experiences combined with this experience shape the meaning and behaviour of the individual. Therefore, in this study the focus takes a symbolic interactionism position; considering the question 'what's going on here', whereas a phenomenological position would require a more interpretative gaze. This is an important differential, in that in my decision to move away from IPA to Grounded Theory, I recognised that my research interests lay in exploring the contrasts and consistencies within and across the data, i.e. considering the constructions from the same voice as well as across different voices, which a social constructionist Grounded Theory approach allowed for. However, a phenomenological position places the focus on the assumptions and implications narrated by different voices. It seemed to me that a symbolic interactional approach provided a greater opportunity to stay close to the nuances and complexity of an individual's constructions. As I reflected on my research proposal it therefore became clear that my project was primarily looking at the meanings made by individuals of the self in the context of society and culture. Therefore, a phenomenological approach would not best support this endeavour.

Research Methodology

Within this chapter I outline the methodology for this enquiry, as well as consider the project from a critical viewpoint. I recap on the aims of this thesis and considered to what extend the research approach is compatible with the objectives of the project. I outline the research process undertaken and reflect upon the rationale for the decisions taken during this process, including reflecting on the suitableness of my sample, sample size and transcription methods. I conclude by outlining the process of analysis and expanding upon the rationale for this approach.

Aims of this research

The central research question for this project is to explore how being childfree through choice is constructed by British women who self-identify with this term. In essence, this question invites a consideration into that which the existing literature has mainly sought to theorise or explain from the outside. Additionally, as part of this enquiry I have also considered how being childfree through choice influences participant's views of themselves, the impact on key aspects of their lives, and how they talk about their choice to be childfree.

To begin, I recognised I needed to get a better understanding of what being 'childfree through choice' meant from a social and cultural perspective. I had my own preconceived ideas, but to develop my research idea further, I decided to run a focus group to explore the conceptual understanding of the term 'childfree through choice'. I elected to use a focus

group for this stage of the data gathering process as this environment can often provide an open and supportive environment in which to explore sensitive issues, as well as providing the opportunity to hear a variety of views and opinions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Through contacting a number of community groups I was able to gather together a group of adult women volunteers relatively easily; all of whom were keen to share their thoughts and ideas on the subject. It was my intention that the insights gained from running the focus group would then inform my actions in furthering this research project.

Research Ethics

After participation in the research activities, all participants were invited to ask questions, and to elect to withdraw from the research (within the parameters of the research process). Additionally, they were provided with information signposting them to suitable organisations should they have wished to seek further information or support. It is also intended that the participants will be provided with a summarised presentation of my research for their own interest upon completion of the research project. Copies of the information sheet, consent form, focus group facilitators' guide and interview schedule can all be found in the appendices, alongside a copy of the UWE Faculty Research Ethics Committee (UWE FREC) approval.

Recruitment for the focus group

I began my recruitment for the focus group by contacting the Bristol Women's Voice and Bristol Fawcett feminist groups based in Bristol. These organisations shared details of my research with their members and invited replies. Additionally, I advertised an invitation to participate in the focus group on the BS5 Connect and UWE postgraduate online forums, as well as speaking at a Sunday Assembly community gathering. I identified these groups as appropriate as part of their purpose is to reflect on or provide notices about social issues. The focus group was relatively straightforward to garner interest for, suggesting this was a topic that was intriguing and culturally relevant. The main hurdles I found in facilitating this event were logistical; identifying a location which was convenient and affordable, as well as fitting around the busy social schedules of people during the summer. My intention was to recruit between five and eight women to participate in the focus group, and on the day the group totalled seven. Recommendations for the size of focus groups vary, however, Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 115) suggest that smaller groups work best in terms of generating a rich discussion and are easier to manage, and my experience certainly tallied with this suggestion.

Focus group participants

Seven women participated in the focus group ranging in age from 25 to 59 years (please see Appendix two for participant demographics). Other than identifying as a woman no other exclusion criteria were applied. One participant advised she had children, and the remaining six all advised

they believed they would be able to conceive. Three participants advised they have not wanted to have children, two wished to have children, and one was unsure.

The Focus Group

Den: "when I read your email 'childfree' it was like this weight had lifted off me"

The group was an all cis-female gathering; some of whom were mothers, some considered themselves to be childfree, and others childless. Initially my questions focused on what the participants understood by the term 'childfree by choice'. Additionally, I invited reflection on who might be included within the classification of being childfree, and the meaning and value of those who were childfree through choice.

I found that the focus group highlighted the need and appetite for dialogue around being childfree outside of the academic sphere. Beyond these insights, I was also struck by the powerful response to the choice of language I had used in the marketing materials for the group. Some participants remarked that they had not heard the term 'childfree by choice' before, and that this seemed to fit them so well that they would now use this as a way to describe themselves. A participant also mentioned how she had experienced a lightness, "as if a weight came off" when she read this term; that she felt validated. The focus group therefore supported my choice to continue to use this term over others such as 'voluntarily childless'.

The initial purpose of the focus group was to gather information to help clarify my research questions, as well as to learn more about how others might construct being 'childfree through choice'. The focus group provided narratives of a broad spectrum of experiences, as well as a space to begin to reflect on the political and cognitive processes around being childfree by choice. There was a recognition that for some women, there was a deep knowing that having children was just not for them and for others, a powerful avoidance. In hearing these accounts, I wondered how much active choice there was in following this life path. Other participants described a growing evolution of a decision; rather than seeing a childfree life as an end goal, some participants described a rather subtler drift through a series of micro-choices. Additionally, the role of culture and society was illuminated; questioning the notion that a woman has full and active choice over her body. The concept and construction of choice was therefore interesting to observe being discussed and negotiated in the group; at times experienced as instinct, sometimes deviance, or a preservation of a valued life path.

The focus group provided the starting point for reflections on constructing choice. It also gave me validation that my research topic was culturally relevant, highlighted the absence of a public conversation about being a woman who is childfree by choice, as well as suggested that the existing research was misaligned with the way that many childfree women understood their choices and their actions.

On a practical level, the focus group brought me into contact with helpful organisations where participants were willing and open to engage in academic research, as well as providing me with a valuable experience of organising, coordinating and structuring

research interventions. Additionally, reflecting on the experience of the focus group gave me the courage to pursue a topic I perceived as sensitive and one I had been shy to broach in my personal life, as well as to use these reflections to orient my questions for further research activity.

I felt the experience of holding the focus group was an invaluable way to start this research project. It provided me with the opportunity to test out the degree to which my research topic was relevant and of interest. An information sheet and process guide for the focus group can be found in the appendices. These documents provided some contextual background information for the participants as well as a suggested format for opening, facilitating and closing the event.

The focus group acted as an introductory activity to this emotive and little-researched subject area. It provided validation that this was a subject area people were interested in being involved in. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, it provided a wealth of insights around the lived experience of being childfree and encountering the childfree; impacts of and responses to political, social and cultural expectations around childbearing and womanhood. All of which helped me to reflect on and clarify my research questions, to focus the interviews to the research questions, and to select a compatible research methodology.

At the time of holding the focus group, my intention was to adopt IPA as a methodology. I knew my research interest was around exploring at a deep level, the experience of women who identified as being childfree by choice. Through reflecting on the content of the focus group with my research supervisor, I started to recognise the limitations of IPA in terms of being able to access the contrasts and contradictions within accounts. The focus group had given me an insight into the personal, complex and nuanced nature of being childfree by choice. In so doing, the participants helped me recognise the value of a piece of research oriented around the actions and constructions of being childfree by choice, and the analytical power a grounded theory approach could offer.

Whilst the data gathered from the focus group was rich, it contained contributions from women who did not self-identify as being childfree by choice. I therefore took the decision to use the insights from the focus group to hone my research questions and shape the semi-structured individual interviews, and not to use the data for initial coding and analysis. This decision was taken as I recognised that whilst the focus group generated data around ways of talking about the research subject and meaning making around this, it did not allow in-depth reflection of individual views or experiences. This is an acknowledged feature of focus group data (Braun and Clarke, 2013). However, I retained the transcript and my personal reflections from the focus group and was able to return to this data in the later stages of the analysis, for theoretical coding.

Recruitment for the interviews

Recruitment for the interviews was predominantly conducted using snowball advertising in online childfree community groups on Facebook such as 'The Childfree Choice', 'Childfree' and 'London Childfree' as well as via my own social media pages. Additionally, I continued to engage with the community groups initially approached for the focus group; UWE postgraduate forums, Bristol Fawcett, Bristol Women's Voice and Sunday Assembly and invited snowball recruitment via their membership.

During the recruitment phase of these interviews, I found it difficult to decline the generous offers of people who expressed an interest in the research but who were either outside of the age range or unable to attend an interview at a workable time or location. I was struck by how keen many women seemed to be to talk to me about their experience; and I feared that to decline their offer was to perhaps in effect continue the message that what they had to say, no one wanted to listen to. By keeping to the boundaries of my research, I was concerned that I risked continuing the dismissive attitude they faced from others in their lives. Grounded Theory methodology does not explicitly state the required number of interviews for a small study such as this; rather Charmaz emphasises working towards saturating categories, rather than data (Charmaz, 2014, p. 107). Therefore the objective of my interview recruitment was to initially recruit enough participants to craft coherent core categories upon which to develop my theory. I aimed to recruit between six and ten participants, and was successful in recording seven interviews in all.

Interview participants

Seven women were interviewed, ranging in age from 37 to 43 years (please see Appendix six for participant demographics). All the participants identified as White, able bodied, partnered and middle class (although two participants indicated coming from working class backgrounds). In terms of their identity as being childfree by choice, five participants advised they had not wanted children and believed they were able to conceive. One participants advised they had not wanted children and had a voluntary sterilisation, and another participant advised they did want children now but had wanted them in the past and believed they were able to conceive.

The Interviews

> *Louise: "I think anything like this is really valuable because there is so little understanding."*

Building on the insights and experiences gained through conducting the focus group, the next phase of the research involved a deeper exploration of the individual narratives of British women who identified as being childfree through choice. Given the limited nature of this research enquiry in terms of scope, time and length, with my supervision team I took the decision to set an age range of between 35 and 49 years for participants. This age range was proposed in the context of the ONS (2013) data. The ONS (2013) information suggested

that between these years the majority of women who become mothers have their children. Additionally, the literature supported the assumption that women in this age range would experience increased levels of prejudice connected to their childfree-ness (Ngoubene-Atioky et al, 2017; Mollen, 2006; Park, 2005; Vinson, Mollen & Smith, 2010; Yang, 2012).

I was delighted with the level of response to my recruitment efforts, both in terms of response by possible participants as well as feedback from people interested in my work. As I recruited, I observed that despite the number of responses received, in practice all the participants identified as white British, with the majority being in heterosexual partnerships and describing themselves as middle-class. This bore out the assumption I posited in response to the Blackstone (2012) research, i.e. that whilst there is an observable negativity levied towards white non-mothers, there appears to be greater negativity levied towards non-white women in the same situation; thereby suggesting a relative safeness offered to the white woman to express her differences in contrast to those with other racial backgrounds. I am aware that this may limit the impact of this research enquiry to some degree, however I found it interesting to observe this in practice, despite casting a wide net during the recruitment phase.

Semi-structured interviews were used for this second phase of data collection, taking place either face-to-face or via Skype. This format of qualitative interviewing offers the opportunity to explore understandings, perceptions and constructions that participants have a personal stake in; thereby providing often rich and detailed accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In preparation for the interviews, I crafted a semi-structured interview pro-

forma. The interview questions mapped to the focus group discussions and were also shaped by my main research question; 'how being childfree through choice is constructed by British women who self-identify with this term'. As with the focus group, an illustrative information sheet and interview schedule is included in the appendices.

Transcription

Both the focus group and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Great effort was made to record what was shared, through ensuring that to the best of my ability I captured the language used, the pauses and phrasing of each passage of narrative. I recognised that an audio-recording of the research events could only ever be a representation of what happened, and therefore the transcriptions of the focus and interviews are constructions I have created based on my audio recording and experience of the events.

In keeping with the requirements of the BPS Code of Ethics in respect of privacy and confidentiality, the participants of both the focus group and interviews were invited to choose a pseudonym. They were referred to by this name (rather than their actual name) throughout the discussions and in the transcription. It was important to preserve their anonymity in order to restrict the scope of disclosure of personal information beyond what is necessary by law. In accordance with this principle, any identifying information (such as locations, employers, club memberships) has been referred to generically, rather than specifically. Each interview was audio recorded, and each interview was transcribed by hand by me. I considered outsourcing the transcription, but I felt a pull towards completing the

transcription personally. As I reflected on this, I was glad to have made this decision; I felt closer to the data and I was able to recall the nuances of the interview and my personal responses to the participant's contributions. I believe the immersive nature of transcribing these interviews brought a more intimate understanding of the narrative, and in doing so, I felt better placed to look at what's going on; identifying ways in which the data contrasted and supported the constructions contained within, both across and within each piece of data. I found the transcription process fascinating to reflect upon. At times I found that I was able to transcribe with ease; that the words flowed. However, at other times, I was hesitant to immerse myself in the data. I recall one such example early in my transcription of Alice's recording. I had started to transcribe her interview, breaking off for a few days partway through. I was not able to articulate why, but I really struggled to return to the interview transcription. Upon doing so, and this required some courage and steeliness on my part, it was to return to a part of the interview which touched on a painful childhood experience. At the time of breaking away from the transcription I did not recall this was what came next in her narrative. However, this hesitancy acted as a reminder to me of the vulnerability of a child to harm; and the recalled fear connected to this vulnerability contained within the dialogue I was listening to. Reflecting in this way reminded me of the need for self-care throughout this process; that the narratives contained intimate, raw reflections, and that I need to take care not only of these narratives, but also of myself. The transcription process was therefore slow at times with a stop-start nature to it. Recognising early on that this was a process in and of itself I took care to reflect on my own experience during this time. I noticed that a pausing or hesitancy frequently coincided with times when the narrative moved closer to my own experience; and that the pause offered an opportunity for me to pull away from the data somewhat. This pulling away proved helpful

in that it gave me the opportunity to explore what was going on for me at these times; that I was finding the content of the data resonant or discordant with my own experiences, and therefore I needed to be able to process what was coming up for me before I could reengage fully with the material.

Taking the time to transcribe the interview data gave me the opportunity to reengage with the individual narratives, to start to think about the main premise of inductive grounded theory, to question 'what's going on here?'. However, whilst my attention was turning towards analysis, I noticed my thinking was more general and thematic, rather than grounded in the actual data themselves. To help me transition into a more iterative mind-set, I embarked on initial line-by-line coding.

Initial Coding

In line with Charmaz's (2014) guidance, my initial coding focused on selecting, separating and sorting data. This then allowed me to begin to make an analytic account of them. As I approached the initial coding, it felt as though my attempts to define what was happening in the data was slow, and at times I felt stuck. I was aware that the words I chose to capture the actions of what I saw in the data would not capture the perceived reality of my participants. My views and experiences influenced not only how I chose to select and separate the data, but also how I used words to construct the codes around these accounts. It was this awareness that introduced a hesitancy to my coding. To allow me to move forward in the face of this concern, I employed Charmaz's recommendation of line-by-line

coding. I tried hard to stay close to the action in each specific line and segment of data. As I got deeper into the data, I found that I enjoyed this interactive experience; that I started to ask questions of the data, which prompted me to make early memos about what I was seeing, thinking about and being struck by. As Charmaz (2014) states, "memos will form the core of your grounded theory", and I found the process of memo writing to be enormously helpful. This process helped me to craft categories grounded in the data, and to begin to weave an analytical fabric which underpinned the eventual grounded theory of this project.

Additionally, line-by-line coding helped me to manage what felt overwhelming at times. By breaking the data into bite sized chunks; just thinking about this line, at this time, I was able to notice comparisons within and between the data. I also noticed I developed a feeling of comfort towards the selected methodology, rather than feeling overwhelmed and daunted as I had at the start of this project. I started to discover that the use of grounded theory; identifying actions rather than themes, helped me step away somewhat from my own pre-conceived theories and initial research 'hunches'. Instead, I found that I started to notice an emergent and changing awareness of a theory grounded in the data, constructed from the accounts of my participants, rather than shaped by my own experiences and suppositions.

Early on in my initial line-by-line coding, I found that rather than being immersed in my participant's world views, I was able to step back from them and identify inconsistencies. For example, both Louise and Madeline were able to self-reflect on their own inconsistencies live in the interview, perhaps suggesting an ambivalence towards their identity of being childfree. However, Alice described herself as being certain of her choice to

be childfree, electing for voluntary sterilisation in her 20's. However, her account also made reference to her own imaginary child, and a belief in the global responsibility of every adult to the care of a child. It was observations such as these that led me to make initial memos around the ideas of 'tension between ease and struggle', 'permanence / impermanence' and also 'the presence of an imaginary child'.

Through taking time to step away from the coding and capture these initial thoughts, it felt as though my work was taking an analytical route from an early stage of the research. Although time consuming, I found line-by-line coding fitted my data. The data are rich, nuanced, and at times emotionally laden. Adopting this approach helped me remain close to the data but not swallowed up by it. I could move relatively quickly at times and attempted to make clear the tacit and implicit actions and meanings I saw. Charmaz describes grounded theory coding as part work but also part play, and it certainly felt like this to me at times. I felt excited; a pull forward, a keenness to keep going into and with the data. I felt like an explorer.

Coding the Codes

Once I had completed an initial line-by-line coding of the data, I needed to take the level of analysis up a level. I started to code my initial line-by-line codes; pulling out codes which revealed patterns, as well as those which accounted for the data. This continued to pique my interest in exploring the concepts I was constructing from the data. Charmaz suggests that "initial and focused coding will suffice for many projects." However, as I reached a point

of having completed the coding of the initial codes I was left with a sense of disempowerment; that I did not really know where to go from here. This was an indication to me that I had not yet tapped into the analytic power of my data; that this was an opportunity to raise the analytic level of the work. To help me do this, I started to pair clustering exercises with free-writing and writing memos. The notion of grounded theory being 'part play' (Charmaz, 2014) continued to resonate; I at once enjoyed the opportunity to immerse myself in the data and to start to query the different codes and concepts which I identified through this process. However, I was also concerned as to the length of time this took. I became conscious of a tension between my desire to do a thorough piece of analysis, and the time constraints and limitations of the doctoral research project. As time moved on, I became increasingly reconciled to an acceptance that the analytic process may not fit neatly within pre-planned project deadlines. Rather, I needed to allow myself to open to the analytic process, to play with ideas, and to allow the theory within the data to become clearer to me.

Below is an example of a clustering exercise I completed after re-reading the interview with Madeline:
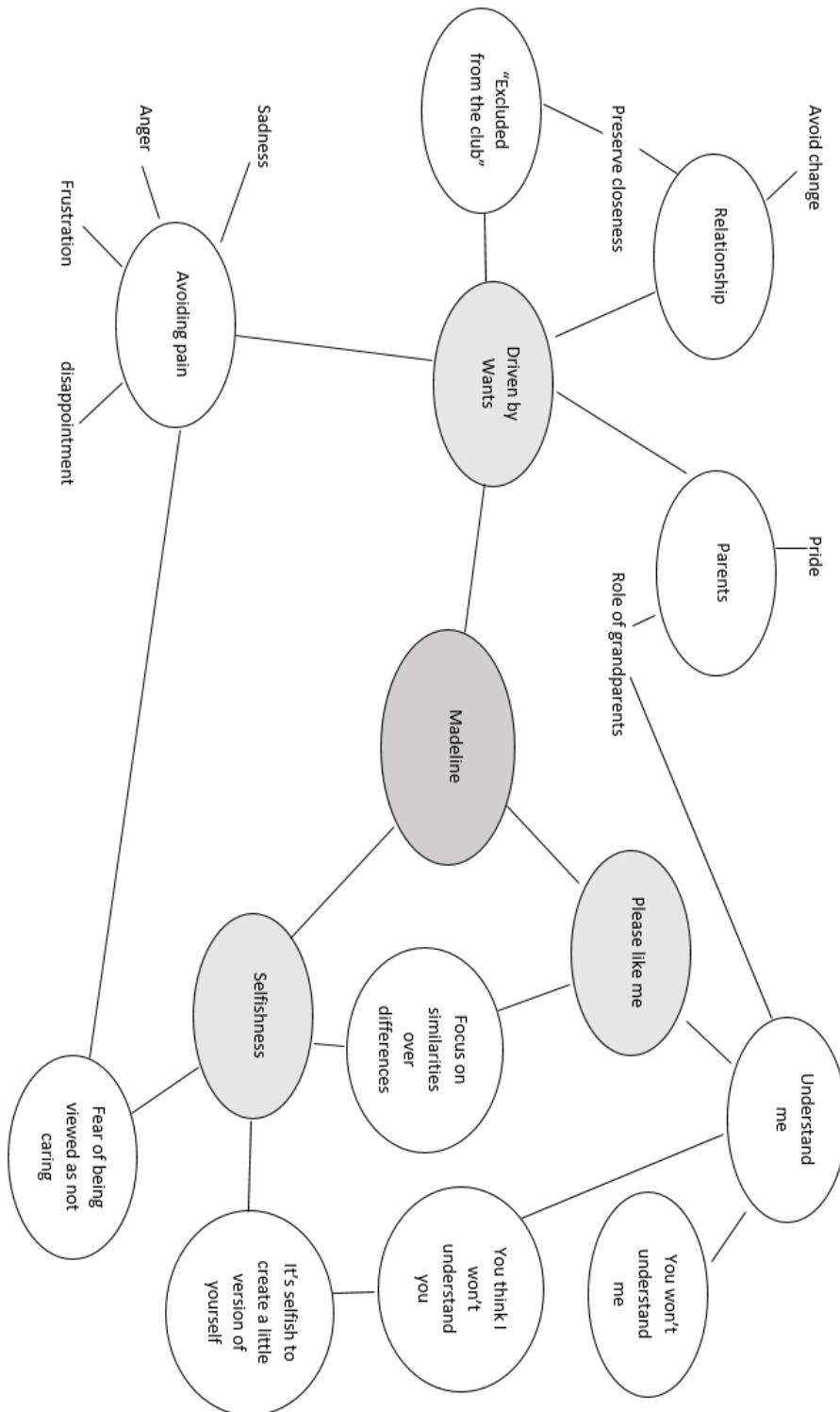
Fig. 1.

I found the process of trying to capture the key actions within Madeline's interview helped me raise my analytic thinking about 'what is going on here'. I then wrote a memo about the three main conceptual categories that I saw in the data; 'driven by wants', 'please like me' and 'selfishness'.

I found the process of memoing and clustering to be helpful in developing a deeper understanding of how I related to the data and thinking in a more analytical way about the data. However, on reflection I can now see that I may have stayed in this phase of analysis longer than was truly helpful or productive. I found myself moving further away from the actual data and drawing on my skills of therapeutic curiosity, rather than looking at what I saw in the data in front of me. I started to look at what I wondered about in the data and developing theoretical ideas around these wonderings. This was an interesting pursuit in and of itself; I found myself exploring concepts around harm, recovery and growth, seeing patterns in and across the different narratives connected to these ideas. However, the data did not necessarily demonstrate these constructions; rather I found myself constructing these notions and searching for extracts which validated these concepts.

I was able to reflect on this deviation from the data in partnership with my supervisor, again considering how being an 'insider researcher' and connecting with the stories of my participants may have led me to being too close to the data for a time. It was helpful to reflect in this way. As a result, I not only experienced a comfort, but was also able to

recognise the harm I sometimes experienced living in a culture where I do not always fit. I was able to construct a response recognising strengths and growth beyond and in response to these experiences. Additionally, in constructing a formulation or theory about the direction my thinking was taking me, I felt I was also honouring the women who had offered their stories to me so generously. I felt this was a theory or idea that I could take back to them, which validated their experiences and highlighted their strengths and worth. No matter how well intentioned this endeavour may have been, I was also able to see that I had taken a deviation from the path of grounded theory methodology in my quest to deepen the analytic power of the data.

Emergence of Narratives

To return to the path of inductive grounded theory methodology, I needed to get closer to the data again. To help me do this, I reoriented my focus back on the original interviews, this time with a focus on looking to identify what the action of the narrative was. What was going on here? What actions or constructions were present in the actual words of the interviewees? What actions were contained within sections of the interviews? This became a focused coding exercise which flowed quickly and smoothly. I credit the reflective skills I developed through the initial coding and memoing phases with helping me to clearly pick out the action-oriented focused codes and concepts I saw within the data. I was guided to stay close to the gerund, the action, the thing that that I saw happening. Conceptual codes for each interviewee were constructed, often using the words the participants used. This reassured me that I was working close to the data, that what was being constructed could

map directly onto the data themselves. This thrilled me. I felt secure and solid; I had the robustness of the data underneath my work and I felt able to use this stability as a platform from which to move forward.

Once I had completed this focused coding exercise, I was able to collect the codes into conceptual themes. To do this, I needed to step back from the codes and see them from a distance. I acted on this need in a literal sense; I placed each focused code onto a post-it and using a large wall space clustered each code into what seemed to me to be collections of similar codes. I found this exercise at once exciting and calming. Prior to completing this exercise, I had been aware of a sense of 'drowning'. It had seemed to me that my data were richly powerful and valuable, but I couldn't seem gain a grasp of them. However, through seeing these codes from a distance, spread out in front of me, they became much more tangible, and I started to see a grounded theory for this research take shape.

The figure below illustrates this first conceptual map:
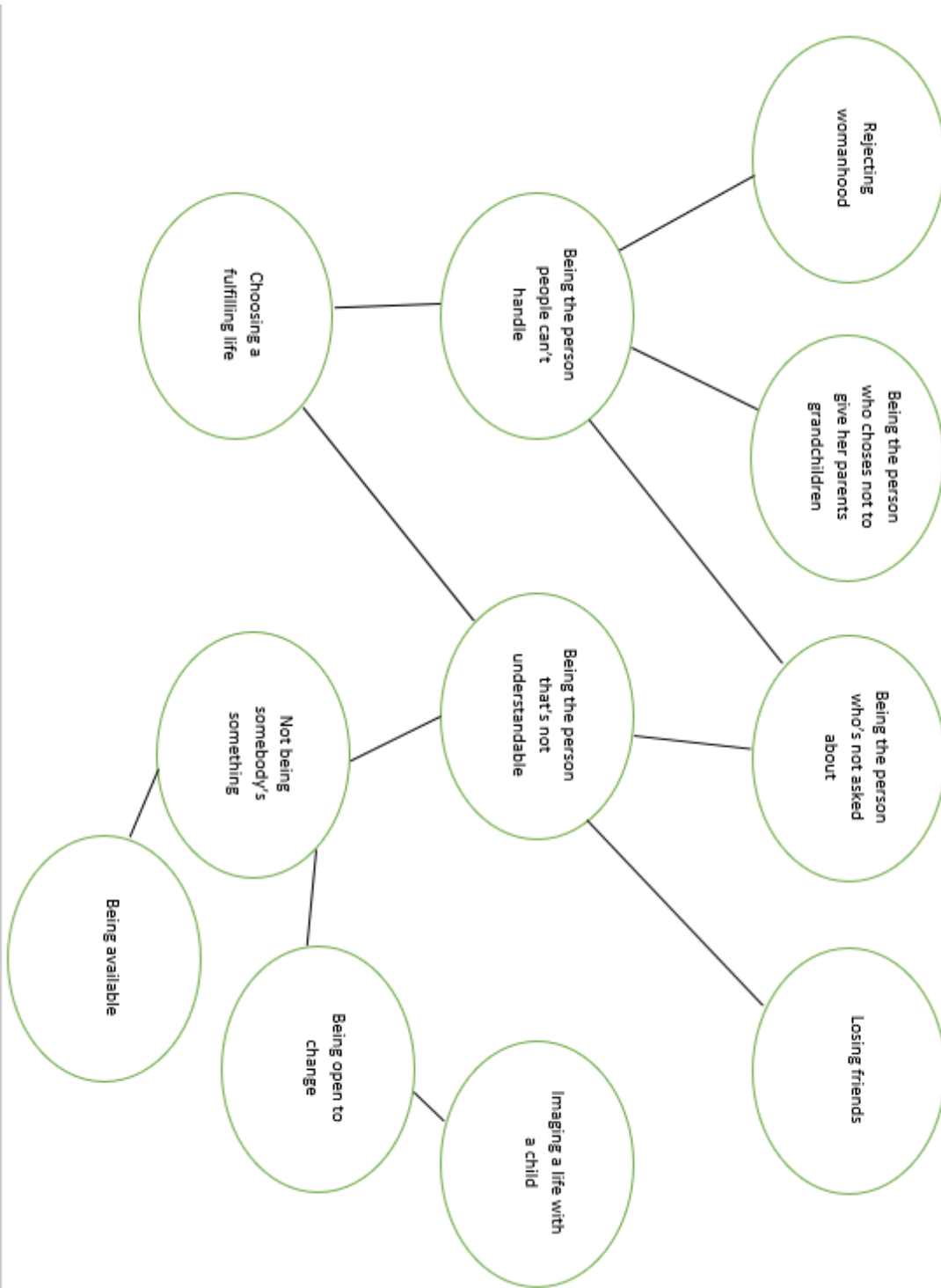
Fig. 2.

Although I found it containing to have a conceptual map underpinning my move towards analysis, I continued to think about how the concepts connected. I started to wonder if my main categories, 'Being the Person People Can't Handle' and 'Being the Person That's Not Understandable' were part of the same category. The more I reflected on this map, I wondered if perhaps there were two main conceptual categories; 'Being the Person People Can't Handle' and another; 'Choosing / Living a fulfilling Life'. A very strong feature of the accounts related to curating / choosing / living a life which is of value; on a macro- or micro-scale depending on the view of the participant. This seemed to come back to the strong concept of 'being a spare adult' which came up in the focus group; of being available, a part of a family or community, of making a difference in a different way.

As I looked at things from this perspective, it offered ideas to explore further around being a deviant; living a life outside the 'norm'. Whether or not this is a choice is not clear; it seems rather that there is perhaps a choice away from the norm for some (Alice), as well as a prizing of one's own inner knowing (Sophie) or a choice which is made based on the prizing of the relationship (Madeline). Counter to the concept of deviance, there are also ideas to explore further around valuing self, self-expression and generativity in the face of other's difficulty in agreeing with, supporting, understanding the nature of that action. These ideas link strongly with a feminist psychology perspective.

The first thematic map placed themes connected to rejection (being the person people can't handle, can't understand) at the centre of the map. Whilst these seemed to be powerful categories I could construct from the data, they did not tell the full story. The participants

were actively trying to communicate their value, their worth, and the wrongness of the assumption of selfishness that they frequently experienced. It was important therefore to reorient the thematic map to more fully reflect the gaps I saw in the emergent grounded theory at this point.

To this end, I constructed two key categories; *Being the person people can't handle* and *Living a fulfilling life*. Under *Being the person people can't handle,* three further sub-categories were constructed; *Being the person that's not understandable*; *Not being somebody's something* and; *Stagnating the family*. Under *Living a fulfilling life* three sub-categories were constructed; *Being available*; *Being open to change* and; *Rejecting notions of womanhood*.

Stagnating the family

Being the person who's not asked about

Being the person that's not understandable

Being the person people can't handle

Not being somebody's something

Losing friends

Living a fulfilling life

Being available

Being open to change

Rejecting notions of womanhood

Imaging a life with a child
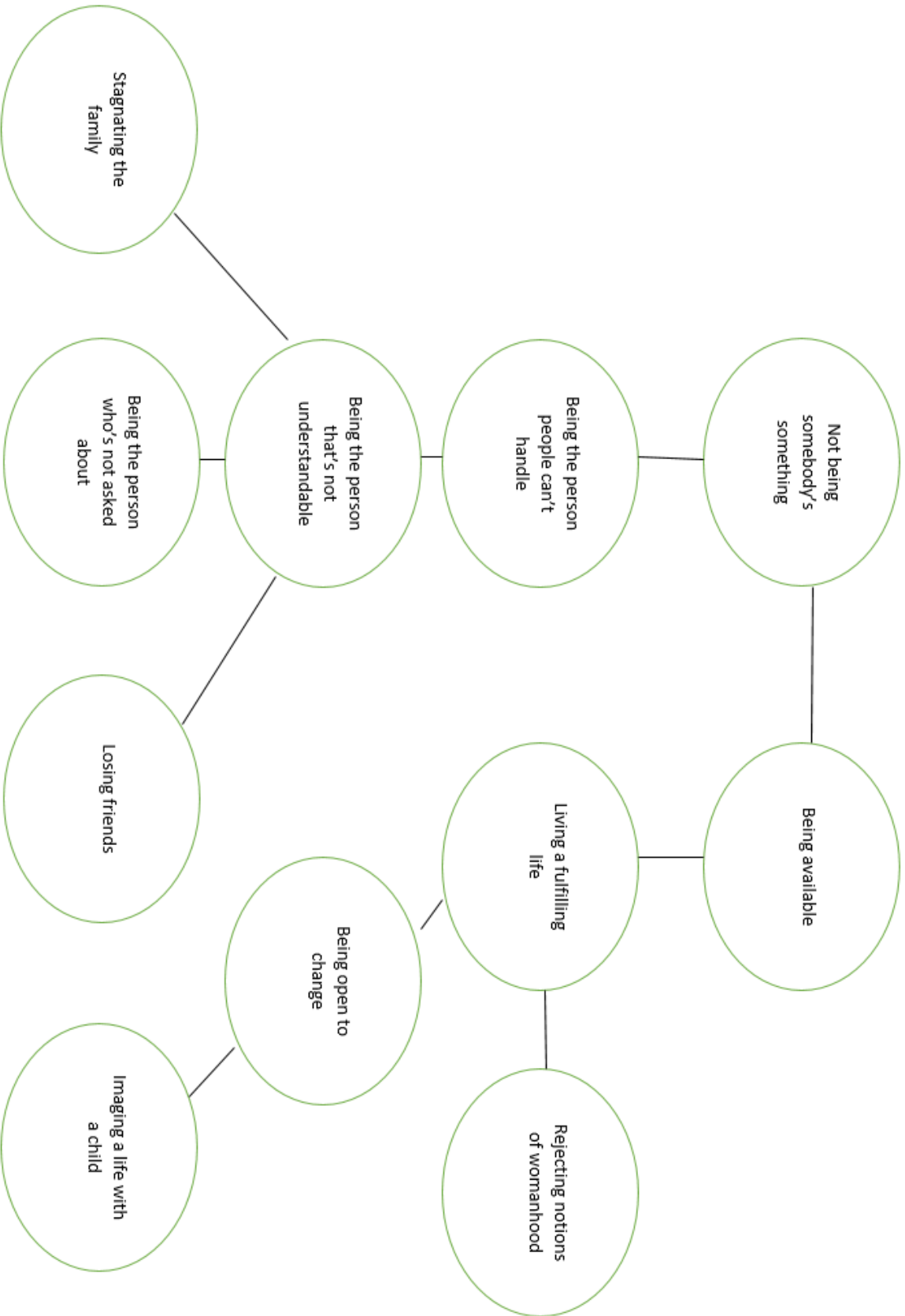
Fig. 3.

Axial Coding

I became aware that I was searching for a way to make sense of the categories I'd created, and simply looking at initial and focused coding left me with a sense of there being something missing. It appeared axial coding could provide a structure to orient an answer to my research questions. Charmaz suggests axial coding is a method which can provide a structure for 'how' and 'why' questions; precisely the kind of questions I was asking in this research project. Strauss and Corbin initially presented this third approach to coding (beyond initial and focused coding) as a way of relating categories to subcategories. This way of coding specifies the properties and dimensions of a category, and to organise the data into a more coherent whole after the fragmentation of initial coding. Whilst Strauss and Corbin proposed formal procedures to guide the process of axial coding (1998, cited in Charmaz, 2014), Charmaz advocates a more emergent stance. She states (p148) that "my approach differs from axial coding in that my analytic strategies are emergent, rather than procedural applications. The subsequent categories, subcategories, and links reflect how I made sense of the data." I found that, just as Charmaz describes, by adopting a more emergent approach I was able to make links between categories and subcategories in a way that felt containing; and to ensure this creative and interpretative process was grounded in the data.

Whilst the containment of a structure was certainly appealing, it was not the only reason I considered adopting this approach; the more time I spent with my categories and codes, the

more I saw how they related and interacted with one another. I was starting to get a sense of the function or action I was seeing within these codes. It became clear to me that my next step was to map the major categories, looking at the 'conditions' 'actions' and 'consequences' constructed within them. I found it helpful to visualise these categories as containers for each subsequent layer; that the conditions made sense of and contained the actions taken; and that in turn, the actions made sense of and contained the consequences experienced:

Fig. 4.

A frequent experience described by the participants was that of *Being the person that's not understandable*. This led me to reflect on what it was that led them to feel not understood, identifying behaviours of others such as not being asked about and losing friends. The outcome of these behaviours seemed to be that some participants felt as if they were the 'person that people can't handle'; that this was a rational explanation for the experiences of not being asked about, not being part of a conversation, not having their life choices recognised to the same value as motherhood and excluded from social interactions. These constructions seemed to explain the experience of not being understood.

Participants also frequently spoke about *Living a fulfilling life*. In reflecting on this, I coded for what actions were taken around this, constructing a subcategory of *Rejecting notions of womanhood*. In so doing, participants described an experience of *Being available*; that they were able to offer more of themselves to the passions, projects and pursuits they prized and valued.

I became curious about these categories and subcategories. As I mapped and attempted to draw connections between and across these categories, I found it increasingly hard to identify where one category ended and another began. Rather, there appeared to be

something of a continuum connecting these ideas; that being the person people can't

understand, also meant the participants found themselves available, but that availability

also meant they perceived themselves as someone others can't handle. Additionally, that by

not being asked about, and losing (female) friends, this perceived social 'shunning' often

invited a questioning of notions of womanhood, frequently rejecting elements of such

constructions, which in turn, led to experiences of perceived difference or confrontation,

resulting in a continuation of not being asked about and losing friends. No explicit frame

guided my analytic constructions of participants' accounts and experiences or elicited the

emphasis. This has been an emergent process, constructed from codes, grounded in the

data.

The figure below illustrates such connections:

Being the person people can't handle

Relating to mothering

not being asked about

losing friends

Being the person that's not understandable

living a fulfilling life

rejecting notions of womanhood

Being available
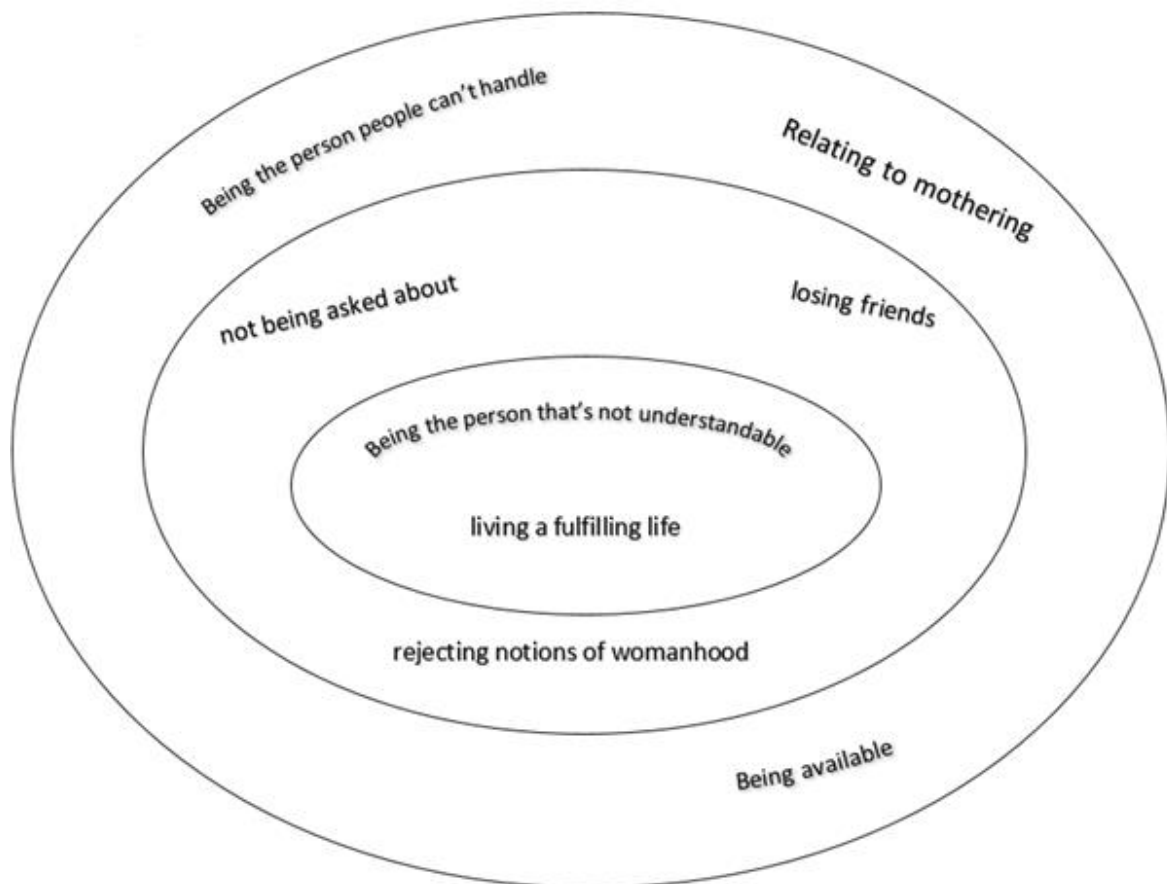
Fig. 5.

During the process of crafting and reviewing the thematic maps, I found the support of my

Director of Studies to be invaluable. Through meeting with him every few weeks over the

course of several months, I was able to not only consider what I saw in the data, but also

reflect on my relationship and responses to what I was constructing. In so doing, I was able

to identify areas of the 'map' which felt solid; that was close to the data, and also where the

'map' felt loose and therefore indicated a need for further focus. Whilst this was at times

frustrating, it was also immensely fruitful, in that by taking the time to invest in the data,

and my relationship to it, I was able to find a way forward, and to start to construct a theory

which seemed to be very much grounded in the data, and which remained close to that shared by the participants. I was encouraged to continue to return to the data, to immerse myself in the nuance of the narratives, and to consider the degree to which the constructed theory connected with that offered by the participants. It was this iterative and emergent process which provided for the construction of an original, rich and nuanced grounded theory.

It was only when I was able to hold the proposed theory up against the narratives of the participants, and find a close and tight fit with the data in a repeated and solid way that I felt confident to conclude the analytical process. Charmaz defines saturation as "when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of these core theoretical categories" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 213). Therefore, having reached a point in the analysis where the categories and connections between these theoretical constructions seemed to be consistent, suggested a point of analytical saturation, and an invitation to move on to the next stage of the research endeavour.

Analysis

In this section I provide a description of the key features of the data, including illustrative quotes and diagrams (where appropriate), in order to provide a guide to the grounded theory constructed as part of this research project. I also discuss issues of quality in this

study, including but not limited to aspects of participant numbers, limitations of diversity, etc.

As introduced in the previous section, after a process of initial coding, focused coding, memoing and axial coding of the interview data, I constructed a thematic map (previously referenced as Fig. 5.). In this section I demonstrate my reasoning, including supportive illustrative quotes.

Key Category: Being the person people can't handle

Participants described being treated differently, rejected or discriminated by others for their childfree-ness. Many of the accounts contained emotive examples of how participants experienced the attitudes and actions of others as indicators of their inability to accept their childfree status. These examples took different forms; in dejection around not experiencing acceptance and equality; in anger and fear at the perceived fatality of motherhood; and the gamble they take in their intimate relationships in deciding to be childfree.

Participants spoke about their experiences of not being accepted by others; that somehow their childfree-ness made them 'other'. Indeed, Louise likened her experience to the mistrust and darkness so often associated with women in folklore who don't have children:

> Louise: "well it's like the old kind of, erm, myths about witches, I mean, they're all
>
> childfree, there's something about the old woman in the Hansel and Gretal story, you

know, there's something about women not having children being er, being cold,

being ah I don't know, people can't handle that."

This 'other-ness' was echoed by Helen, drawing from her own experiences in the workplace. She talked about how the expectation was that somehow it was more acceptable to treat her less favourably than her parent colleagues:

Helen: "I suppose there's the kind of issue in work, that there's the kind, the little bit of the expectation that if you don't have children you're going to be available all the time you know, erm, all through the year, possibly at any time of the day or night, erm, in a way that I think parents get a much easier time"

The concept of being treated less favourably than others was echoed by Amanda, likening her fight for acceptance with other examples of discrimination:

Amanda: "I mean that, I think it's enormously sad that I felt that way erm, but I just think, even when I was of an age, you know, where you want things like, legalising gay marriage, all these things I've been supportive of, you know, you still have to, have to almost fight in order to be accepted as childfree, in some situations."

In some accounts, participants spoke with strong feeling in response to the expectations and dominant discourse around motherhood. In these accounts, the feelings seemed to convey a power and strength, communicating the force such expectations exerted on the speaker:

Helen: "[I feel] A bit annoyed really, a bit angry that people have this expectation that you have to have children in order to have a fulfilled life, because I just don't see that at all"

Sophie used the metaphor of being washed away; vividly evoking a risk of being carried, swept up by the great dominating force of social expectations:

> *Sophie: "I'll dig my heels in to the end erm because of this assumption, or sort of current of various factors that attempts wash you into the, down the river, into the sea of motherhood. It takes some doing to resist that in various ways"*

In several accounts, participants spoke about the impact of being childfree on their intimate relationships; that being childfree was a condition of their relationship with their partner. However, whilst for many not having children was a firm boundary and brought a potential pressure and conditionality into this dynamic, this boundary also allowed for acceptance on their own terms. That within their intimate relationships they experienced another person who could 'handle' them. It was being in a heterosexual relationship, and encountering the risk of pregnancy which brought a hard boundary into Helen's awareness:

> *Helen: "I think yeah, probably when I got together with my partner, and therefore it became a reality that I might get pregnant in a heterosexual relationship, erm, it became very clear to me that that was something I definitely didn't want"*

This sharpening of awareness was also echoed by Sophie. She described how she separated for a time from her partner, and that the relationship was rekindled on the condition that they would not have children. This conditionality seemingly required her partner to adapt his way of offering caring to another; and through so doing he demonstrated a love and care for her, and for others more broadly:

Sophie: "We broke up for two years and then we got back together again, and he understood at that point, that not having children was a prerequisite, that that was it. And since then that's been fine. And he's very loving and understanding, and he's just decided that he could put his caringness into the world at large erm, and that's fine."

In contrast to Sophie and Helen, Madeline's choice to be childfree was oriented around her choice to be with her partner, and it was he who primarily did not wish to have children. She spoke of her ambivalence about having children; that it was something she saw as a potential loss, but an acceptable loss on the condition that their relationship is sustained. However, she also revealed her concern about the potential for personal harm; that by being with him she is taking a gamble with regard to her future satisfaction, recognising the inherent uncertainty of relationships:

Madeline: "There's always a fear that what happens if something happens to that relationship and then, you, you're left, and you're past the point of no return if that makes sense, and you think "oh maybe in 10 years' time, what if we split up and I've made the decision not to have children to stay with you, we're not together and then I don't have children or a partner" so I guess you always have that in the back of your mind because you never know what's going to happen."

Acceptance by others does not seem to be limited solely to the participants' intimate partners. Alice described being accepted by others, seemingly conditional on her 'being good with children', suggesting something normalising about this:

Alice: "I think generally, because I get on with kids, people with kids, just accept that I don't have kids."

In the accounts there are many examples of how participants experience 'being the person others can't handle'. This manifests and is experienced as discrimination and less favourable treatment, which for the speakers, resonated with the dark coldness associated with harmful characters in fairy tales and fantasy. Additionally, they spoke of a need to fight for acceptance, anger at being viewed as unfulfilled, fearing a 'washing away' through conforming to societal expectations. This sense of fight, anger and swimming against the weight of expectation speaks to an awareness of being unacceptable, wrong, and a response which is protective and defensive. However, there is also a recognition that there are others who can 'handle' them; and that through so doing, participants spoke of experiencing love, companionship and connectedness. It struck me in the recruitment for this project that almost without exception, the women expressing an interest in taking part were partnered; often in very longstanding relationships which they described as highly valued and treasured partnerships. As I reflected on this, I wondered if the presence of this supportive relationship; of feeling understood and accepted, provided the participants with the necessary conditions core conditions for growth (Rogers, 1967). Thereby providing a secure base from which to go out into the world; including the potentially risky experience of being interviewed for this project.

In revisiting the accounts for the category of 'being the person people can't handle' I noticed that there were several actions described by the participants. One clear action that stood out in the narratives was that of not being asked about; almost that their childfree status created something of an invisibility. Louise described this experience as follows:

> *Louise: "A huge imbalance, yeah, I mean there was this one friend in particular who I've been friends with since we were seventeen, sixteen, and it's not necessarily about the children. Maybe not the last time, the time before, it was a Christmas, and I sort of deliberately paid attention to how much she talked, and how much she asked me about anything to do with me, and it was almost nothing."*

Louise's account describes an imbalance, again connecting to a sense of being less-than or treated less favourably than parents. However, other participants' accounts suggest a different sense-making of the experience of not being asked about. For example, both Madeline and Louise acknowledge that they make an active choice not to talk about their decision to be childfree:

> *Madeline: "but they're looking at you as if to say "oh that's a shame" and you think "well, it isn't a shame, I'm very happy thank you" and it's almost as though you have to explain it when really you don't. And to be honest most of the time I don't."*

> *Louise: "to then say "you know, I'm not going to do it, I could, but I'm not going to bother", that, I think, would be quite hurtful, so no, I don't, we don't have that conversation."*

The accounts above allude to an expectation of the other; either that they require an explanation, or protection, from the revelation that the speaker has chosen not to have children. There is an avoidance of the disclosure of more information about this choice, leaving the assumptions untested. Indeed, Helen acknowledged how by not having this conversation a gap remains in her awareness, and therefore potentially in the other's too:

> Helen: "Yeah, and maybe it depends on where they are in their own lives actually, erm, but I haven't that conversation enough really, to be able to say well, you know, the people who do have children already tend to have this reaction, and the people who don't have children have that reaction, I haven't had the conversation enough to see if there is any kind of pattern, or whether it's just random."

The accounts therefore highlight something of a double bind (Bateson, 2000); that there is an absence of conversation about being childfree seemingly perpetuated by a withholding of curiosity by others, as well as an active choice to protect or defend the self.

Sub-category (Action): Losing friends

Another frequent experience participants spoke about was the loss of friendship or connection in treasured relationships. I was curious about the constructions around this experience of loss and noticed that this took several forms; loss as a result of friends disappearing, loss as a result of divergent life paths, loss through deterioration in ways of relating. Some participants spoke about losing as a result of friends disappearing, often into

a fantasy location. I was struck by the imagery this evoked. There was something other-worldly about the creation of these alternative lands.

> *Sophie: "It's more my private grief when people I do know, that I like, are feeling that pull with, that I want to stay friends with, just disappear into like baby mush-brain land, and I have to get over there. And I often can't really express it to them, er, or they don't get it, or they won't accept it."*

> *Helen: "for the last ooh, 15 years probably I could name friends who I was quite good friends with, who've then had children and have disappeared into what I call babyland"*

The loss of friends, as well as disappearing to another world, was also constructed by some participants as a waste of life. Friends with whom participants seemingly shared interests and attributes became mothers and their lives started to take a different life path. This divergence, and perceived distraction, was constructed as a waste, a perceived loss of talent and contribution:

> *Helen: "I have lots of friends, or ex-friends, who I went to university with, and who were kind of intelligent, interesting, you know go-getting people, who I had a lot of respect for, and then they have a child, and in 90% of cases their career stops, they stay at home, and I kind of feel that's wasting their lives"*

Losing friends was also constructed as an increased sense of disconnection; that the fabric and quality of the relationship had deteriorated. There was something perceived in the toll of being a mother which was experienced as an enhancing of negative elements of someone's personality. Again, Helen used herself as an example; that she feared being a

mother would somehow pull out her 'bad' aspects. In this, I wondered if there was a perception that the demands of motherhood could reveal undesirable parts of the self; and that this was feared as not only detrimental to the self, but to others too.

> Helen: "I want to look at the aspects of my personality that are not so good, particularly in relationship with other people, I try and make those better and work on those, so I have better relationships with people. But I think being a mother would bring out all of the bad aspects of my personality (laughs). Erm, so that's, that's the reason I don't feel I want to go there."

Sub-category (Consequence): Being the person that's not understandable

Many participants spoke about the perceived consequence of being the person that people can't handle, experienced as not being asked about and losing friends; that of 'being the person that's not understandable'. This was constructed in several ways, including being outside other's frame of reference; needing to be explained; being an odd-one out. This was often demonstrated in the emotional reaction of others, such as, for Madeline, sympathy and sadness, for Louise, disappointment or wistfulness, and for Helen, intolerance.

> Madeline: "Most people, especially people with children can't understand why you wouldn't want to have children erm, or you know, you get that slight sort of sympathy look, especially from older people, can you not, have you not met the right person yet?"

> Louise: "she likes things that are normal, and this isn't normal. So, that's her word not mine (laughs). She actually said to me once "I wish you could be normal", or "I

wish you were normal" or something like that which, you know, and I, I think what

she meant was "I wish you wanted what I consider to be normal""

Helen: "and I know a lot of people are very tolerant in a general kind of political kind

of a way, erm, and some of them are tolerant when it comes to the whole childfree

thing as well, but not everybody. And it's not that they, not that they actively have a

problem with me not having children, it's just that it doesn't occur to them"

However, for Sophie, she spoke about a desire for babies being beyond her frame of

reference, rather than the reaction of others in response to her preference not to have

them.

Sophie: "So I do get that, I just don't have that with babies. Erm, and I think most

people probably aren't pretending. Maybe it's a natural thing that I don't have, but

I'm sceptical about that."

As I heard these accounts, it seemed the awareness of being different created a barrier to

being understood. The participants seemed to be talking about empathy, a capability to

encounter the other with an openness to the 'as if' nature of the other's experience. These

accounts suggested a perceived empathy gap between the participants and parents they

encounter.

Beyond the emotional reactions to others' seeming lack of understanding of their childfree-

ness, participants also described experiences of others explaining away their preference. For

example, Amanda's account included an explanation in terms of her personality and

attitude:

Amanda: "they made some comment about how they didn't understand childfree women, they must be really cold and uncaring or those sorts of things, and my sister being her, she er, she said er "well my sister's childfree and er, she, she's not like that"""

Whilst Amanda's account suggested an endeavour by others to understand, Louise's account suggested the opposite; that she had not experienced an attempt by others to understand.

Louise: "there's a very definite erm, I don't know if it's an inability or an unwillingness to understand and to, to, to understand why it could be a good thing."

Ultimately, it seemed that there was a common thread across the participants who spoke about 'being the person that's not understandable'; that of feeling different. Indeed, some participants described themselves as being the 'odd-one-out';

Amanda: "I think about couples, they all bond because they've got children, and they all know each other through having children, whereas I was a sort of odd-one-out. I do find myself being the odd-one-out erm, and it just, as I said, they do have other things to talk about, it just takes that extra bit of effort to get there, to find out that you have that commonality."

Helen: "and I do feel sometimes in some kind of social settings that you're a bit of an oddity if you don't have children. And if you're not interested in having a conversation about children"

In addition to experiencing themselves as something of a perceived 'oddity' some participants spoke about how they often masked their exclusion, or feelings of oddness. Helen spoke about how this is often unrecognised by others:

> Helen: "I don't know if it's just my own perception, but I do feel like I'm on the outside of those conversations sometimes, erm, and that when the group of people that you're with start to have those kind of conversations about their children or their grandchildren that they don't necessarily realise how, how much I'm not included"

However, rather than hiding any differences, Sophie spoke about disclosing her needs to others. She recognised that a disclosure could contain risk, but not disclosing could be uncomfortable.

> Sophie: "Erm, I don't know how it would come out. I guess it would come out after one starts talking about relationships and aspirations and those kind of things, so probably would be quite a good friend, erm, unless it came up early because a baby screamed and, in a cafe, and I've said 'oh God, could we sit in the other corner?', something like that. You know, I'm not embarrassed about saying that. So er, you find out soon enough then if someone likes babies or doesn't care, or really doesn't like them like me."

In stepping back and asking myself "what's going on here?" the key category of 'Being the person people can't handle' took shape, constructed from the actions and consequences I observed in the data. Across the accounts, there were many examples of constructions in the speech illustrating this key category. However, I also noticed gaps in the data which I felt

warranted further exploration. I was curious to gain a deeper understanding of how the experiences of loss as a consequence in the deterioration of relationship was constructed. Additionally, there seemed to be something more to explore around protection and defence; protecting the self from the harm of perceived social expectations and assumptions, and the harm of witnessing others reactions to hidden parts of the self (such as the decision to be childfree, or the 'bad' elements of their personality).

Key Category: Being available

In the coding of the participants' accounts, a key category of 'being available' was constructed within the data, oriented around what I observed as the consequences of living a fulfilling life, and rejecting notions of womanhood. I saw 'being available' in several different forms across the data; the physical availability of time and energy; and the availability afforded to others to engage in conversations and reflections not bounded by expectation and cultural norms.

Alice described how she was available for others, that she was viewed as a helpful adult:

> Alice: "so if, if they're stuck for a babysitter, or, you know, I'll pick them up give a call, some friends with their first children they'll be up all night and they're losing it, and I'll get a text (unclear) "can you pop round for half an hour cos I'm losing it", so I can do some of that and be supportive with that, so I see that as being important and something I can do because I don't have children."

Both Helen and Madeline spoke about how their childfree status enabled them to connect with others, and to allow conversations to unfold, unfettered by a need to conform to the dominant discourse.

> Helen: *"when I still said I wasn't interested in having children we actually had a really interesting conversation where she said, actually, I think if I'd had my time over again I might have decided not to have children. And that was a real breakthrough because I really felt she understood at that point, and that she wasn't going to give me a hard time about it."*

Whilst Helen's account suggests her difference allowed for connection, Madeline's suggests similarities allowed for connection:

> Madeline: *"we talk about things that are collective, rather than talking about things that are different. So we'll talk about relationships in terms of what's going on in the relationship, we won't talk about this in specific terms"*

Sub-category (Action): Rejecting notions of womanhood

Within the participant's accounts, womanhood was intrinsically linked to gender, and with gender came a collection of expectations around behaviour, appearance, interests and focus. For several of the participants this collection of expectations did not seem to fit them. Amanda described finding it hard to relate to other women; rather she had more connection with the interests and activities associated with men:

> *Amanda: "it's hard to relate to other women because they've often got that in common erm, but then having said that, you know, when I was younger I was a tomboy for want of a better phrase, I played football, I still like football (laughs) erm, something my husband and I have in common, it's great!"*

In reflecting on the different attitudes she had experienced regarding her childfree status, Louise observed that men and women appeared to be treated differently. She connected being a woman with femininity, and that to be feminine is to be a mother; indeed, that she saw femininity as being synonymous with a woman's purpose; to bear children. In rejecting bearing children, she started to consider the roles of femininity and womanhood, but then retreated, seemingly confused or tangled in these thoughts:

> *Louise: "there is a certain kind of, degree of significance for a man than a woman, but somehow it just doesn't seem to come up. I think it's a feminine thing, I think it's a, the purpose of a woman is to bear children, erm, I don't know, I'm thinking myself into a right hole here"*

Continuing with the notion that gender prescribes certain expectations for a person, Sophie was explicit in her rejection of this; she wanted to be seen primarily as a person and to not be laden with the expectations of womanhood:

> *Sophie: "I don't really want too much womanhood…. Because it gives you problems. And I don't 100% identify with womanhood, I just want to be a person."*

As well as rejecting the notions and expectations of womanhood, participants also spoke about their rejection of motherhood as a defence against being overtaken or destroyed.

Sophie considered motherhood as something fatal to her; that to be a mother the person as she knows as herself, would be obliterated:

> *Sophie: "So I don't think the fashion is in my favour, and I can't imagine disappearing like that. Not that I think I'm a particularly marvellous person, but it just feels like a fight for survival, like I might as well just kill myself now and then let someone else be it, because it would be somebody else anyway."*

When reflecting on motherhood, Amanda also echoed Sophie's sentiment; that she feared that being a parent would swallow her whole, again fearing her own destruction:

> *Amanda: "I think it was almost that I just felt it would swallow me whole erm, and erm, so I, I use that side of my personality in other ways."*

Sophie had a voluntary sterilisation. Talking about her preparation for this, she spoke of how others assumed her fertility to be the defining part of her womanhood or being a woman. In removing the ability to reproduce, she was advised to grieve for her lost womanhood. In her account, Sophie challenged the assertion that her reproductive organs were connected to her sense of self; she did not see a removal of tissue as significant as the literature she read suggested:

> *Sophie: "A lot of the books about hysterectomy say things like 'you have to come to terms with' 'you have to mourn the loss of your womanhood' and I just thought 'really, what's to mourn?'. I had my appendix out and I never missed that."*

Based on the participant's accounts, notions of womanhood seem to be constructed around expectations associated with gender. Powerfully, these expectations are perceived as devastating, posing a fatal threat to the survival of a life as it is known and valued by the speaker. Indeed, both Alice and Sophie elected to have their reproductive organs removed and in so doing, challenged perceptions of what it is to be a woman.

Sub-category (Consequences): Living a fulfilling life

I initially used the word 'choosing' for this the category; 'choosing a fulfilling life'. However, as I got deeper into the data that word did not seem to fit so well. On revisiting what I saw the participants doing in this category, the actions in their narrative seemed rather less 'choosing' than 'living'. 'Living' suggested a more embodied term; that this was something they were actively doing, rather than a cognitive process. In many of the accounts, participants spoke about 'living a fulfilling life'. How this was constructed varied across the accounts but envisioning a life which felt of value and which was treasured was one which was common across all the interviews. There seemed to be three main constructs within this category; that of cutting her own path i.e. deviating from the perceived norm, preserving a treasured relationship and being of value to the world.

Some participants were explicit in their pursuit of a life of their own creation. For example, both Georgina and Helen spoke about defending their rights to choose her own path;

> Georgina: *"I know that's, people say that a lot about people who are childfree, 'well you're selfish', maybe, maybe I am, but it, it is my life and I'm going to live the life that I want to live."*

Helen: "I think everybody should have the freedom to do what they want with their lives and not just kind of fall into a certain way of doing things, whether that's having children or what they do with their careers, or who they live with as their partner or anything really."

Louise spoke about making choices and recognising how her life was created with each choice she made; from the mundane to the significant. In this extract she also echoed an earlier category, 'being the person people can't understand':

Louise: ""this is the life I've chosen", it's, it's you know, and everything kind of, everything, you kind of create your life around it don't you, so you do a job that you, that you can do, erm, without needing, my job wouldn't allow me to have the kind of flexibility that I would need to have children for example, and you know, the house that I live in, you know, it's got cream carpets, you know (laughs) you sort of design things around it, you plan on the kind of places that you want to go on holiday and it's not the kind of places that you would take children, and erm, it's a lifestyle choice, and people don't really understand that."

Several of the participants spoke about the role of their relationship in regard to their childfree status. For many of the interviewees, they saw the relationship with their partner as something precious to treasure. The choice to preserve a valued relationship without changing the dynamic by having children, was something which featured across several

accounts. For Madeline and Georgina, they reflect on their choice to be with their partner, and the satisfaction they felt around that:

> Madeline: *"So my choice is to have a life and a very filling life with this person, erm, and our decision is that we won't be having children, but you know, I am very involved with my friends children, have lots of lovely kind of pretend nieces and nephews who I spend a lot of time with, but erm our choice is to just be a couple, with a dog, and not to have children. So that's really how I see my future."*

> Georgina: *"I couldn't do that. I couldn't be without my husband, and so I would for him have had children, erm, if if that had been a thing, but thankfully it hasn't. But I do feel incredibly lucky for that."*

For Amanda, she found value in reflecting on the security she felt knowing that neither she nor her husband expected to regret their decision; that they were living a fulfilling life with each other:

> Amanda: *"Erm, and my husband will turn to me when he's 60 and say "never regretted it a day of my life", and it's good to know there are people out there like that, who will say, "I am 60 years old and all of life's opportunities and experience I've had, I could not have had if I'd had children."*

Helen spoke about the active-ness of the choices she and her partner had made to be childfree; that the life they live was of their own creation:

> Helen: *"if they wanted me to explain that then I would, erm, cos I think it's important that people realise that it was an active choice, it's not just something we've fallen into because we haven't managed to get pregnant or whatever"*

Elsewhere in the interview Helen spoke about the choices she and her partner have made; recognising that whilst there have been a series of active choices made around not wanting children, this has been at times electing *not* to change, rather than to take action *towards* a way of being.

> Helen: *"obviously I have decided at various points of my life that I guess I really don't want children. But it's kind of keeping the status quo rather than actively deciding for something different if you see what I mean?"*

A common construction I saw in many of the participants' accounts was viewing their life as something which is of value to the world. This was often described in terms of a choice; that one could live a life of value oriented towards one's own children; or to contribute to the enrichment of many more people's lives. Amanda put this idea across in the following way:

> Amanda: *"I realised how much I touched other people's lives and you know, you can bring up maybe 2 children and erm put all your all into that, but at the same time, you know, you don't have time for maybe everyone else in the same way, so I felt like I could really nurture the friendships and relationships I already have, erm, in some way contribute to, improving other people's lives I guess."*

Sophie echoed a similar sentiment:

> Sophie: *"it's all about you and your kid, when actually you could be using that time to benefit a number of other people or things. You could be committing yourself to something that's unique to you, that's of value to you, and that you deem necessary. Instead you've just made more stuff that needs to be cared for. So you've actually*

increased the amount of caring that needs to be done, instead of doing something

about it."

Whereas Georgina took the view that being childfree was a contribution; that she was not adding to the environmental impact of an increasing population:

Georgina: "I think it's a good thing environmentally to not have children, so I am

doing good for our society and our world, kind of by not having children is how I view

it."

Indeed, Sophie emphasised her perception of how an increasing population is adding to the suffering of the world, and that she saw her action as an altruistic act:

Sophie: "I've expressed myself quite pointedly in ways that I've thought about a lot,

and it can seem like you're quite heartless or, erm, just sort of hateful, but as I said,

part of my motivation is to do what I can for other things, rather than adding to the

world's grief and need"

However, Louise spoke of feelings of doubt about the impact and contribution of her life. She seemed to experience a tension between a rational part of herself, recognising the parity between her and another; and on a more emotional level, there seemed to be something of a judgement or unfavourable comparison between herself and others:

Louise: "and I'll have that moment when I think "well I haven't created life (laughs),

I've been on holiday" you know, and I struggle myself with that because, I would say

to someone else that there is no less value in what I do than, than in what they do,

but I do feel it, I do feel that I've just been bumbling around through life, you know,

doing my job and going to the cinema, and you know that kind of thing."

Interestingly, Sophie also compared her activities against those she imagined mothers may do but took a very different view than Louise. Rather than doubting the value of her actions, she perceived her actions more favourably than many of those she associated with motherhood:

> Sophie: *"All these things that I think make life worthwhile and I just don't think that watching the Tellytubbies and cleaning up sick would make me have such a sense of self-worth or value, or that life had any meaning because you just, you're just deferring your chance to do something."*

The power and potency of a perceived fulfilling life seemed to leap from the different accounts; that this acted as both a motivator as well as validator of the choices and actions of many of the participants. It became clear as I looked at the different accounts that the ways in which the participants constructed their fulfilling lives varied as much as they did as individuals. However, what was consistent across the accounts was the pursuit and curation of a life which felt of value and which was fulfilling to the individual.

In reflecting on the key category of *being available*, the nature of availability differed between accounts, but the passion with which this was spoken of struck me. The women spoke of their openness to being available with their time, with the level and quality of connection they offered, for offering a definition of what it meant to be a woman which challenged social norms, and ultimately, for living a valued and fulfilling life. It struck me that that whilst there were common key categories and concepts across the participants' accounts, how these were constructed and actioned were often wildly different, indeed often contradictory. The key categories of '*being the person people can't handle'* and '*being*

available' seemed to be two sides of the same coin; that one was the consequence of the other, maintaining a cycle of rejection and acceptance. This ambivalence and tussle for what's going on played out across and within the accounts.

Key category: Relating to mothering

Beyond the two key categories of '*being the person people can't handle'* and '*being available'*, participants also talked about a third category, that of their experiences of '*relating to mothering'*. I noticed that in the narratives, several participants talked about how they saw their role as mothers; either imagined in the future, or in the way that by being mothers they would create the opportunity for their parents to be grandparents. What these experiences seemed to allow for was an ambivalence; a being open to change.

Several participants spoke about how they related to the concept of mothering, which seemed to tap into ideas around the construction of family. For some participants, there was a sense of not belonging within their family structure, whereas for others, they spoke about constructing a family that fit them. For example, Alice spoke about not 'being somebody's something', i.e. that she didn't have a role or a sense of belonging specific to someone else as a consequence of not being a mother:

> *Alice: "It does, I mean you don't have the role of being somebody's. I mean I talked about the negatives of responsibility there obviously, there are positives that come from that as well in terms of your identity as a mother."*

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However, both Helen and Amanda spoke about encountering other people's meaning of the word 'family' in contrast to their understanding of this word:

> Helen: "one of their first questions they said to us after we'd introduced ourselves was "do you have a family?" and I was baffled by that question because I thought well I've parents, I've got a sister (laughs) I've got aunts and uncles and it didn't occur to me until several seconds later that they meant "do we have children?""

> Amanda: "they're just used to being close to sort of traditional nuclear family for want of a better phrase, erm, whereas I think for us, we're more used to having extended family. Erm, so, yeah, I mean with friends and things, it's not been overly dramatic. I feel I lose them a little bit when they first have children, but then they come back."

For both Helen and Amanda, their accounts construct the idea of family as being a collection of relatives and friends; not necessarily including direct offspring of their own. However, their accounts suggest that others' constructions of family may follow a more traditional, nuclear template.

Additionally, Madeline spoke about the depth of connection she enjoys with her partner, which she perceived would be difficult to sustain with children. In prizing their partnership, she and her partner have crafted a family which fit them:

> Madeline: "we spend an awful lot of time together, we plan to do things together and we think about things in the future, so yeah, it does give you a closeness and an

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intimacy that I suppose you would, you would struggle to maintain if you had

children."

Connecting to a previous category of 'being available', Amanda spoke about how she held a compassion for all human beings, and in so doing, was able to value and prize every child; she valued being available for all children, not limited to her own:

Amanda: "I have compassion for all human beings so you know, I think not having my own children means I don't have that bias almost towards my own progeny, like, I feel very much that every child is important."

Sub-category (Action): Disappointing others

In the initial and focused coding stages of analysis I noticed that several participants spoke about a feeling of responsibility, particularly around disappointing other people, most notably their parents. This disappointment was linked to a perceived failure in their role as generative adults; that by not having a child themselves, they were denying their parents the opportunity to be a grandparent.

However, several accounts referred to an unborn child; that somehow by not birthing this child the participants were avoiding letting the child down through their predicted failings as a suitable parent. Madeline spoke of her feelings of responsibility and sadness that she was not providing her parents with something she anticipated they would enjoy:

> *Madeline: "so you just want to make sure that you, you kind of make your parents proud and I, I, a lot of people become proud grandparents and if that's not something that you're enabling for your parents then maybe you feel you've let them down a little bit."*

Rather than experiencing a sense of failure, Georgina spoke of criticism she has received from others, which validated Madeline's fears:

> *Georgina: "a couple of people have said 'well isn't it selfish' from the perspective of our parents, so you've not given your parents grandchildren and that's selfish."*

In contrast, Helen experienced direct pressure from her parents-in-law to produce children, thereby being placed in a position where her wishes were in direct contrast with the demands of her family members. She described a pressure to produce grandchildren until such time as this demand was met, and then the pressure eased off:

> *Helen: "my parents in law on the other hand were pretty pushy for quite a long time (laughs) because my partner has a brother, an older brother who also didn't have children for a long time, he's got 2 now, erm, but it looked like he wasn't going to have children either with his wife, and so their parents seemed to be desperate for grandchildren, and were very pushy for quite a long time."*

Constructions around how the disappointment of others was expressed and felt was a common feature of the narratives. As they reflected on the decisions they had made about their bodies and family life, several of the women spoke of the impact and involvement of others and how this continued to be something they wrestled with.

Some of the participants had experienced a pregnancy. Georgina and Sophie had elected

not to continue with their pregnancies, whereas Madeline had experienced a miscarriage.

They spoke about how these experiences had impacted on their decision to be childfree. For

Georgina, becoming pregnant invited a process of decision making with her partner,

oriented around what a life with a child would look like. This process prompted them to

consider if they wanted to be parents, and their decision not to be has remained unchanged

since this time:

> *Georgina: "the next big thing to happen was falling pregnant at university, so at 19,*
>
> *and deciding not to have, not to have, not to go through with the pregnancy, because*
>
> *I was in my first year at university and although I was with the partner that I*
>
> *expected to live the rest of my life with, we didn't want children at that point, and we*
>
> *had to have the discussion about erm, were we going to have this child or not, erm,*
>
> *and all the kind of pros and cons, and that that I think then is the, the point at which*
>
> *you really think about parenting and being a parent, and do I want to be a parent,*
>
> *and that decision making process that we went through then never changed."*

Sophie described waiting for this unborn child to become an adult and leave, and in the

process release her from her imagined parental connection:

> *Sophie: "I suppose on some level I'm waiting for that imaginary non-existent child to*
>
> *grow up and leave home, and then in my parallel universe self, it's all over."*

However, Madeline spoke about her desire to have a child, and how much the loss of this

pregnancy hurt her. She spoke about her acceptance of her current partner's wish not to

have children, and that in choosing to avoid another pregnancy she was protecting herself from the risk of being further harmed by another loss:

> *Madeline: "I did have a miscarriage at one stage, and for a long time after that I think I was frightened of the idea of having children, and I don't know if it has, but it may have had an impact on my acceptance of being with somebody who doesn't want to have children, and me thinking "yeah that's absolutely fine" and I don't have to face that kind of fear, does that make sense?"*

Amanda and Helen on the other hand, spoke openly about their ambivalence towards having a child, and that this had been something they had considered for a period. They both describe a 'flirtation' with the idea of becoming a parent, which they later rejected and dismissed. Amanda described her use of imagery in which the imagined child grew up and is an adult now:

> *Amanda: "That was my only wobble period, because I would say I've been quite decidedly childfree most of my adult life, but there probably was a wobble period when I was about 26, erm, I think if I'd fallen pregnant at that time we wouldn't be having this conversation because I'd have a baby, erm, well it would be much older adult child now."*

However, for Helen, it was the experience of playing with children in real life which prompted a reflection around being a parent. However, with this experience came a realisation that joy can also accompany boredom, leading to a dismissal of this possibility:

Helen: "for maybe half an hour of playing with the children I might have thought "oh this is very nice, maybe I could do this" (laughs) but then I've got bored and thought "no, that's really not what I want to spend my next 20 plus years doing"."

The risk of boredom or resentment was present in Amanda's account. In her construction of a life with a child, she anticipated a compromise in her capability to meet their needs and juggle her other pursuits. Her decision not to have a child therefore protected the imagined child from the harm of her resentment:

Amanda: "I think, if I did have children, I wouldn't commit fully to it, I know how important it is to do it well, erm, and I wouldn't want to resent my children in a way, or (unclear….). I wouldn't think that was fair on them, erm I think it was a better decision for any future children that I might have that it might be better that I accepted that about myself, that it would be better that I would be sort of realistic about what I'm like as an individual."

Some of the participants spoke about an ambivalence in their decision to be childfree; that there was a 'for now' quality. For Georgina, this 'for now'-ness was spoken about as a shared state with her partner, with an agreement around what would happen should one of them change their minds:

Georgina: "we did always say, 'we'll never say never. We don't know what we're going to feel like at 30' and we also said 'if one of us suddenly had erm a you know, a need to have children, then we would have to have really serious kind of discussion

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about that, and it wouldn't, it wouldn't be the, the you know, that we would split up,

we would have children, but that's quite a scary…"

However, Louise spoke about her 'for-now'-ness from an individual perspective:

Louise: "I can't, you don't know what you don't know, and I can't say that I'm not

going to wake up in 6 months' time and go "oh my God", no I don't think I will, but

who knows. You know, at the moment, I can't see any reason for a change, so I'm

feeling pretty much committed. You know, I'm not one of those people who thinks

that I'm always going to know how I'm going to feel about something because you

don't."

For Alice, she spoke about having absolute certainty in her preference not to have children, and her relief at having had a hysterectomy to guarantee this:

Alice: "Yeah, cos I did use to get anxious before so actually, the, having the, certainly

having the operation was kinda "it's done now", so it's fine, and just I don't need to

worry about that, it's done and dusted."

However, despite being certain that she does not want children, Alice also acknowledged that the choice was not a free one, and not hers alone, that the culture and environment in which she lived also impacted on her capacity to choose, and the choices she made:

Alice: "Yeah, that's why I think if you contextualised it in terms of the environment,

then it, it, it is a choice, but it's not. I j, I just, choice gives the impression that it's a

free choice, and I don't think, it's not free choice, I think it's a constrained,

contextualised choice."

Therefore, the third key category of '*relating to mothering'* weaves together constructions around '*disappointing others', 'imagining a life with a child'* and *'being open to change'*. These sub-categories illustrated the tangle and tussle for some of the participants in choosing to be childfree, and actively demonstrated how an individual's account could synthesise as well as contradict their actions and constructions. For example, some participants imagined a life with a child, connecting to a fantasy alternative life. In so doing, they connected to emotions such as guilt and shame around disappointing others, fear of pain or resentment in response to not being 'enough' in the parenting relationship, whilst also acknowledging the potential for pleasure and risk of regret.

Theoretical sampling – Moving the analysis forward

Having completed the initial analysis of the interview data, I was left with a tentative set of categories, and what seemed to be the start of a grounded theory. However, I had a sense of thinness in areas of the analysis, which the data I'd explored so far didn't satisfactorily cover. I therefore decided to widen my analysis to include theoretical sampling. Charmaz defines theoretical sampling as "strategic, specific, and systematic… you use it to elaborate and refine your theoretical categories… This pivotal grounded theory strategy helps you to delineate and develop the properties of your category and its range of variation" (p.199). I recognised I had a wealth of data so far untapped in this research, gathered from my focus group. The focus group data had the potential to add to the current tentative grounded theory in that it was collected from a different and more diverse group of women from

those I interviewed; whilst some of the participants identified as being childfree by choice, not all the participants were, and the age range was wider than that specified for my interviewees. It therefore provided a set of data focused on the perceptions of being childfree by choice, and therefore had the potential to contribute depth to the theory I was constructing.

I started my theoretical sampling by returning to the focus group data, and conducting an initial coding exercise, very similar in practice to the initial coding I conducted on the interviews. As this was not a new skill for me, I found the process took less time. As well as holding the tentative categories of my grounded theory in mind, I was aware of the impact of the reading I had been doing in the literature. I noticed that as I coded the focus group data, this information was present for me; shaping how I saw the data. It was for this reason that I was glad to have delayed exploring the literature until after the initial coding and analysis was completed. After coding the focus group data, I was left with a collection of codes. I was curious to see how, and to what degree, the codes from the focus group connected with the categories identified so far. Through this process I was able to elaborate on the following categories:

Key category: Being the person people can't handle

Further analysis of the focus group data allowed me to develop a more fulsome understanding of the category *Being the person people can't handle,* in particular giving

texture to the sub-categories of *Being the person who's not asked about* and *Losing friends (which became Experiencing Loss).*

Sub-category: Being the person who's not asked about

Some focus group participants spoke about their experiences of having their reproductive choices 'asked' about, connecting with the tentative concept '*Being the person who's not asked about*' in the proposed theory. However, whereas the interviews identified an absence of being asked about, some focus group participants described the asking as being akin to being scrutinised. This therefore suggested a judgement of their choice by others, often experienced as a harsh judgement:

> *Den: "now that I'm over fifty now I don't get quizzed or often people prefer not to ask why I haven't got kids in case they all died or something awful happened to them, I'm barren or something like that, and I feel that as women we, we do get looked at or scrutinised even for taking that childfree choice whereas men don't"*

Den spoke of believing herself under scrutiny, at the same time as not being asked about. This described actions in conflict with each other, in the context of also being aware of a fear within the other that she would reveal something awful if asked about. Her account therefore adds depth to the experience of *Being the person people can't handle*; an experience of being feared, scrutinised and avoided.

In the interviews a tentative sub-category of 'Losing friends' was constructed from the data. However, the focus group data elaborated on the category of loss, providing a richness of narrative which allowed me to explore this category on a broader basis. One of the ways loss was spoken about was through the experience of being rejected or considered weird:

> *Lorna: "…the normal state of affairs and so you're, there is some sort of aberration that you're choosing that route"*

> *Magenta: "I'd like to be volunteering, I'd like to be helping out with the kids in my street, and I'd like to start a playing out, and that kind of thing, but I know that that's weird. Everyone's gonna be kind of like 'what are you doing, you don't have children, why do you care?'"*

Conversely, Alice spoke of the experience of people holding negative assumptions about her, and then discovering how these perceptions are not appropriate:

> *Alice: "that's part of the whole erm negative connotation thing that goes around women who choose not to have children and therefore surprised when you can do that and still be a good person"*

In Lorna, Magenta and Alice's accounts there was an awareness of being judged harshly by others and risking rejection for their chosen ways of relating to children. This suggested a dissonance between how they were perceived by others (i.e. as weird), and how they perceived themselves (i.e. as a good person). Indeed, Alice spoke observed surprise in others, as they experienced her as a 'good person' as well as a childfree person, providing

further depth to the actions I saw within the key category of *being the person people can't handle.*

Looking at the focus group data, I was struck by a sense of loss across a broader level within the narratives. I connected to a sense of loss of what might have been, and with it, a loss as a consequence of not having a clear model or framework for a childfree identity; a loss of secure identity or place in society, as well as loss of connection and loss of friendships.

> *Sam: "I'm getting to the age of soon I wouldn't biologically be able to give birth, I'm, I am feeling grief"… "and I feel like I'd like to have a child to love, but we've got enough people in the world, what world, wh what's the world turning into, I'm not sure I'd want bring a child into it"*

> *Magenta: "it is kind of grieving actually, it really is (pause), grieving for, for in a way allowing myself to be that selfish, for making a tiny version of the person that I love, like that would be quite cool, but that's quite narcissistic in a way so not necessarily worth it"*

> *Bren: "there's quite a lot of grief involved with having children because actually you don't always, you know, you don't always end up with what you thought you were gonna end up with"… "you've missed a lot of opportunities actually to do amazing things in the world that you might have done"*

The participants connected to and articulated their experience of grief in response to being childfree; that in taking action (or experiencing an absence of action such as with Sam), a loss was felt in response to the awareness of the potential for another way of being. Indeed, as the categories for the proposed grounded theory gained more depth, it seemed to me

that the loss described was an understandable consequence of *being the person people can't handle*. If the cultural narrative around another way of being was one of acceptance, *experiencing loss* would be a very understandable response to choosing, or living, in ways which challenged the dominant narrative.

In the context of *being the person people can't handle,* as well as the risk of *experiencing loss,* some participants spoke about strategizing in order to reduce their exposure to these negative attitudes:

> Bren: "[my sister] deliberately staved off marriage into her 40's just so people wouldn't you know, sort of, if she'd have married in her 30's she knows damn well people would have said every 5 minutes 'oo it's the patter of tiny feet yet' and all that drivel"

In reflecting on the attitudes observed in others, some participants spoke about how they observed these attitudes as oppressive:

> Bren: "each of us arrives here with the right to live however we choose to live, you know, er and that doesn't, you know, that's not gonna be the same for everybody, and I worry about the language around it, I worry about the sorts of pressures, I worry about the digs"

> Fiona: "I kind of read all the statistics about how you're less likely to get employed if you're a young woman because you might be about to have a kid, which is just terrifying and awful"

These accounts therefore provided access to a deeper exploration of the ambivalence around the decision to being childfree by choice. They expanded on the experience of *being the person people can't handle*; giving rise to both scrutiny and avoidance, as well as *experiencing loss* on a physical level as well as a personal grief in response to what might have been.

Key category: Being available

Many participants acknowledged the value and availability provided through not being a parent:

> Lorna: *"I think that there's definitely actually being able to invest that energy into working with young people who don't have other people doing those things for them, in a way that perhaps I couldn't do it, if I was also bringing up my own children."*

> Magenta: *"in some ways I find it gives me, yeah, I do have the time and the energy into it"*

Across the contributions, several participants spoke of their capacity to be available for others, recognising the role they play in family and community life:

> Magenta: *"I'm the spare adult, erm, and I'm you know I'm the extra family member for my, my friends with children"*

> Alice: *"I can help other people's children become the people who we'd want to be when they grow up"*

> Bren: *"you can be childfree and still be very involved with your family"*

Directly contrasting with the personal experiences shared in group, were accounts describing the expectations of others about the childfree:

> *Bren: "the expectation that, that if you don't have a child you don't care about your nieces or nephews and that family doesn't mean anything to you, which is quite a long way from the truth actually"*

> *Alice: "[My uncle]'s worked every Christmas since we were born because he doesn't have children so he'll take the Christmas shift, and it is that expectation that he'll be there"*

These accounts developed the category of *being available* further, in that they spoke of the different ways in which being childfree offered a valuable contribution to family and community life. The accounts also spoke of the blocks to encountering that value through unhelpful expectations; again, coming back to the categories of *being the person people can't handle, being the person not asked about, and experiencing loss.*

The focus group data provided depth and elaboration on the key category 'Being available' constructed after the analysis of the interview data. The respondents spoke of the energy, capacity and a willingness or desire to participate actively with family or community that being childfree potentially offers. Where the focus group participants were particularly expressive was in drawing on their personal experiences of being childfree in terms of recognising the valuable contribution to family and community life.

Sub-category: Rejecting Notions of womanhood

The focus group participants reflected on their understandings and experiences of being a woman. Across the accounts many participants shared their experience of rejecting assumptions, and observing differences in treatment of men and women:

> Lorna: *"she never asked my brother (breathes out). You know, maybe once a year he gets the question, the rest, the the two women get it all the time and say, it's so, you know, it really is attached to female identity"*

> Bren: *"it's attached to our identity, it's attached to notions of femininity and masculinity, and that's the problem that they're not challenged in any meaningful way, unfortunately. Erm, and I think particularly, you know around this issue there's no, no really challenge to any man's masculinity"*

Another participant spoke of acting to protect herself as she is, fearing that her identity or sense of self would not remain intact if she were to become a mother:

> Alice: *"I can't be the person that I am because I would be part of them, so I'd lose a bit of me to make that, and I don't wanna do that really (laughs)"*

These accounts elaborated on the actions of the participants living in the world as a woman, and the consequences of choosing to live as a childfree woman. The respondents' accounts suggested that to live as a woman and not a mother challenged expectations of what was expected of you as a woman. Additionally, when considered in this context, Alice's expressed fear of losing part of herself communicated a potential source of internal conflict around identity; if being a mother risked being less of herself, being a woman and not a mother risked not being viewed fully as a woman.

One of the participants spoke of a sense of searching for a place to fit; which could be viewed as a potential consequence of rejecting traditional notions of womanhood;

> Magenta: *"I'm kind of 'what do I, so what do I do?' You know I'm looking for a role model of someone who is childfree by choice"*

This category again connected closely to the category *Rejecting notions of womanhood* identified in the interview data. Participants connected to a sense of being lost; experiencing an absence of a clear and valued representation of being a childfree woman in society. Rather they encountered unhelpful stereotypes, and also a challenge or resistance to exploring ways of living as a woman, as female and questioning the intrinsic connection of being a woman to being a mother.

Sub-category: Imagining a life with a child

As with the interviews, some participants of the focus group connected to an imagined life with a child. In response to this imagined life, participants shared the doubts they had regarding their own capabilities as parents:

> Den: *"I've always said if I happen to have children they'd be in care within months!"*

> Alice: *"I think having children is an incredibly selfish thing to do, you're creating another bit of you, which means you think you're good enough for there be another you"*

In contrast, some participants resisted the attempts by others to define their actions or attitudes by a parenting frame.

Sam: *"my mum used to say as I was growing up 'you've got good child bearing hips'"*

Bren: *"I don't know whether I'm not normal, but it's certainly not the most fulfilling thing I've ever done, and I've done it a lot of times"*

Interestingly Den seemed to pick up on this when reflecting on something Lorna shared:

Lorna: *"well by making that decision you're already parenting' it's kind of like 'no, I'm not, stop defining me by what, by that'. She's like 'you're taking, you're being responsible'"*

Den (in reflection): *"by choosing not to parent that makes you a good parent"*

And within this imagined life, some participants spoke of aspects of repulsion:

Alice: *"[a friend] said it's like being part of a disgusting club that no one ever told her about"*

Bren: *"I too have literally cried with boredom, cri, literally, not not joking and cried because I've been with intelligent women and they they've tried to engage me in a debate about whether Pampas or Padous mop up more shit"*

As part of imagining a life with a child, some participants shared their feelings and responses to the physical changes associated with pregnancy:

Den: *"No way, the thought of being pregnant urgh"*

Magenta: *"erm yeah, yeah, quite quite afraid of it actually"*

These accounts provide deeper insights into how *imagining a life with a child* can be constructed and actioned in the context of being childfree. Through connecting to the child, the participants expressed care for the child's wellbeing as well as giving a critical appraisal to their own capabilities. There was an acknowledgment of the personal and physical impact of birthing children, and an emotional response to this imagined life. There were contrasting responses to the experience of being viewed through a parenting lens; some participants expressed acceptance of this, whereas others rejected this perspective.

Sub-category: Disappointing others

The focus group participants spoke of the expectations of child-raising, recognising that the reality of this experience can be a changeable one, and has the capacity to disappoint:

> Lorna: "I was having loads of them, you know, big farmhouse out in the country full of babies, it was going to be amazing"

> Den: "there's then the expectation that you're gonna turn them into wonderfully well-educated successful young people, so what if you don't?"

> Bren: "you're going to have a baby and nobody talks about that, you're not actually, you're going to have an adult"

Some of the focus group participants spoke of their perceptions and expectations of being disappointed in family life; that there were aspects of community and cultural life which they experience or witness as harmful:

Alice: "wherever children are so much a part of life that everybody parents really, and we don't do that we sort of insulate ourselves into our little families and feel this massive responsibility"

Magenta: "I'd like to be in a world where I can help out with everybody's kids and everybody's grandmas (pause) really"

The focus group participants contemplated ideas of mothering far more than the interview participants. Perhaps this was not surprising as the purpose of the group was to explore understandings, rather than explore the actions and constructions in being childfree by choice. They considered what it meant to be a mother, in terms of both biology and the lived experience. These considerations took an ambivalent frame; some participants speaking of a pull towards this experience, and others feeling repelled or frightened of it, reflective of the mix of parents and non-parents in the group. They also recognised the fantasy element of mothering and the relationship with the child; recognising the role of expectation in respect of both being a mother, and towards the child. Beyond direct mothering though, in connecting to the idea of 'being a spare adult' came reflections on family relationships and noticing the importance of these connections and relationships. There was also an acknowledgement of the hurt experienced in response to others seemingly to under-value these relationships, an attitude which did not align with the experiences of the participants. Additionally, they shared powerful emotional responses to this perceived unfairness, as well as to the idea of not being 'selfish' enough to have their own children.

In summary therefore, the final constructed grounded theory consisted of three key 'condition' categories; *Being the person people can't handle; Relating to mothering; and Being available.* These key categories are supported by a set of sub-categories expressing the 'actions' of the participants; *Not being asked about, Experiencing loss;* and *Rejecting notions of womanhood.* Resulting in 'consequences' of *Being the person that's not understandable;* and *Living a fulfilling life.*

Discussion

The grounded theory proposed in this study describes the psychological and relational processes involved in how being childfree by choice is constructed by British women who identify with this term. Additionally, it illuminates how being childfree by choice influences the participant's views of themselves, how they talk about their choice to be childfree, and how living as childfree by choice impacts on key aspects of their lives. The theory was influenced by my social constructionist and feminist positions, and my insider position as a woman who has also identified as childfree by choice. The aim of this research project was to build on and contribute to the body of work in this field, relating to interests across the social sciences sensitive to aspects of power, gender and culture. I have therefore linked my research findings to feminist research and psychoanalytic theory, as well as positioning it in the context of theoretical constructions of 'the other' and existing research on being childfree by choice.

In summary, the constructed grounded theory is as follows: The first key category is *Being the person people can't handle.* Participants described experiences of suffering

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discrimination, oppression and being perceived negatively by others. These experiences were associated with the painful actions of *being the person who's not asked about* and *experiencing loss.* Participants described their childfree-ness in terms of how this has impacted on their depth of relationship and connection with others, noting experiences of avoidance, neglect and shame. Participants articulated their experience of tension; recognising the pull to protect themselves and others from potential harm, as well as experiencing harm through others' inattention in the context of appreciating close bonds and valuing their relationships. Consequently, participants described constructions around *being the person who's not understandable.*

The second key category is *Being available.* This was described in several different ways across the accounts, reflecting the flexibility the participants perceived they had as a result of not being in a direct parenting role. This was described in terms of physical availability, as well as emotional and mental availability. The actions constructed within this key category oriented around *rejecting notions of womanhood*; in order to experience availability and flexibility there was an active recognition of a movement away from traditional gender expectations. The experience of challenging gender norms provoked a process of self-reflection for many of the contributors, and as a result, they described idiosyncratic negotiations and constructions around their understanding of *living a fulfilling life.*

The third key category is *Relating to mothering.* This category describes the constructions and concepts associated with mothering as referenced by the participants. This was a strong feature of many of the accounts, reflecting the power of observation through lived

experience, transgenerational expectations, and witnessing the lives of others. This key category was associated with the actions of *disappointing others* and *imagining a life with a child.* These actions led to a constructed consequence of *being open to change.*

The key categories of *Being the person people can't handle, Being available* and *Relating to mothering* were all 'conditions' constructed from the participants narratives in relation to being childfree by choice. In this way, the theory describes the participants' negotiations in navigating the tensions and harms of living differently, their reflections on how living in this way impacts on their capacity to value difference, and the emotional response to reflecting on aspects of gendered expectation and experience. The narratives reflect how the respondents are conflicted, upset and disturbed by crossing a deep social binary.

The rationales given for being childfree identified in the literature included "freedom from childcare responsibility and greater opportunity for self-fulfilment and spontaneous mobility" (Houseknecht, 1987 cited in Blackstone et al, 2012). A later study (Carmichael and Whittaker, 2007, cited in Blackstone et al, 2012) included the following reasons cited by childfree women; "an aversion to the lifestyle changes that come with parenthood, an explicit rejection of the maternal role, selfishness, and either feeling unsuited, or proficient but unwilling to take on the role of parent." Whilst these elements are evident in the categories of *Being available* and *Relating to mothering*, what the previous research has failed to cover are the meanings and constructions made by women of their experiences. For example, rather than the pursuit of career being a selfish endeavour, my research strongly suggests this to be perceived by the participants a generative endeavour; offering

something of value to a greater number of people, rather than limiting one's efforts and resources to one's own offspring.

In rationalizing the decision to be childfree Park (2002) noted the emotional content of these motives; yet the participants in my study described their decision as a means to an end goal of a happier life. They thereby avoided the perceived negative outcomes of the parenting experience, again evidenced in the tensions between *Being available* and *Relating to mothering.* Additionally, Park identified that many women perceived motherhood as compromising on career and leisure identities that were currently experienced as satisfying and something to be continued. Whilst my work connects with these motives, Park's work ends with the perception that career and leisure identities would be compromised; whereas by exploring the constructions and actions in the narratives of my participants I identify what these careers and leisure activities mean to the women. My research challenges the assumption of a compromise to a selfish endeavour; rather motherhood is frequently seen by my participants as a way of curtailing pursuits which are of value beyond the individual. They nurture the self, others, the family and the community at large.

Research on childless adults in later life (Rempel, 1985; Wu and Hart, 2002) suggests that childfree adults are adaptive in their creation of strong support networks, raising interesting questions around the notion of 'what is family?' My research, particularly around the category of *Being available* and descriptions of being a 'spare adult' highlights the valued contribution to family and community my participants make, and also the value of these relationships to the participants. It demonstrates that beyond the traditional nuclear family,

the notion of 'family' is flexible, recognising the value and function of childfree adults in the development and nurturement of children, supportive adult relationships, and valued contributions to the community. This research recognises the role of the childfree adult in the context of their constructed family unit and gives voice to the perspective of those it seeks to describe.

In developing the constructed grounded theory, the actions of the participants, such as *Experiencing loss, Not being asked about,* and *Rejecting notions of womanhood* are suggestive of the influence of intergenerational attitudes towards gender, class, role, and expectations. For example, some participants referenced the assumptions and attitudes they encountered in their families. Additionally, others spoke of the credit placed on the qualities of their male partners, and the perceived loss through his not becoming a father. This contrasted with the perceived shame and judgement felt by participants at not becoming a mother despite having certain qualities in the eyes of others. This research enquiry therefore brings into consideration the way women come to understand their roles and choices about creativity and generativity in a social context. Additionally, in reflecting on this research in the context of Furman's work (Furman, 2001) there appears to be a common theme of loss between the two accounts. Whereas Furman proposes that a 'good enough' *mother* has to be available to be left, what the sub-category of *Experiencing loss* suggests is that a *woman* has to be available to be left. Participants described being childfree as a protective strategy to protect key relationships (such as with their partners), however, in so doing they experience loss of connection in other relationships. It is perhaps through deciding to protect against loss, but nevertheless experiencing it in other ways

which connects with the sense of hurt, shame and not being understood many participants describe.

Navigating a constructed grounded theory

Whilst Charmaz does not explicitly state the minimum number of interviews or data sets for a grounded theory exploration, she does suggest that as a researcher it will become clearer once the required amount of data has been gathered. As I began the process of initial coding, and then further coding, I got a sense of the outline of the theory I would go on to construct. However, I felt as though I was still missing something, and in line with Charmaz's recommendations for such a situation, I began a process of memoing and clustering. This led me to gain clarity around what I was constructing, what codes and categories I could make in the data, and where there was not enough data in the interviews to conclude this stage of the research process. As my main research questions centred around 'how' and 'why' questions, and the categories constructed seemed to require a framework through which to make sense of their connection, I began a process of axial coding, again taking heed of Charmaz's social constructionist, creative approach to this process. This gave shape to the beginnings of the grounded theory for this project and allowed me to begin a process of theoretical sampling of additional data to further deepen the constructions of the key- and sub-categories. This process of coding, reviewing and staying close to the data, allowed me to ensure that the theory I produced was grounded in the narratives of my participants, that I had followed a rigorous research process and had adapted my process as I reflected on, accommodated and expanded on points of stuck-ness and expansion. However, I found it

difficult to identify at what point it was time to stop. I struggled to balance the desire to

complete a robust analysis and to give attention to other parts of this project within the

specified time and structure limitations. It was with the support of my supervision team and

a hard deadline that these decisions were made.

Reflecting on limitations

The participants were all white, mostly middle class, predominantly straight and had

partners. I feel it is important not to naively suggest that race, class, sexuality or other

aspects of power and privilege have not influenced the findings of this research project.

Most participants in this study will have had access to education, to a voice, to financial and

personal independence; a capacity to expect to move around society in safety. The

limitations of this research are therefore clearly one of intersectionality, and certainly

invites further research. I consider it to be exceptionally valuable to be able to explore the

degrees to which British women from different ethnic, social and economic backgrounds

share or differ from the ideas developed in this project around expectations, assumptions

and actions in response to being childfree, and the degree to which a choice is experienced.

I perceive this to be imperative to the work of the Counselling Psychologist, covering aspects

such as social justice, social policy formation, and ethical clinical practice. I would suggest

the white middle class woman holds an expectation of the right to be outraged; to respond

by growing taller & louder. How is this different for someone without the same

opportunities or privileges? To what extent would a woman who does not have financial

independence, a belief in equality of voice or agency, connect to *Being the person people can't handle, Being available,* or *Relating to motherhood?*

Throughout the research project, at times I have reflected on how partners and society respond to a woman's expression of choice around being a mother. One reflective pause was initiated by an exchange I had with a fellow PhD student, a black West African man. He informed me not only of the reasons *he believed* women chose not to have children, but also why my research project was *wrong*. I was able to consider his points with interest and choose the degree to which I agreed or disagreed. However, were I to be from his culture, I wonder how safe it might be for me to express such views? There was no threat from this man to me, however, he powerfully indicated that I was promoting a view which was not tolerable. If I were a black West African woman asserting that being a mother was not for me, I wonder how this might be perceived and received? I continued to reflect on this, drawing from my own experience, and noting my own interpersonal responses in connection to *Relating to mothering* and *Being the person people can't handle.*

In recognising the degree to which my personal experiences connected with the constructed grounded theory, I was also minded of the risks or limitations of being an insider researcher. Throughout the research project I have made active use of the support of my Director of Studies, as well as maintaining a reflective journal. I found these to be invaluable practices, frequently offering me the opportunity to step back from aspects of the research and to process what was coming up for me at the time. It was through this process of reflection that I was able to stay close to what I saw in the data, not what I wanted to see through a

lens of loyalty or personal resonance. Additionally, I was able to keep going with the research by using a reflective space to process what was emotionally charged or difficult for me.

The research project has provided me with frequent and challenging opportunities for self-reflection and recognition of my own 'childbearing face'. Reading the J. Moore article *'From I'm Never Having Children' to Motherhood*, I was struck by how this resonated with my own personal experience over the years of working on this project; moving from a declared 'childfree' identity to living with a partner with children. I have noticed I feel drawn towards caregiving, love for and protection of these young people, combined with fear of rejection. I have noticed how I have responded to this change and the associated uncertainty inherent within it, rather than to continue with my 'sincerely childfree' face which I have worked hard to understand, accommodate and have respect for. I felt moved as I read of other experiences and navigations of this transition, as well as recognising the differences in my own experience.

Implications for practice

My constructed grounded theory suggests that rather than there being a clear 'way of being' in terms of constructions around being childfree, there are conflicts, tensions and negotiations in terms of inter- and intra-personal interactions. Participants seem to move between defence from or responding to external pressures and expectations, and curiosity, awareness and compassion towards internalised pressures and expectations. In terms of

implications for practice therefore, this research has identified several constructions of threat for the childfree woman, such as interpersonal threats associated with *being the person people can't handle*, as well as risking intrapersonal threats through the meaning-making process of *relating to mothering*. It is therefore important for the practitioner to be sensitive to these sources of threat in their work. As Parritt (2016) writes "the elephant in the room can, ironically, become what is outside the room, where there is a narrative of oppression and exclusion in everyday language." The constructed grounded theory therefore provides a powerful acknowledgement of experiences of threat and harm associated with living differently to the dominant cultural narrative. For the participants of this study, this offers validation of their experiences, and strength to the generative endeavours associated with *living a fulfilling life.* In recognising the power of culture, words and language in their work, the Counselling Psychologist is well placed not only to provide a therapeutic relationship grounded in empathy and the client's emotional experience, but to also recognise the wider social justice implications of living in a gendered culture.

In the early literature around deviance and defences an assumption was perpetuated that childfree women were defending against the narcissistic wound or investment of motherhood (Blackstone et al, 2012). My theory suggests that whilst there could well be defences at play, the defences are against being harmed by the culture in which the participants live. The participants spoke of how this cultural harm threatened key aspects of themselves, which they held dear in terms of their values & identity (e.g. generativity through education, activism, altruism, relationship) thereby highlighting the strengths & potential of women (a key feminist tenet). Furman (2001) described the actions of mothers

who cannot bear to be there to be left; they avoid being left by taking themselves out of the situation. My theory challenges the proposition that women who are childfree by choice are avoiding being left. Rather my grounded theory suggests an avoidance of being disconnected from that which the participants found fulfilling and meaningful. The theory suggests that a consequence of the necessary investment in creating a child, participants perceived their personal sources of meaning and fulfilment to be under threat. It is therefore important for practitioners to recognise the tension between clients' defensive actions in the context of a culture experienced as harmful and the movement towards fulfilment, creativity and generativity.

Implications for research

The category *Being the person people can't handle* communicates something of not being acceptable, and therefore not safe. In terms of further research in the area of living childfree, it is important for researchers to recognise the risks felt by potential participants in participating in such research projects. The experience of recruiting for this project, despite being met by warm and enthusiastic responses, suggested that this is a powerful area for further study, but in order to recruit non-white, non-middle-class participants, particular focus needs to be paid to the aspects of shame, judgement, and the cultural norms and expectations associated with gender, reproduction and power.

Relating to mothering again suggests implications for research. In challenging the normative stance, this strikes me as perhaps connecting to a wider theme of contemplating and responding to a cultural narrative, witnessed across the UK, Europe and US in such movements as #metoo, as well as evidenced more broadly through increased unrest and an increased political polarisation. Conducting further research on what is understood by motherhood, and the implications of these assumptions may open new meanings for ways of relating, connecting ideas of family, community and policy.

As a profession, Counselling Psychology is committed to "promoting the wellbeing of our diverse society" (BPS, 2019), grounded on principles of social justice, equality, compassion and collaboration, in order to meet the psychological needs of people. The constructed grounded theory produced in this research clearly speaks to psychological experiences of threat and finding a life of value. The profession is therefore ideally placed to build on this original research; to explore experiences of living childfree further, to give colour and shape to perceptions of being childfree on a wider social level. Through so doing, there is great potential to nurture empathy and appreciation for an increasingly common way of living, and therefore make impactful and positive social change.

Recommendations for practice

I consider this research project to be a valuable and original contribution to the field of Counselling Psychology, as well as feminist psychology. The research project has provided

an opportunity to update practitioners' awareness of social change, attitudes and

awareness of social identity; thereby helping to maintain therapeutic awareness in a culture

where we are sensitised to gender, choice and conflict.

From a psychology perspective, the categories of *Being the person people can't handle* and

Relating to mothering highlight potential sources of inter- and intra-personal threat for the

childfree woman, in response to the culture in which she lives. For the practitioner,

awareness of these potential sources of threat and conflict informs sensitive and culturally

aware practice, contributing to creating an environment in which the childfree client may

safely explore personal responses and processes. The 'elephant in the room' is made visible,

thereby challenging experiences of oppression and exclusion. Additionally, the category of

Living a fulfilling life invites a focus of attention towards the different ways in which a

woman may experience her strengths and potential; thereby contributing to a movement

towards fulfilment and living a valued life. This grounded theory therefore makes a valuable

contribution not only informing the practice of Counselling Psychology, and the associated

values of social justice, individual and community wellbeing, but also to the fields of

Feminist and Community psychology and the wider social sciences.

From a policy and practice perspective, *Being the person people can't handle* suggests a

rationale for revisiting aspects of ethical practice in terms of equality and inclusion. For

example, in the UK pregnancy and maternity are protected characteristics under the

Equalities Act 2010. Under the Act, discrimination occurs when someone is treated less

favourably on the basis of a particular characteristic or treats others who do not have the

same characteristic differently. I would therefore argue that the attitudes and expectations levied towards many of the participants in this study based on the *intentional absence* of pregnancy and maternity is one of ethical and inclusive concern. For example, that because they do not have children, they have experienced unfavourable treatment such as around expectations for their availability to work, their time, energy and interests, as well as assumed aspects of their personal characteristics. I therefore make a recommendation that consideration is given to what this means in terms of ethical practice for service management and individual practitioners, bringing into awareness the potential harm of living differently to expected norms, and the vulnerability this provides to discriminatory actions and practice.

Recommendations for research

This new grounded theory makes a valuable contribution to the field of psychology, and to qualitative research into the experience of living as a childfree woman. However, the participants of this study, and much of the associated literature, were white, predominantly heterosexual and well educated. Further research in the field of living as a woman who is childfree within an intersectional framework would be valuable in order to better understand the conditions and actions which contribute to this experience across gender, race, sexual orientation and class. This would be an important piece of feminist research and in line with the Counselling Psychologist's mandate to support social justice. However, the constructed theory, *Being the person people can't handle*, as well as the findings of previous research, is indicative of risk associated with identifying as being childfree by

choice. In order to recruit a more diverse research population, attention is needed in terms of participant safety in research. The recruitment for this study invited women to self-identify as being childfree by choice, and to volunteer to participate in academic research conducted by a stranger, who's name suggested they were British. Having reflected on the recruitment strategy for this study, I would recommend several adaptations to attract a more diverse group of respondents. Firstly, the term 'childfree by choice' may not be the most culturally neutral or diverse term to use. Whilst this undoubtedly resonated with the participants of this study, it was the use of these words which prompted many of the participants to come forward in the first place. I would therefore recommend further community-based research focused on identifying terms used to describe women who choose not to have children, and to reference these terms in recruitment for further study. Additionally, I would recommend that the researcher be community based, and that recruitment adopt an in-person community out-reach approach rather than utilising online communities. By being more identifiable and known within the community, this may provide a greater level of safety for the participants, whilst also taking all appropriate steps to ensure anonymity to protect the participants. These recommendations recognise the significant value of continued research into the lived experience of being a childfree woman to ongoing community, feminist and applied psychology. However, much of the research to date has been based on white, educated women and this is a limitation. If further research is to continue to make a valued contribution, I would suggest it needs to adequately consider multiple aspects of power and difference. It is therefore important on an ethical and political basis to endeavour to support further intersectional research in this field.

The categories of *Relating to mothering* and *Being the person people can't handle* describe the at times confronting and challenging encounters with a dominant cultural narrative. However, this research has also constructed the actions involved in *Living a fulfilling life*. The constructed grounded theory is a consideration of the experience of being a woman who is childfree by choice. However, the theory has also recognised actions and constructions involved in responding to assumptions and constructions of what it is to be a person living in a gendered society. Therefore, in order to support more women, more effectively, in living in a fulfilled way, it seems vital to develop this research further. This research study has recognised the tensions between *Being the person people can't handle* and *Living a fulfilling life,* i.e inter- and intra-personal conflicts. I would therefore suggest that further research into understandings of family, ways of relating and community has the potential to educate and contribute to both individual and community wellbeing, as well as to inform policy development, clinical practice, and the feminist agenda.

Conclusion

The culture in which we live has the potential to harm us, as well as to support us in our growth, development and fulfilment. This research project has demonstrated the delicate navigation of our pro-natalist culture by a group of women who have often been vilified, overlooked or second-guessed. What this research has shown is the ways in which the process of living, following one's own path and experiencing the response of others to it can bruise us, but also offer hope, courage and inspiration. In concluding this research, I have

been struck by the boldness, the courage and the generosity of the women who took part.

As this project was intended to give voice to women who so often have not been heard, I would like to give the last word to Den; *"When are we doing this again?"*

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Appendices

Appendix one – Ethical approval

University of the West of England
BRISTOL

Faculty of Health & Applied Sciences
Glenside Campus
Blackberry Hill
Stapleton
Bristol   BS16 1DD

Tel: 0117 328 1170

UWE REC REF No: HAS/15/05/171

12th June 2015

Mary Hill

█████████

Dear Mary

Application title: A Road (Slightly) Less Travelled: A qualitative exploration of British women's identity who are childfree through choice

Your ethics application was considered by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee and, based on the information provided, has been given ethical approval to proceed with the following conditions:

1. I am not really clear about the relationship between the focus group stage of this research and the interviews. Would the participants for both focus group and interviews be drawn from the same pool of women? In the application the researcher indicates that the focus group will take place 'prior' to the data collection and that the focus group will highlight a range of views, perspectives and understandings around the research area, which will then inform the recruitment and data collection. If this is the case, I don't think we can give ethical approval for the data collection stage now since this could change. I am happy to approve the focus group stage but if I understand the above correctly we would need to see a further application once the researcher had finalised her recruitment protocols.
2. The consent forms need to be simplified so that consent by ticking a box is being given to each statement. At the moment there are 2 paragraphs of implicit consent and then some statements with tick boxes. Everything needing consent needs a tick box.

3. The consent and information sheets need a UWE logo on.
4. I am uncomfortable with the consent form asking for the pseudonym and the signature on the same form. This could lead to a breach of confidentiality.
5. The information sheet provides a mobile phone number for the researcher. This should not be the researchers' personal mobile number.
6. The information sheet refers to the 'School of Life Sciences Ethics Committee' which does not exist.

If these conditions include providing further information please do not proceed with your research until you have full approval from the committee. You must notify the committee in advance if you wish to make any significant amendments to the original application using the amendment form at http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/hls/research/researchethicsandgovernance.aspx.

Please note that any information sheets and consent forms should have the UWE logo. Further guidance is available on the web:
http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/aboutus/departmentsandservices/professionalservices/marketingandcommunications/resources.aspx

The following standard conditions also apply to all research given ethical approval by a UWE Research Ethics Committee:

1. You must notify the relevant UWE Research Ethics Committee in advance if you wish to make significant amendments to the original application: these include any changes to the study protocol which have an ethical dimension. Please note that any changes approved by an external research ethics committee must also be communicated to the relevant UWE committee.
2. You must notify the University Research Ethics Committee if you terminate your research before completion;
3. You must notify the University Research Ethics Committee if there are any serious events or developments in the research that have an ethical dimension.

Please note: The UREC is required to monitor and audit the ethical conduct of research involving human participants, data and tissue conducted by academic staff, students and researchers. Your project may be selected for audit from the research projects submitted to and approved by the UREC and its committees.

We wish you well with your research.

Yours sincerely
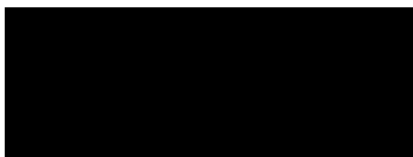
Dr Julie Woodley
Chair
Faculty Research Ethics Committee

c.c *Nigel Williams*

Age	Employment	Sexuality	Relationship status	Ethnic background	Social Class	Disability	Children
38	Full time Playwork	Bisexual	Partnered	White	Aspirational middle	No	No children Has wanted children and believes able to conceive
42	Full time Coach, teacher, circus performer	Hetero-sexual	Single	White	Middle class	No	No children Has wanted children and believes able to conceive
59	Part time Administrator	Hetero-sexual	Separated	White	Educated working class	Yes	Has children Has wanted children and believes able to conceive
45	Full time Retail manager	Hetero-sexual	Single	White	Originally working class, moving towards middle	No	No children Not sure if wanted children and believes able to conceive

| 51 | Registered disabled | Hetero-sexual | Partnered | White | Middle class | Yes | No children

Has not wanted children and believes able to conceive |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 35 | Full time Teacher | Lesbian | Single | White | Middle class | No | No children

Has not wanted children and believes able to conceive |
| 25 | Full time student | Hetero-sexual | Partnered | White | Working class | No | No children

Has not wanted children and believes able to conceive |

Understandings of 'Childfree Through Choice' Focus Group Participant Information Sheet

I am Mary Hill, a Counselling Psychology doctoral student at the University of the West of England. I am looking at women's experiences of being childfree through choice.

Increasing numbers of women are remaining childfree, however, the psychological research has tended to overlook this group of women in favour of exploring aspects of motherhood. My aim in this project is to explore the lived experience of being childfree through choice, particularly with reference to aspects of personal identity.

The focus group will explore understandings of being 'childfree through choice' and will inform the format and nature of subsequent research and interviews.

What are you being invited to take part in?

I would like to invite you to be part of a group discussion focussed on the theme of being childfree through choice.

One of the purposes of focus groups is to closely replicate how we express views and form opinions in real life. This means you will be expected to talk to each other, as well as to the moderator, and to indicate when you agree or disagree with each other. I am interested in your views and opinions on the topic of being childfree through choice and I'd like the focus group to be a lively discussion; there are no right or wrong answers to the questions you will be asked to discuss. Before the focus group you will be invited to answer some demographic questions. This is to help me gain a sense of who is taking part in the research.

Who is eligible to participate?

Any woman over the age of 30. You do not need to identify as childfree through choice to participate.

What will participation in the focus group involve?

The focus group will involve between 5-8 participants and one moderator, and will be audio-recorded. It should last around an hour. In the group, you will be asked to talk about issues relating to your understanding of childfree through choice. The questions will relate to your perspectives and views, as well as your own individual experiences.

What should you expect from the experience?

You will be provided with a consent form to read and sign. You will also be invited to choose a pseudonym for the purposes of anonymity. You will also be asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire. I will discuss what is going to happen in the group and you will be given an opportunity to ask any questions that you might have. I will then ask everyone to agree on some ground rules for the group (e.g., avoiding speaking over other people, being respectful and considerate of other people's feelings). Once everyone is happy for the group to begin, I will switch on the recording device and ask the first question! You will be given another opportunity to ask questions at the end of the group.

What are the benefits of taking part?

You will get the opportunity to participate in and contribute to a valuable research project. You will also get the opportunity to participate in a (hopefully) lively and interesting discussion, and to share and develop your views on an important social issue.

University of the West of England
BRISTOL

Will you be identifiable?

The focus group will be transcribed either by me or a hired transcriber, and I will make sure the transcript is anonymised so that any personally identifying information has been changed or removed. Despite my efforts to protect against this, there may remain the possibility that people who know you very well may be able to identify your contributions to the focus group if you are quoted in extracts from the focus group that are used in journal articles, conference presentations and other academic outputs.

Are there any risks involved?

There are no particular significant risks involved in this project, and we do not anticipate that it will cause distress or harm. The *general* 'risks' of participating in focus groups on any topic centre on the potential to become upset by a particular question or topic (e.g., if a question reminds you of a distressing personal experience), or by another participant's comments or behaviour. If you feel distressed as a result of participating in the focus group, the following website lists free and low cost counselling services in Bristol and South Gloucestershire. http://www.bristolmind.org.uk/bsn/counselling.htm.

How do you withdraw from the research?

Participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide you want to withdraw from the research after participating in the focus group please contact me. Please note that there are certain points beyond which it will be impossible to withdraw from the research – for instance, when we have published papers reporting our analysis of the data. Therefore, please contact me within a month of participation if you wish to withdraw your data.

How will the data be used?

The data will be used in research. The transcript will be anonymised (i.e., any information that can identify you – people's names, places etc. - will be removed). Once anonymised, the data will be analysed for our research, and anonymised extracts from the data may be quoted in any publications and conference presentations arising from the research.

The demographic data for all of the participants will be compiled into a table and reported in any publications or presentations arising from the research.

The information you provide will be treated confidentially (within the constraints outlined above) and personally identifiable details will be kept separately from the data. Agreeing to take part in this research means that you agree to this use of the information you provide.

If you have any questions about this research please contact me on the details below:

Email: mary3.hill@live.uwe.ac.uk

For queries regarding any concerns about this research, please contact:

Director of Studies: Nigel Williams, Department of Psychology, The University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol, BS16 1QY

Consent Form for Understandings of Childfree Through Choice Focus Group

I.. (insert name) confirm I am am over 16 years of age and agree to participate in this research.

Please tick the following boxes to confirm your agreement:

☐ I have been informed about the nature of the research project and the nature of my participation in this project.

☐ I understand that my participation is voluntary and I have been informed of my right to withdraw from the research at any time (within a month of participation, as specified in the information sheet), without giving a reason. I understand that any information I provide will be kept confidentially (where possible).

☐ I agree to participate in a focus group on the topic of understandings of childfree through choice.

☐ I agree to the focus group being audio-recorded and transcribed for the purposes of research conducted by Mary Hill (UWE). I understand that anonymised extracts of the focus group may be quoted in doctoral thesis, journal articles and conference presentations and in other academic outputs.

☐ I agree to the collection of demographic data that will be compiled into a table and reported in any publications or presentations arising from the research.

☐ I agree that the demographic data I provide can be compiled into a table and included in an online qualitative data archive.

Signed:...

Date:..

NB This sheet will be kept separately from the focus group transcript and audio file and demographic data.

This research has been approved by the Faculty of Health and Applied Sciences Ethics Committee

Childfree Through Choice Focus Group Guide

<u>Set up by highlighting the following:</u>

- I'm seeking their thoughts, views and opinions; that nothing is right or wrong
- Participants are welcome, though not obliged, to talk about their personal experiences
- Some of the questions will be about real issues, and some will be speculative

<u>Ice-breaker</u>

- Invite everyone to give their pseudonym and briefly say what their super power would be if they had one (I set a light hearted tone by going first).

<u>Starting questions</u>

- What's the first thing that comes to mind when I say 'childfree through choice'
- What's the first thing you think about when I say 'childlessness'
- What do you think about women who don't want children? Is this different from your thoughts about men who don't want children?
- Who would you consider as being childfree through choice? (what other lifestyle factors would make you think someone was childfree through choice)

<u>Further questions</u>

- Why do you think some women don't have children?
  - Fertility?
  - Desire?
  - Career?
  - Economics?
  - Relationship status?
  - Sexual orientation?
  - Environmental concerns?

- Some women talk about a clock ticking & a maternal urge. Do you think that's normal for women?
  - What do you think about women who don't have these feelings?

- Do you think women can really know if they do or don't want children without parenthood?
- Do you think it's acceptable not to have children?
- What media messages have you encountered about women choosing not to have children?
  - Do you think the media portrays these women in a certain way? If yes, how do you feel about this?

<u>Closing</u>

- Do you have any other thoughts or views you'd like to share?

- Can you tell me why you decided to participate in this focus group?
- What has it felt like to participate in a focus group? Is it what you expected?

Age	Employment	Sexuality	Relationship status	Ethnic background	Social Class	Disability	Children
42	Full time University research fellow	Hetero-sexual	Married	White British	Middle class (from a working class background)	No	No children Has not wanted children Sterilized when 27 by choice
37	Full time HR Manager	Hetero-sexual	Married / civil partnership	White	Middle class	No	No children Has not wanted children and believes able to conceive
43	Full time University lecturer	Bisexual	Partnered	White	Working class upbringing, Middle class adulthood	No	No children Has not wanted children and believes able to conceive
38	Unemployed	Hetero-sexual	Married / civil partnership	White	Middle class	No	No children Has not wanted children and believes able to conceive
38	Full time Marketing Manager	Hetero-sexual	Partnered	White	Middle class	No	No children Has wanted children

							and believes able to conceive
41	Full time Employment law specialist	Hetero-sexual	Married / civil partnership	White	Middle class	No	No children Has not wanted children and believes able to conceive
39	Full time Teacher	Hetero-sexual	Married / civil partnership	White	Middle class	No	No children Has not wanted children and believes able to conceive

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

'A Road (Slightly) Less Travelled: A qualitative exploration of British women's identity who are childfree through choice'

My name is Mary Hill. I am a doctoral student in the Department of Psychology at the University of the West of England. I am conducting a research project looking at the lived experiences of women who are childfree through choice. The project aims to look at aspects of personal identity for women who choose to be childfree, and how this relates to their experience of life, purpose and value, creativity, personal power, and to also consider these experiences in the context of established psychological theory.

What are you being invited to take part in?

I would like to invite you to participate in a single confidential interview, conducted by me, exploring aspects of your life and experiences as influenced by being childfree through choice.

The interview would last between one and one and a half hours, and take place at a time that suits you. Interviews will cover a range of topics related to identity. As this will be an in-depth discussion of a personal topic, there is a slight chance you might find it upsetting in some way, although I hope you will find it enjoyable and interesting. The interview would, with your consent, be audio recorded, and will be transcribed, either by me or potentially by a third person hired specifically for this purpose. This person will be required to retain strict confidentiality regarding the information transcribed.

Before the interview you will be invited to answer some demographic questions. This is to help me gain a sense of who is taking part in the research.

Who is eligible to participate?

Any woman between the ages of 35 and 49, who identifies as being childfree through choice.

What should you expect from the experience?

You will be provided with a consent form to read and sign. You will also be invited to choose a pseudonym for the purposes of anonymity. You will also be asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire. I will discuss what is going to happen and you will be given an opportunity to ask any questions that you might have. You will be given another opportunity to ask questions at the end of the interview.

What are the benefits of taking part?

You will get the opportunity to participate in and contribute to a valuable research project. You will also get the opportunity to share and develop your views on an important social issue.

Will you be identifiable?

The interview will be transcribed either by me or a hired transcriber, and I will make sure the transcript is anonymised so that any personally identifying information has been changed or removed. Despite

my efforts to protect against this, there may remain the possibility that people who know you very well may be able to identify you if you are quoted in extracts from the interview that are used in journal articles, conference presentations and other academic outputs.

Are there any risks involved?

There are no particular significant risks involved in this project, and I do not anticipate that it will cause distress or harm. The *general* 'risks' of participating in interviews on any topic centre on the potential to become upset by a particular question or topic (e.g., if a question reminds you of a distressing personal experience). If you feel distressed as a result of participating in the interview, the following website provides details of UK counselling and support services. http://www.mind.org.uk

How do you withdraw from the research?

Participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide you want to withdraw from the research after participating in the interview please contact me. Please note that there are certain points beyond which it will be impossible to withdraw from the research – for instance, when I have published papers reporting my analysis of the data. Therefore, please contact me within a month of participation if you wish to withdraw your data.

How will the data be used?

The data will be used in research. The transcript will be anonymised (i.e., any information that can identify you – people's names, places etc. - will be removed). Once anonymised, the data will be analysed for our research, and anonymised extracts from the data may be quoted in any publications and conference presentations arising from the research.

The demographic data for all of the research participants will be compiled into a table and reported in any publications or presentations arising from the research.

The information you provide will be treated confidentially (within the constraints outlined above) and personally identifiable details will be kept separately from the data. Agreeing to take part in this research means that you agree to this use of the information you provide.

If you have any questions about this research please contact me on the details below:

Email: mary3.hill@live.uwe.ac.uk

For queries regarding any concerns about this research, please contact:

Director of Studies: Nigel Williams, Department of Psychology, The University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol, BS16 1QY

Consent to Participate in Research

Research Title: **"A Road (Slightly) Less Travelled: A qualitative exploration of British women's identity who are childfree through choice."**

Researcher: **Mary Hill**

I …………………………………………………………….(insert name) confirm I am over 16 years of age and agree to participate in this research.

I have been given and have understood an explanation of this research project. I have had an opportunity to ask questions about the project, and have them answered. I know that my participation in this project is entirely voluntary.

I understand that I can withdraw from the interview at any point, and that I am under no obligation to answer any particular questions. I also understand that I may withdraw any or all of the information I provide at any time up to one month from interview date without giving a reason.

Please tick the following boxes to confirm your agreement:

☐ I have been informed about the nature of the research project and the nature of my participation in this project.

☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions about the project and have them answered.

☐ I understand my participation is voluntary and I have been informed of my right to withdraw from the research and at time (within a month of participation, as specified on the information sheet), without giving a reason. I understand that any information I provide will be kept confidentially (where possible).

☐ I agree to participate in this research

☐ I agree to the interview being audio-recorded and transcribed for the purposes of research conducted by Mary Hill (UWE). I understand that anonymised extracts of the interview may be quoted in doctoral thesis, journal articles and conference presentations and in other academic outputs.

☐ I agree to the collection of demographic data that will be compiled into a table and reported in any publications or presentations arising from the research.

☐ I agree that Mary Hill may keep the interview material for use in future research and publications not strictly within the scope of the current project.

☐ I agree that a person hired specifically for this purpose can transcribe my interview.

Signed:...

Date:..

NB This sheet will be kept separately from the interview transcript, audio file and demographic data. This sheet will be held for a period of six years.

This research has been approved by the School of Health and Applied Life Sciences Ethics Committee

Childfree Through Choice Semi Structured Interview Schedule

- To start with, I'd like to know more about being childfree through choice. Can you tell me what this means for you?

- Tell me about how you came to describe yourself in this way.
    - Have you always felt this way, or have you felt differently in the past?
    - How committed do you feel towards this life choice?

- Do you think being childfree challenges any stereotypes?
    - Why, in what way?

- What impact does being childfree have on how you view your own personal value, contribution or worth?

- How have you experienced others' reactions to your childfree status?
    - How do you feel about these reactions?

- Can you tell me about any challenges / issues you have faced specific to being childfree?
    - How have you resolved them? (Have you resolved them?)

- How has your decision to be childfree influenced your relationships?

- Do you discuss your childfree status with family and friends? In other settings?
    - How do you describe your choices? Does this differ depending on who you're with?
    - If there have been any reactions to your choices, what have they been?

Appendix ten – Example coded transcript

Interview	Initial Coding	Focused Coding
I: Psuedonym, who would you like to be today?		
L: Just first name? Erm, ha, gosh, let's say Louise		
I: So I suppose to start with, what I'd really like to know is about being childfree by choice, can you tell me what that means to you?		
L: Er, what it means. What my experience of it is do you mean?		
I: When I say childfree through choice, what comes to mind?		
L: Erm, ha, getting stumped by the first question! Well I suppose for me, that really does sum it up doesn't it, the term childfree I think is a very important distinction from childless, very much. Erm, and, I don't know, I'm not sure how to answer that, sorry, I'm not	Distinguishing the term childfree from childless	

I: Well I suppose if you think about erm, I'm interviewing other women as well, who've all said hands up, I'm childfree through choice. I wonder what that group might look like, how you might describe them?		
L: Ok well I think, I know a few other childfree people just through just a group I was in a little while ago and I think you tend to find people who are quite sort of, who think things through, who think about things. The experience I've had with it is, you've had, have to kind of, you have take a deliberate, I suppose that's the choice bit isn't it, you have to take a deliberate decision to move away from what's expected of you and what's considered normal, and and common and standard, and I suppose that takes a certain amount of thinking through. Unless you're just someone who has gone through life and it's just never happened for you, if you are childfree by choice, you have actually had I think had to make that decision at some point, or maybe it's it's made itself, but it's a conscious thing rather than a sort of accidental state that you're in	Knowing other childfree people ==Finding people== ==Observing childfree people as those who think about things== Recalling own experience ==Emphasising the deliberateness of the choice== Taking a deliberate position Moving away from what's considered normal Acknowledging the thinking required Suggesting being childfree is a 'happening' Needing to make a decision Being conscious ==Not being accidental in your life situation==	Taking a deliberate decision to move away from expectations Being the person who's not normal
I: Hmm, it's that aspect of deliberateness and action		
L: yeah, hmm		

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I: There's something active about this status		
L: Hmm, yeah, I think so		
I: Erm, and in terms of how you might describe yourself in that way, it's a label that is not exactly a kind of everyday kind of label, how would you describe yourself?		
L: Erm, do you mean as an alternative to that description?		
I: Oh no, do you say "I am childfree through choice"?		
L: Yeah, I have used those exact words, I have said to people "I'm childfree by choice". It's not something, I don't tend to, er, I tend not to make it into a big deal unless it comes up for an obvious reason. You know people do often say, they have a look around the room and say "oh do you have children" and then I don't kind of make a big deal "oh no, it's because I'm childfree by choice", I just say "no". It's come up you know if, you have new friends that you've met and you've, you know you	Describing self Not making a big deal Being asked about children Denying having children. <mark>Choosing not to be clear that it's by choice</mark>	Owning her childfree status

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talk about your background and what do you do, what kind of things do you like and that sort of thing, and then that's probably when I've I've used that term to describe myself. Erm, er, yeah, does that answer the question?	Recalling new friendships Recalling sharing personal preferences Recalling when she has referred to herself as childfree by choice	
I: Absolutely, yeah, I mean I just want to make it clear there are no right or wrong answers		
L: No (laughs)		
I: I'm just as interested in situations which are confusing or unclear as much as a definite position, so please don't worry, it's OK		
L: (laughs)		
I: So clearly, you describe yourself as childfree by choice. Have you always felt this way?		
L: I think I have, yeah, erm, I can remember when I was, what would I have been? So when I did GCSE, so what was that, when you're 14 is that when you start GCSEs? I ended up doing a module called child development and it was kind of, it wasn't by accident, it was, you know how when you choose	Remembering Recalling being 14 Recalling studying child development Recognising an event not an accident	

your GCSE modules you have to choose x number from this category and x number from this category? And this category was all art, music, drama, PE, stuff that I wasn't interested in, and I had to pick something and child development was in there. So I ended up kind of choosing it by default. I didn't want to do it, but it was better than PE. Erm, so (laughs) and I remember the very first, at the beginning of the very first lesson, the teacher saying "put your hand up if you want 4 or more children" "3 children", "2 children", "1 child", "hands up if you don't want any children" and I did this (laughs) and everybody sort of looked at me horrified, and I could see they were all thinking the same thing that I was thinking "why am I here, why am I sitting in this room"? (laughs). I never had baby dolls or anything you know as a child, I always had soft toy dogs and bears and things like that, I was never interested in that kind of thing, I never had pushchairs or that kind of thing. Erm, and then when I was I guess around between 18 and 22 I think, I had a boyfriend and even at that age he was very clear he definitely wanted to have them. And, I mean, you know, we were young, but it was, it was the kind of relationship that was potentially, I could of possibly stayed with him, and I think for a while I sort of accepted that if I was going to, then I would probably be having children with him. And I didn't really think it through particularly, I think, you know at that age I had other things on my mind, but it was, it was sort of in my head that that was probably what would happen. And then, we didn't stay together, and a couple of years after I got	Describing choices Describing not being interested Choosing something interesting ==highlight== Preferring the subject over others Recalling the first lesson Being asked about having children Being asked about not having children Being looked at Horrifying others ==highlight== Feeling like she doesn't belong ==highlight== Recalling choice of toys Being interested in animals Not being interested in baby play Recalling a relationship	 Being unusual

together with the guy who is now my husband, and he made some comment about not wanting them, and I remember saying "ooo we should probably talk about that then" and then, it, we never did, and then some point afterwards I sort of, I can remember feeling like I'd be let off the hook, because with him saying he didn't want them, then suddenly it was like "well that means I don't have to have them, that's good", you know, I can remember this feeling of this weight being lifted off my shoulders, it was almost like a physical feeling. Erm so I think I have always, always felt like that, I just didn't maybe know until it kind of became an issue	Recalling boyfriend's desire to have children	
	Recognising being young	
	Acknowledging the potential of her relationship	
	Accepting children as part of the relationship with him	
	<mark>Not thinking it through</mark>	
	Recalling having lots of distractions	
	<mark>Assuming the inevitability of having children</mark>	
	Recalling meeting another partner	
	Recalling partner not wanting children	
I: Yeah, and I'm interested in what you say there about, that this is something you've been conscious of for a good chunk of your life, certainly since your time of being sort of in the era of 'I could give birth' sort of from puberty and upwards	Recalling the desire to talk about choices	Being let off the hook
	Not having a conversation	
	<mark>Recalling a feeling of relief</mark>	
	Recalling the impact of her partner's decision	
L: Mmm	Describing partner's decision as a removal of responsibility	
	Recalling feeling lighter. Describing a physical feeling	Feeling relieved
I: erm, but it, it sounds like it was your husband saying "I don't want them" that actually gave you permission to sort of admit it to people	Reflecting on a perpetual feeling. Suggesting she needed someone to show her this choice. Being unaware of a choice	
L: Yeah, I think so		Having permission to not choose

I: I don't know if I've understood that correctly? L: Yeah, yeah, I think so, I mean, I think if I had genuinely wanted them then, something would have happened at that point wouldn't it, I would have either, we would have talked about it and he would have come around to my way of thinking, or we would have separated at that point, so erm, it was never, obviously, at that point I was not in a strong enough position, that it wasn't very easy to talk to him I must admit (laughs) and I think, I, I, I was young then as well, I mean I was, you know, that was when we were early 20's or something when it. I, I can remember feeling about, this idea of having to decide what to do with childcare and would I, how would I work, and could we afford it, and those kind of questions. Feeling like, you know that, that feeling you have about something that you know was coming in the future, and the thing that's on my mind at the moment is you know my mum getting old and how we deal with her, and you know it's coming and you know it's going to be awful and you don't want to think about it. And I can remember thinking about those kind of practical aspects of having children in those terms, and occasionally thinking "oh my god, I'd have to take them to nursery, I'm not going to think about it", you know, and it being in the back of my mind and turning away from it. And then when I had that moment where I was felt like I was let off the hook,	Doubting her genuine wanting of children Expecting events to have taken over Anticipating a conversation with her partner Imagining a polarising of actions ==Perceiving ambivalence== ==Recalling a struggle to have a discussion== ==Using age as a reason== Recalling feelings Remembering the need to make a decision Recalling trying to figure out practicalities Recalling a feeling Anticipating a future event Drawing parallels with anticipating her mum's aging ==Recalling the inevitability. Predicting awfulness== Remembering trying to figure out practicalities Recalling wanting to not think about the problems	Sensing a problem looming

I remember thinking "I don't have to worry about any of that stuff" (laughs) and it was such a relief	Choosing not to think about it Being aware of the presence of the thought. Choosing to turn away from the thought	
I: Yeah, yeah, it sounds like quite a heavy thought	Recalling the feeling of relief of not needing to figure out the practical problems	Turning away from an imagined life with children
L: Yeah, yeah		
I: Opressive. And erm, I suppose, my next question is around how committed you feel to this choice?		
L: Well, occasionally people will say to me "well do you think you'll never want them" you know, they have that sort of tone in their voice "you really think you'll never want them?" and my answer is always, "if I always feel the way I feel now, then no, I'll never want them" and I, I, I can't, you don't know what you don't know, and I can't say that I'm not going to wake up in 6 months time and go "oh my God", no I don't think I will, but who knows. You know, at the moment, I can't see any reason for a change, so I'm feeling pretty much committed. You know, I'm not one of those people who thinks that I'm always going to know how I'm going to feel about something because you don't	Recalling questions from others Being aware of other's judgements Having a stock answer Denying a want Recognising a not knowing Accepting she could change her mind Not desiring change Feeling committed Describing self. Accepting impermanence	

I: yeah, OK, great. So there's certainly a sort of "never say never", and erm, you might surprise yourself?		
L: I might, I might, I mean, I don't, that maybe makes it seem a bit more like I could change my mind. I don't believe I'll change my mind. I don't believe I'll ever feel any different. Erm, but I'm not, you know, I've got a friend who if there's such a thing as a fundamentalist childfree person, she is that person, and you know, she says "I know for a fact I will never want to have children" and you know, she may be right, but I just think you don't know what you don't know and, but I don't think I'll change my mind, and as the years go by it gets less likely doesn't it (laughs)	Acknowledging the possibility of surprise Not believing she'll change her mind	Being open to change
I: And I suppose there is this aspect around what does being childfree mean in terms of parenting non, you know, children that you haven't given birth to yourself, and you know where does being childfree come in to, in terms of adoption, step families, that kind of thing. I don't know what you think about that?		
L: I think I would like to think that if I ever did sort of decide to have a family that I would seriously consider adopting because you know I do think it's a shame that more people don't do it and, you	Avoiding making a definitive statement	

know, I think, it, it, it rather upsets me when people go through years and years of IVF and all those years of horrible treatment and I think, everytime you do that, you are, you are saying to a child that needs a family, "I would rather do all this, and have all this expense and pain, than give you a family", and I think that's a really, I don't know, I don't think I even know how to describe that, but that, I think that, that's a real shame that people feel like that. So I would like to think that rather than bring a whole new person into the world I would consider giving a chance of a family to someone who's chances are, you know, people who are in local authority care, their chances are pretty, of a decent life, are pretty poor. So I wouldn't, I wouldn't rule that out if, if I decided I wanted to have that kind of life. Fostering, I don't think I've got that in me (laughs) absolutely no way, step children, I don't know, it happens to people doesn't it? I: I mean as a, you know, I'm just curious as to the, if there's that aspect of childfreeness around that sort of parenting? L: Sorry, what do you mean? I: I suppose I was looking to sort of, when we've talked about being childfree so far, it's been around	Recalling a friend. <mark>Describing friend as a 'fundamentalist'</mark> Describing the certainty of her friend Accepting her friend's position <mark>Observing difference in her own views. Being doubtful</mark> Recognising the impact of time Imagining making a decision Hoping she would consider adoption Noticing a sadness that adoption is not a frequent choice Feeling upset in response to thoughts of IVF Thinking about the horribleness of IVF Perceiving how the choice to have IVF is viewed by a child in need Perceiving IVF is a preference of cost and pain over giving a family to a child Feeling unsure <mark>Feeling regret at the choices of others</mark> Hoping she would choose not to create a new person <mark>Hoping she would choose to give a family to someone in need</mark>	Being more sure of her decision as time passes

an active choice not to give birth to a child, erm, whereas, if I've understood correctly, if we're looking at being childfree through choice, that's also meaning that you're not parenting in a situation where you're adopting, fostering, or being an active stepparent.	Reflecting on the children who don't have a strong chance of a decent life Not ruling out adoption Denying her capability to foster Being unsure about step-children	Imagining a possibility of having children
L: Yeah, I mean I suppose the one that argueably isn't so much of a choice is stepparenting because I know you have a choice to be with the person who is the parent, but they come with what they come with and you know, that could could not be so much of a choice, but yeah, there is a difference isn't there between not actually bearing children your own children, and, and there's two separate issues, not bearing a child and not raising a child erm I suppose. I mean I wouldn't say I would seriously consider adopting, I would only consider it as an option if I decided that I wanted to have that life, but ultimately you end up with the same, same life don't you	Reflecting on choices Suggesting being a stepparent is less of a choice Recognising that partners may not come in isolation Recognising a lessening of choice around step-parenting Reflecting on a difference between bearing your own children Reflecting further. Distinguishing between bearing and raising a child Not seriously considering adoption	Recognising her capacity to support a child in need
I: Yeah, yeah. Erm, and do you think being childfree challenges any stereotypes?		
L: Oh yes, absolutely (laughs)		
I: Can you say a bit more about that?		

L: Er, I mean it's the expected thing isn't it. I don't know what the statistics are, but it's, that's what most people, they have children don't they, it's what you, it's almost this accepted, you know, you go to school, you go to university, you get a job, you get married, you have children, it's just a thing isn't it? Erm, and you know, people assume if you're married that you have children, or will have children. Er, I think there's, a lot of people think, women in particular, there's definitely something that really upsets people about childfree women that doesn't upset them about childfree men and you do see this a lot. Oh, who was it, was it Julia Gillard, the australian PM, and she was described as 'deliberately barren' by somebody, which is about the most offensive collection you could put together (laughs) and it's this idea, well it's like the old kind of, erm, myths about witches, I mean, they're all childfree, there's something about the old woman in the Hansel and Gretal story, you know, there's something about women not having children being er, being cold, being ah I don't know, people can't handle that. I: And I'm just wondering what it feels like to be embodying the kind of person that people can't handle?	Being clear about under what circumstances she would consider adoption Recognising that a life of parenting is the same, no matter how the child comes to you Verifying that being childfree challenges stereotypes Noticing there is an expected path Observing that most people have children Noticing that having children is the accepted path Describing the socially accepted path Observing the assumptions of others Connecting marriage with having children Noticing a difference about women Observing that childfree women are upsetting for others. Distinguishing between childfree men and women ==Recalling the language used to describe a childfree women== ==Feeling offended by the language== ==Evoking ideas of myths and witches== Noticing witches are all childfree	Connecting marriage with child raising Being a woman who upsets people Being an archetype (old crone) Being the person people can't handle

L: It's tricky, I mean I haven't had too many problems with it I suppose I'm surrounded by people who are generally fairly open minded but, erm, it it can be, ah, I have an old school friend who I'm not really in contact any more but my, we grew up together and our mums were friends, so the mums are still friends but we, we've kind of lost touch, and she's childfree. And, in in recent years, my mum has obviously been having conversations with her mum and it's come up, and my mum will to me things about "oh well she, she was always a bit like that [name]" and there is a bit of a, ooo, "selfish", "[name] was always selfish" that's what it is, erm yeah, that, I think that's the biggest stereotype	Recalling fairy stories Noticing a society's intolerance of women not having children Denying experiencing problems Reflecting on the nature of the people she surrounds herself with Recalling a friend Describing a conversation with her mum Recalling a childfree friend being called selfish	
I: And that's your mum's perception?		Being considered selfish
L: Mmm, and probably her mum's perception as well I'm guessing it's probably come through that route but yeah, definitely	Guessing both mums have a perception of childfree women being selfish	
I: Ok, so in an aspect it sounds like that label's also being applied to you as well?		
L: Yeah I mean no one's actually ever said it to me, but, I don't know how much of this is me imagining that's what people think but, erm, I mean you do		

hear it said, you do hear it said about childfree people which I, I find it bizarre. I mean we all do what we want to do, and people have children because they want children, and it's no, it's no less selfish	Feeling as though she's thought of as selfish. Admitting no explicit statement Reflecting on the role of her imagination. Being aware of people using the term selfish about childfree people. <mark>Feeling surprised / shocked</mark> Drawing comparisons with other choices beyond those to have children <mark>Rejecting being selfish</mark>	
I: I mean I guess I'm curious as to what your reaction is, you know, it's, you've said it strikes you are bizarre, you know, looking at you it kind of beggars belief really, and I'm just wondering, OK if you could just sort of, even if people aren't explicit to you, if you had a response to what you're imagining they're saying, what is it?		
L: Yeah, well if I was to respond, then it would be exactly that, we all do the things we want to do, and people have children because they want to have children and it's the same, we're both doing the thing we want to do. People have children for selfish reasons, because they want to have children. And I mean there's a much broader picture isn't there around the impact that it has on the, the larger population is having on the world and the, that's the pretty big part of it for me. Erm, that, every additional person that we have on the planet is, is er making things less sustainable by the year, so you know, we do need people not to have children and erm, and the, some of the attitudes of some parents are remarkably selfish, you know, the lengths that they will go to for things like erm, you know, lying about their religious beliefs to get into	Imagining her response Defending right to act in line with wants <mark>Observing the 'wanting' around the choice to have children</mark> Suggesting there are selfish reasons for having children Taking a broad view Considering the impact of the population on the environment	Defending the right to do as she wants to

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a particular school and that kind of thing you know, there's a very kind of bloody mindedness, erm that is selfish. And it might be on behalf of your child, but it's still a selfishness, it's still well you know "I'm going to do everything for my family" rather than thinking of a broader picture. So I see an awful lot more selfishness in, in some parents than I do in childfree people.	Stating the negative impact on the sustainability of the planet of each human birth	Protecting the environment
	Stating that there is a need not to have children	
	Observing the attitudes of some parents as selfish	
	Giving examples of dishonesty for gain	
	<mark>Feeling irritated. Accusing parents of selfishness</mark>	
	Acknowledging the intent of actions. Reiterating selfishness	
I: There's a sense of inward looking rather than outward looking?	Perceiving actions as individualistic rather than collectivist	
L: Yeah, absolutely, definitely	Comparing levels of observed selfishness in parents & childfree people	
I: Ok, great. And what impact do you think being childfree through choice has on how you view your own personal value, or worth or contribution that you make?	Confirming a perceived inward rather than outward look in parents	Living with an outward focus
L: Yeah, I mean, that is quite tricky I think because, so when, if I meet up with a friend who's just had a baby, especially if it's their first one, you know there'll be moments of, there'll be a period of catching up and talking about what they've done, and then they'll turn to me as say "so what have you been up to?" and I'll have that moment when I think "well I haven't created life (laughs), I've been on holiday" you know, and I struggle myself with	Reflecting on personal value & worth	
	Recalling a meeting with a friend and new baby	
	Describing an expected conversation	

that because, I would say to someone else that there is no less value in what I do than, that in what they do, but I do feel it, I do feel that I've just been bumbling around through life, you know, doing my job and going to the cinema, and you know that kind of thing. I think, I do wonder sometimes whether one of the maybe unconsious reasons people have children is that they feel, they have to create something, they have to do something that's lasting, they have to do something significant. I don't know whether they think it through, but, erm, I think there's a perception that there is nothing that you could do with your life that is as valuable as having a child erm, and I can't think of particular kind of examples that sort of illustrate that, but erm, I genuinely do believe that you know you can have a fulfilling life, with, in a number of ways, and you know, in more imaginative ways that having children, but it is a difficult one to, to, I don't know. I mean there are so many things that you can do, you know, you can create things, you can learn, you can you know, but, er, I suppose I have a friend who is childfree and she's about to turn 40, and she's been trying to write a book for the past 5 years and she's suddenly got this kind of kick up her bum, "I'm about to turn 40, I need to do something productive, I need to create something" and I did say to her "do you think one of the reasons that people have children is that they go through the same thing?" in that they don't think in terms of writing a book, or something, they create a baby	Experiencing a moment of perceived personal shortcoming Comparing value of own actions with others Admitting she speaks more critically to herself than to others Recognising the value in everyone Describing self as bumbling Belittling own achievements Wondering about reasons behind having a child ==Perceiving a need to create== ==Perceiving a need to do something significant and lasting== Being unsure Being aware of a perception of prising having a child most highly Struggling to think of examples ==Believing in a fulfilling life== Suggesting being fulfilled beyond having children requires imagination Being aware of the difficulty. Describing the variety of routes to fulfilment Describing witnessing age impacting on the motivation of a friend	Feeling a need to be of value Recognising the need for generativity

I: And her response?	Wondering with a friend	
L: Er, I can't remember. Erm, but knowing what I know about her she probably would agree that yeah, yes that's why people do it (laughs)		
I: And you started to, in response to the question, was the instant, straight away of, when you spend time with a friend who's just had a baby, potentially their first baby, and you said that potentially there's that feeling of, well it certainly feels, it sounds uncomfortable to say the least, a little bit diminished and a little bit uncomfortable. And I'm just thinking about outside of the company of new mothers, how else do you think arouind your sense of value and worth?		
L: Er, so I do think a lot about er, you know, what do I want to have done with my life when I look back on it, what do I want? I mean I'm not going to be saying probably "I created life" (laughs) so you know, what else? And I mean, at the moment, I'm doing a masters and have a very busy job but you know, I do kind of think in terms as the years go by, I should be, er, you know learning things, I should be you know kind of try and find a degree of creativity in me that I haven't found before and you know, having the time to do that kind of thing is erm , is something that you don't have if you have	Struggling to recall Believing a friend agreed with a generative motivation explanation Recalling thinking a lot about her worth Wondering about her goals for life	

children. I mean I have, I absolutely do not feel that my life is any less value than anybody with children erm and you do occasionally, particularly at work, if there's an issue of working late or something, and the parents will say "well no, because I have to go and pick up the chidren" and there is an expectation that the people without children will, will pick up the slack. And there was something a few years ago where somebody without children had insisted on going home or not working a weekend or something, and someone had said "well, what's he got to go home for?" and it insensed me! (laughs), and I thought "well it's none of your business what he's got to go home for" he may have nothing to go home for but you know, it's his choice to go home, and there is a feeling that there's nothing in your life that could be as valuable as a child, erm, which obviously is wrong, it's wrong. Erm, and one of the reasons I don't have them is because there's a lot things about my life that I value and it's, you know, it's having independence, it's erm, you know, having options, it's erm, having, having time, those sorts of things. I: It's, it's that sense of, I suppose, they're highly prized by you, and then experiencing how others, do they prize those things that are important to you as highly as you do, and seeing the reaction to people	Being aware she won't create. Wondering what else Describing current areas of focus Expecting to continue to learn Expecting to nurture creativity in self Acknowledging time available to her Stating her strength of feeling Feeling strongly that her life is not less value than a parent's Recalling a work situation Experiencing an expectation that she'll pick up the slack Recalling an incident Recalling an assumption of worthlessness of home life ==Feeling angry== Defending colleague Defending right of colleague to protect home life Reflecting on an awareness that having a child gives life value	Being expected to pick up the slack

L: Yeah, yeah. I: I suppose it leads on to my next question which is around how you've experienced others reactions to your childfree status L: Mmm, mm, erm, varied. Erm, I've never had any extreme reactions. Er, I think, I think probably the, the sort of underlying theme with all of them is, is, is a not taking it too seriously because I'll probably change my mind. I think people don't really, they don't really think of it in terms of, of, of a life choice. Erm, and they, I view it very much as choice to have children. You have a choice to have children and you commit to it, and that's your life, and it's the same thing, you make a choice not to. It's not just "well I haven't got them at the moment", it's yeah, "this is the life I've chosen", it's, it's you know, and everything kind of, everything, you kind of create your life around it don't you, so you do a job that you, that you can do, erm, without needing, my job wouldn't allow me to have the kind of flexibility that I would need to have children for example, and you know, the house that I live in, you know, it's got cream carpets, you know (laughs) you sort of design things around it, you plan on the kind of places that you want to go on holiday and it's not the kind of places that you would take children, and erm, it's a lifestyle choice, and people don't really understand that. And there is an element of "you'll change your	Stating the wrongness of this expectation ==Valuing many aspects of her life== ==Valuing independence and options== Valuing time Reflecting on experiences of other's reactions Identifying a theme Experiencing others not taking her choice seriously. Being expected to change her mind. ==Experiencing people diminish her choice== Viewing people as making a choice to have children ==Equating the decision not to have children as an active choice== Making a clear life choice Reflecting on how the choice impacts on the life she creates for herself Listing the areas of life impacted by decision Expecting childrearing to require sufficient job flexibility	

mind" erm, and there is an element of it just being you know, I think people who have very traditional erm, er, what's the world, sort of, er, traditional ideas and and er, not much imagination, kind of think of it as just being some silly idea that you've got rather than it being you know, a geniune credible choice. Erm, my mum struggles with that, she thinks that it's just some, you know, some silly phase that I'm going though or something like that, erm, what else?	Reflecting on her choice of décor Reflecting on impact on other wants and desires Stating it's a lifestyle choice Not feeling understood Being expected to change her mind Describing society as traditional Equating tradition with lack of imagination Being considered silly. Not being credible	Being the person with nothing to be at home for
I: I'm just curious as to how you feel about that kind of reaction?	Recalling mum's struggles with her choice Being considered silly	Valuing independence, options & time
L: It's, it's quite annoying (laughs). It's not ideal, erm, I had, had, the house I live in at the moment, and this is going to sound a lot grander than it is, it has a libary, it's just a room, it's not oak panelled or anything like that, it's just a room where we have books in. The previous owners used it as a kind of home cinema, you know you can do a lot of things with it, and I had some friends around who have 2 children when we first moved in, and you know, we were showing them around, and "this is the libary" and the friend looks at it and said "oh, you could change it into a playroom if you changed your mind" and it was a real sort of "uh, oh" (laughs) and that room is my favourite room in the house, erm, so yeah, people dpn't, they don't see it. No one would question that you'd turned it into a playroom for your children, nobody would	Feeling annoyed Being bashful Describing house Recalling friends reaction to house Being expected to change her mind	

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question that, but yeah, I think maybe that's it, people don't see it as a problem you know kind of throwing stones at things that they would never do if you'd chosen to have children	Experiencing others not recognising the affection she has for a room	Being the person not taken seriously
	Not being understood	
	Being treated differently for her choices	
I: hmm, hmm, so there's a real sense of one rule for them, one rule for you, it's, you're getting the, sort of shitty end of the stick if you like?	Feeling an open target	
L: Yeah, yeah, I think so. And you see it in just the little things I mean like, on facebook I saw a post yesterday where somebody had something, you know the clocks go back tomorrow, someone had something like "the clocks go back tomorrw, any childless people making comments about having an extra hour in bed, you know, something, you can keep it to yourself" and it was a joke, it was meant to be funny, but, that's one of, that's one of the benefits of being childfree you can sleep for as long as you want, you can have an extra hour in bed if you want to. I would never, ever post on there something like "oo Christmas is coming up, any comments about having a lovely family Christmas, keep them to yourself" (laughs) it's like well that's one of the benefits of having children, tah, you're almost seen as fair game	Recalling something on social media	
	==Being silenced==	
	Experiencing harm in other's humour	
	Recognising the benefits of being childfree	
	Recognising double standards	
	Distancing self from negative attitudes experienced from others	Living a life designed around her choices
	==Being seen as fair game==	
I: Without the chance to retaliate on an equal footing?		

L: Yeah, or even without the desire to, you know, they're obviously not happy with the fact that they can't have an extra hour in bed! (laughs)		
	Not having a desire to retaliate	
	Appreciating other's unhappiness	
I: Sure, sure, sure. So can you tell me about any challenges or issues that you've faced specific to being childfree?		
L: Erm, I suppose for me the only one is around my mum. Because she didn't see this coming, she obviously didn't see this coming erm, I'm the youngest of two, my sister is 7 years older than me and she has some health problems which means that she won't be having them. So I think she kind of got her head around that 7 years ago, and then, you know, I got married in 2007, erm, you know, as soon as that happens then every year people start to think "Oh you know" erm and then it's just never happened and never happened and then 3 years ago I announced that I was starting a masters and I could tell from her reaction she was like "oo, well, that means no babies then" and I've never actually, maybe I should have done, I've never been honest with her and said, "oh by the way, you know this is not going to happen". She's obviously now starting to realise it and she finds it very difficult, and I understand that a lot of it is about her own disappointment, and I get that, I totally get that, but there's a very definite erm, I don't know if it's	Recalling mum Describing mum as being unaware Describing family structure Explaining sibling infertility Describing family timeline Experiencing other's expectations post-marriage Not meeting expectations Recalling making an announcement Recalling mum drawing conclusions Not being honest Observing mum's realisation Observing mum's difficulties with her decision	

an inability or an unwillingness to understand and to, to, to understand why it could be a good thing. I, maybe that's being unfair because if she's got her own reasons that, but I think that's probably the only, the only real difficulty I would say, I mean other than it just you know, annoyances at the way people react and things like that. I think that's the only actual practical thing I could think about	Appreciating mum's disappointment Being aware of a resistance to understanding Acknowledging her views may be unfair Isolating mum's disappointment Feeling annoyed	
I: Yeah, and it sounds like it's not yet, it's not yet been resolved, it's more in the passage of time that it will, you know, mum's drawing her own conclusions		
L: Mmm, yeah		
I: not going to have that conversation because it could be difficult	Recalling a conversation	
L: Yeah, yeah, I mean she has said to me quite recently, obviously when she's started to put 2 and 2 together, it's become clear to her, she has said erm, "so do you think you'll really never have them?" and I have said, as I said to you before, if I don't ever change the way I feel now then no I'll never have them. So you know, the conversation has sort of happened, but it wasn't me, kind of 'coming out' (laughs) it was just her reaching her	Being asked to confirm her decision Verifying her response. Acknowledging her feelings may change	Being doubted as to the permanence of her decisions Being silenced

own conclusions and asking me. And I still think she probably thinks it will still happen, I don't know	Denying a 'coming out'	
	Witnessing mum reach her own conclusions	Disappointing her mother
I: Yeah, yeah. So she's still making sense of it, testing out how secure, you know, the situation appears	Assuming she's not been believed	
L: Mmm, yeah.		
I: And in terms of your relationships, your partners and such, how has your childfree status impacted on that?		
L: It hasn't really, as I'm very fortunate to be married to someone who feels the same. And if I didn't, well, who knows, I can't imagine. Erm, so I mean, when I was with the other boyfriend who did want them, it was when we were way too young, I mean we hadn't even graduated, so it was just never an issue, erm, so now, I've very fortunate, very fortunate	Describing partner	Being the person that's hard to understand
	Recalling past partner	
	Recalling age and life stage	
	Feeling fortunate	
I: So it was a meeting of like minds, it's never come up as an issue		

L: Mm, yeah, no though I could see how it could be a huge issue.		
	Appreciating the possibility for problems	
I: And as a couple, you're both childfree through choice, and I'm just wondering how as a couple that is experienced?		
L: Mmm, we, we talk about it a lot in terms of, so, when was the last time, I say we talk about it, I mean it comes up, so. On a Sunday morning and it's 10 o'clock and we're still sitting on the sofa drinking coffee, and you know, one of us will say "we wouldn't be able to do this would we?" (laughs) or you know, Christmas morning and you kind of wake up whenever and go "I'm so glad we didn't have a child jumping on the bed to wake us up" so you know, it does come up occasionally, erm, you know if we go, on a gorgeous holiday to Zanzibar and it was this beautiful, it wasn't a child, well it might have been, no, it wasn't a childfree resort, but there were no children there, I mean, there were no activities for children, there was no way you would take a child there. And we spent the whole holiday going "oh my God, it's so nice and quiet, there's nobody splashing in the pool" it's, you know, we do very regularly notice, or reflect on the benefits in our life of it	Describing frequent communication as a couple on the subject of being childfree Recalling moments of appreciation Giving examples Describing holiday	Being grateful for the life she has Reflecting on the benefits in her life of being childfree
I: It's like a shared sense of gratitude		

L: Yeah, yeah (laughs)		
I: Like a 'sliding doors' moment, it could be very different and you remind each other sort of how delightful it is right now	Appreciating childfree areas	
L: Yeah, absolutely. Definitely gratitude is the right word (laughs)	Noticing a regular awareness of the benefits of being childfree	Being reminded of delightful moments
I: And erm, how do you discuss your childfree status with family and friends?	Feeling gratitude	
L: I don't really, apart from that short conversation with my mum. No.		
I: Not with your, I mean you mentioned that your sister has a very different kind of situation	Not talking about her decision	
L: Yeah, yeah. No, no, we've never really talked about it. She would have wanted them, she, she's as well as having some health problems she doesn't have a partner she's, she's, so what is she now? 45 ish, erm, and she's just never settled down with anybody and you know, she would have wanted to	Recalling never speaking about her decision with family	

go down that road, so I think I wouldn't feel comfortable, you know I feel very aware of the fact that I'm, in a marriage, and and don't have any health problems, and the only thing stopping me from doing it is me, erm, so to, to say to somebody that you can imagine looks at elements of my life and wishes that she had something similiar, to then say "you know, I'm not going to do it, I could, but I'm not going to bother", that, I think, would be quite hurtful, so no, I don't, we don't have that conversation	Being aware of her sister's wanting of children Describing sister's situation Not feeling comfortable discussing choice with sister Being aware of own life situation Imagining how her life looks from the perspective of others ==Perceiving decision as potentially hurtful to others== ==Making an active choice not to discuss to avoid harm==	 Choosing not to have a conversation Living a life that could be hurtful
I: No, and in terms of sort of broader friendships or colleagues, peers, is it ever a conversation that arises?		
L: Yeah, it comes up occasionally. I mean I was talking to a colleague about 2 or 3 days ago and the subject of how much it costs when he's got 2 children and they do a lot of stuff, they play rugby and football and rowing and stuff, and the subject of how much those things cost came up, and he said something like "oo you've no idea" and I said "no, I do have a bit of an idea, that's why I don't do it" (laughs) I wouldn't say I have no idea at all, so it does come up in those kind of conversations, but not, I mean I talk to friends about it, ah, erm, I talk to other childfree friends obviously about it, in the same sort of way as I talk to my husband about it, as in "oo we couldn't sit here having this cocktail if we had children at home" (laughs) and those sort	Recalling occasional conversations Showing interest in financial cost of children's activities Experiencing other's assumptions that she's unaware	 Being thought naïve

of things, erm, in terms of friends who do have children, ah, er, not a lot do I? I, I mean I have sort of had the conversation about there are other things you could do in your life that are interesting and valuable, but it doesn't really go anywhere because it's just, the ability to understand that just isnt' there. Erm, I mean you have the typical conversation where you know you say you've been on a nice holiday and you've done this and they say "oo you're so lucky to have all that time on your hands" (laughs) and you say "well, it's not really luck is it, it's a choice?"	Denying ignorance	
	Recalling openness with other childfree friends	
	Recalling experiencing shared appreciation with childfree friends	
	Comparing conversations with childfree and parents	
	<mark>Emphasising the value and interest of aspects of her life</mark>	
	<mark>Not feeling understood</mark>	
I: I could imagine that feels quite, there's an element of compromise a little in terms of how much you share on the understanding that it's likely to be met with that kind of a response?	Experiencing other's envy	Being envied
	Distinguishing between luck and choice	
L: Yeah, yeah, I mean there isn't really any point, yeah, there's no point, and it's, ah, this is one of the frustrations that I have with friends that are parents in they will talk incessantly about their children, to a degree, in a degree of detail that I just don't understand. I mean I would never tell, talk to anybody about my life in that kind of tedious detail, but there seems to be an off switch that doesn't get touched with a lot of, not all, a lot of parents	Believing there's no point in sharing	
	Feeling frustrated	
	Recalling the experience of being talked at	
	Not understanding	
	Describing conversation as tedious	

I: Mmm, so there's like an imbalance	Finding it hard to understand other's interest in details	
L: A huge imbalance, yeah, I mean there was this one friend in particular who I've been friends with since we were seventeen, sixteen, and it's not necessarily about the children, maybe not the last time, the time before, it was a Christmas, and I sort of deliberately paid attention to how much she talked, and how much she asked me about anything to do with me, and it was almost nothing. And there were occasions where I would venture something myself and say "oh I've been doing this" and I'd get interupted or something by the waiter coming over and then that'd be it, you know, she'd be right back again on herself, and I don't know if that's her, it never used to be her, but erm, yeah, there's a much greater willingness to talk about themselves and their children.	Experiencing an imbalance Recalling a friend Testing the conversation Observing the level of interest in her Recognising the one-sided nature of the conversation ==Being rebuffed== ==Being overlooked== Noticing a tendency towards a single focus in parents	Experiencing an imbalance Being the person who's not asked about
I: Yeah, you sound really fed up with it (laughs). There's an agitation as you describe it		
L: Yeah, yeah, oh yeah, yeah, I mean it can be quite hurtful. I mean when it's someone you've known for a long time, and they change that way, it's, yeah, it's a shame, and I, I'm not going to fight against it because there's just no point so you know, just be the one that's going to let this happen, and sit there and listen, and eventually it	Feeling hurt ==Noticing the change in friendships== ==Feeling sad. Feeling hopeless==	Feeling hurt

starts to wear you down. I don't know whether maybe they'll come back at some point, it's a, I don't know, I doubt it	<mark>Losing a friend</mark> Feeling worn down Being unsure if the friend will return Being doubtful	Being worn down
I: In the fullness of time, there's a hope		
L: Yeah, maybe		
I: Maybe. Erm, we've come through quite a lot today already so I just want to say thank you for sharing so much as you have. Is there anything that I've not yet asked you about, or you've not mentioned that you think is relevant and is of consquence around being childfree?		
L: Erm, possibly one thing. So my husband's brother and his wife have had a baby early this year, and they asked us if we would be guardians in the event, and we said yes, without any, you know, any need to think about it. And a lot of people have been really surprised by that. I mean, one of my friends, my friend who's the kind of militant childfree, apparently she was asked the same thing by a friend some time ago and she said absolutely, absolutely not, and she can not understand why we would do that. Which I find, I don't know if I find that strange or not. I find it weird that people can't understand why would have said yes to that.	Describing family event Being invited to be a guardian Experiencing other's surprise Recalling friends making different choices Not being understood Feeling unsure Struggling to understand other's responses	Being the person that's hard to understand

I: So, I don't know you and your husband so I can't imagine, so help me understand		
L: Well, firstly it's highly unlikely to happen, so that's the first thing (laughs). And, you know, she's our niece and we know her already, it's not like bringing a new person into the world who doesn't need to exist, she's already there and, I mean she's still only a baby, but we know her and we care about her, and she's a member of the family, and something as terrible as that happened that required us to step in, that wouldn't be about, that wouldn't really be about us and it wouldn't be about having a baby in the family, in our family, it would be about a broader family pulling together and dealing with the situation, and that would be our part of it. And as I say, she's already here and we know her and, what would be the alternative? If we said no, they would have then gone to whoever their second choice was, and I wouldn't have wanted to put them in the position where they have to think about "well OK, this is not the person we actually want to raise our child but we're going to have to", I wouldn't want them to go to a second choice, I'd want them to have the people that they wanted to raise their daughter, raising their daughter. And also, my sister in law, his wife, is Polish, so it would probably have been somebody on her side of the family, so our niece would probably have had to go to Poland and that would	Stating unlikeliness Stating family connection. Being known Differentiating between a new person and an existing person Knowing a person Feeling connected to family Being required to step in Being altruistic Being part of a broader family Playing a part Knowing a person Refusing an alternative Taking care of others Being chosen Being selected Thinking about geography	Protecting her family

have then taken her away from her grandparents here, I know it would have taken her to her Polish grandparents but, you know, to my inlaws they would have lost their granddaughter as well to some degree	Preserving family unit Protecting against loss	
I: So it's that sense of, again to some degree, I'm minded to what you talked about right at the beginning, that sort of depth of thinking that you've gone beyond a thinking about parenting responsibility, that's not really the consideration here, it's much more around that sense of pulling together as wider unit in the face of dreadful tragedy, which would be the situation if ever you needed to fulfill the guardianship		
L: Yeah, yeah, I think so yeah. And you know, I wouldn't want to think that we, we would lose her as well to some degree if she was taken to Poland, that, that's not even if her mother was British, we still would have said yes, but there's a broader picture here and what would actually happen, she would have been brought up in Poland, her mother left Poland, obviously didn't want to live there, and I'm sure her father wouldn't want her to be brought up in Poland so erm, yeah, so she would go there and we would probably never see her. So, but yeah, people were very surprised, mum was very surprised, and I, I can see that that was also a bit of a slap in the face for her, because you know, you, you're not having your own children, you're	Agreeing with a sense of family Fearing loss Thinking about consequences Reflecting on other's wants Experiencing other's surprise Not being understood	Avoiding loss

not giving me any grandchildren, but you're prepared to take on someone else's (laughs)		
I: Mmm, mmm, I'm just wondering if you could take that a little bit further and see how, how do you perceive that she's made sense of that?		
L: Erm, so she said at first she expressed surprise that they asked us, erm, and she said something like "well I'd have thought they'd have asked somebody who actually liked children" (laughs). And I said "well it's not really a case of liking children, this is a person, it's a member of the family" erm, what else did she say? I think when she said that I said something like "well, I think they" yeah, I said "well, they obviously wanted a member of the family, and there's no other siblings on this side, there's siblings on the Polish side but they're in Poland, so it's a combination of wanting to keep the guardianship in the family and wanting to keep it in Britain" erm, you know, my sister in law chipped in and said yeah, she would want to keep it in the family, wouldn't even want her friends doing it, and, she didn't really say anything after that. I didn't really have that kind of, that whole conversation, so everything that I've just said about why we said yes, I didn't actually say that to my mum, so she's probably still confused (laughs) come to think about it	Hearing of other's surprise Being perceived as not liking children ==Treasuring family. Valuing the individual person== Defending self Protecting family position ==Preserving family. Preserving values== Being defended by others Expecting mum to be confused	

I: yeah, yeah. But you mentioned there's a perception of, they would ask someone who likes children, in that she's looking at the instance as if it might happen tomorrow, whereas, you and your husband have looked at it from the perspective of, that if we needed to be guardians, that we're talking about a person who will be a child for a period, an adult for much longer, and that is part of our family		
L: Yeah, that's how I see it. I mean, she's a baby obviously, I see her as a person who's currently a baby, and she's, if it did happen she could be any age, and hopefully she'll know us well enough. It's not going to happen anyway (laughs)	Valuing the person across the life span Being known	
I: But thank you, it's, the question as is there something that you'd like to talk about, and it does feel as if it seems very relevant in terms of that kind of experience, people's reactions to you, and the choices you've made being put under the microscope and challenged a little, confronted		
L: Yeah, I mean, I think the issue is, I feel my mum has, is that she doesn't want to understand because the idea of not, cos you know, she would have had hundreds of children, a lot of children if she'd been able to, you know, she loved chidren,	Perceiving mum as not wanting to understand	

and she always knew that she wanted them. She worked in a school for years, and you know, she just loves being around children. So for her it's very difficult, it's impossible to understand why you would not want to, but I also think it's an unwillingness. You know when some people, they don't, it's so alien to them they don't even want to accept that there might be a way of understanding this. Erm, so I think, I think the reason I, I haven't had that important conversation with her is because I genuinely think there's no point, and she will put, she will put everything down to me just having some funny ideas, that aren't logical and don't follow any kind of logic. I: Hmm, that you're not doing it the right way, because she's done it her way and loved it L: Yeah, yeah I: I'm assuming L: Yes	Being aware of mum's love of children Describing mum's love of children Appreciating mum's difficulty in understanding Perceiving mum to be unwilling Being alien. Being so different Being too difficult to understand Describing the conversation with mum as important Reflecting on reasons for not having conversation Expecting to be dismissed Expecting to be considered illogical Agreeing that not doing it right	 Being the person who's not living the right way

I: And it's difficult for her to understand how you could choose not to do something that she's enjoyed so much.		
L: Yeah, definitely. And is normal as well. She, she likes things that are normal, and this isn't normal. So, that's her word not mine (laughs). She actually said to me once "I wish you could be normal", or "I wish you were normal" or something like that which, you know, and I, I think what she meant was "I wish you wanted what I consider to be normal" because it was one of those things that took me by surprise, and afterwards I wish I'd said something like "well most people say I want you to be happy" but that's not what she meant, she meant that to make me happy, that kind of lifestyle to make me happy	Experiencing others not understanding. Experiencing others not thinking she's normal. Not being normal Recalling hearing mum wish she was normal Reframing mum's wishes Being surprised Wanting to defend self Not being perceived as happy	Being not normal
I: hmm hmm.		
L; Yeah		
I: Anything else that comes to mind about this is something to share?		
L: Erm, I don't think so no, I don't think so		

I: Well thank you ever so much, for being so open and sharing your experiences, and yeah, it's clearly a rollercoaster, and this is why I'm doing the work, because it's not a conversation that's commonly being had at the moment.		
L: No, no, it's not, and that's one of the reasons I particularly wanted to take part. I think anything like this is really valuable because, there is so little understanding of it and, you know there is still this stigma, a little bit of stigma attached to being childfree. [break]	Experiencing stigma	
I: Lots of choices, that your reproduction is your business, and it's not OK to ask about it		
L: And I suppose if you go back a couple of generations it was perfectly OK to ask about it because that what everybody did. You know, erm, and it was just people taking an interest in your life, but as time's moved on and we've been given more options and that kind of thing, it's no longer OK	Appreciating how attitudes have changed over generations Noticing the decrease in having children over generations Noticing the acceptability of asking about children has changed	

I: Yeah, it's interesting, I don't know what you think about 'we've been given more options'. Who is we, and who gave it to us?	Having choices. Not accepting the question	
L: We gave it to ourselves didn't we (laughs)		
I: And who is we?		
L: Women		
I: Women		
L: Yeah, it is isn't it. And it's men as well. And I think this is something that I think is missed a lot in discussion or whatever about the concept of being childfree, that men are generally not really considered. And I think part of that is that it's not so much of an issue, it geniunely isn't so much of an issue, I mean a man could go through his life never being asked about whether he was going to have children or not, nobody thinks it's weird, nobody thinks it, so being childfree as a woman, as we said, it has a kind of, people think it says something about your womanhood, but nobody would say that about a man, nobody would say it makes you less of a man not being a father, but some people do think it makes you less of a woman to not be a	==Stating women gave themselves choices== Considering men as part of the discussion Noticing that men are treated differently to women about being childfree Being thought weird	

mother, I don't know if I'm explaining that right. So, part of the reason is that it just doens't touch men in the same way it touches women, but also, people are just less interested in the concept of a childfree man, but it is still a concept for a man, it is still a choice, in the same way.	<mark>Having her womanhood questioned</mark> <mark>Being considered less of a woman</mark> Observing society's interest in a childfree woman	
I; hmm, mmm, and there's that aspect as well that we talked about, erm, a sense of worth, and erm, you said, people wouldn't think anything of a guy who goes through his life and nobody'd think anything of it, and I'm just wondering how you might compare and contrast that sort of sense of purpose or contribution that a man going through his life and what does he show for it at the end of his days, and a woman goes through her life and what does she have to show at the end of her days, and how, how is that perceived?		
L: I suppose for a man, the things, the kind of stereotypical activities for a man is all about working, and what they do with their working life, and their working life isn't isn't effected generally, I mean there are some stay at home dads and we've got shared parental leave and that kind of thing now, but, generally speaking, they can go through their working life without having any impact, so they can still look back and say "I've achieved this in my career" without it being a choice. But then I suppose there is a kind of, kind of macho thing isn't there about, you know passing on your genes, and	Observing that a man's working life is not impacted by having children	

impregnanting somebody and that kind of thing, I don't know. Erm, I think it, I think it's just because having children makes such a much bigger difference to a woman's life than it does a man's, so I, as I go through my life childfree at the end of it, I will have had a comparible life to my husband, but if we had children, our experiences would be wildly different at the end of it, because I would have obviously physically bourne the children, probably been responsible for most of its upbringing, I would probably have changed my career, I would be the one who was responsible for going to nursery, whereas he would have carried on the same track and I would have gone like that, whereas we're going like that now. I'm not sure what I'm talking about (laughs), we've veered off the subject a bit. Yeah, I don't know, maybe it is, there is a certain kind of, degree of significance for a man than a woman, but somehow it just doesn't seem to come up. I think it's a feminine thing, I think it's a, the purpose of a woman is to bear children, erm, I don't know, I'm thinking myself into a right hole here (laughs) I: And it's interesting to get to a point and then get a bit stuck L: Hmm	Reflecting on possible rationale for men to want to father children Reflecting on the impact of having children on a woman's life Stating women's lives are impacted greater than men's by having children Believing she will have a comparable life to her husband Believing that if she'd had children her life would not be comparable to husband's Carrying the responsibility Perceiving she would have to make significant changes Travelling on parallel paths together <mark>Thinking having children is a feminine thing</mark> Reflecting on the belief that the purpose of a woman is to bear children Experiencing conflict in her thinking process	Noticing the difference in attitudes towards childfree men and woman Connecting being feminine to being a woman and a mother

I: So		
L: There was a, I don't know if you're into your superhero films at all? In the 2nd avengers film that was out this year, so there's a female character played by Scarlett Johannsen, she's a Russian trained spy, she's very good, she's not a superhero, but she's almost a superhero. So she and Bruce Fallen, who's the hulk, a will they won't they situation, and they're having a conversation about whether they could have a relationship, and he says he has nothing to offer you, I keep turning into the hulk every time I get angry, I can't have children because I keep turning into the hulk and I'll probably kill them, and she explains to him, that when she was going through her spy training, and the end of it, they sterilised all the female spies because they didn't want their attention being taken away from their work as a spy by having children, so she says to him "so you see, you're not the only monster around here" and it was one of those moments where I wondered "did everyone else just hear that" (laughs). So for him not having children, it's just meh, he can't have them, cos he's a hulk, but for her it makes her a monster which is shocking, I was astonished that that was allowed through the editing.	Recalling a movie depiction of a sterilised woman. Recalling the description as being 'a monster' ==Wondering if others heard the wounding words== Being shocked	
I: mm, mm, I haven't seen the film, but I remember hearing about the outrage		

"Being the person people can't handle": Constructions of Living Childfree by Choice by British Women

Abstract

This is a qualitative research project, exploring how being childfree through choice is constructed by British women who self-identify with this term. Using a grounded theory approach to analyse rich narratives gathered through semi-structured interviews this enquiry answers this key question. An exploration is made of the constructions and actions grounded in the narratives of women who are childfree by choice; an area which has enjoyed little focus in the research to date. Existing literature in this field includes writings across feminist psychology, psychology, sociology and psychoanalysis focused on theory related to gender, identity and reproduction. The project concludes with a proposed grounded theory, based on the research findings. This theory suggests how culture, context, actions and consequences combine to create a socially-constructed view of the self and others, including strategies to defend against "being the person people can't handle", reflecting on motherhood "I think my focus has always just been different", and supporting "living a fulfilling life" through being available. This research explores aspects of gender and power within a social context, offering a bridge between academic third wave feminism with fourth wave social activism.

Key words: childfree, grounded theory, gender, choice, culture, feminism, social activism.

Introduction

Recent UK population data (ONS, December 2013) shows that increasing numbers of women are not mothers, and those who do raise a family are doing so later in life and raise fewer children. The reasons behind these trends are many and varied (McAlister and Clarke, 1998). However, given that the UK benefits from a long period of sustained good quality health care, access to contraception and increasingly relaxed social attitudes to the structure of family, marriage and partnerships, it would be reasonable to suggest that an increasing proportion of women are choosing not to parent. This research project looks at the ways in which women who define themselves as childfree by choice and therefore part of this growing minority group construct their views and experiences of living in UK society.

Throughout this research, unless stated by other researchers, I have chosen to use the term 'childfree' over other terms such as 'voluntary childlessness', or 'un-childed'. This decision was taken deliberately, acknowledging the power of language to create or maintain perceptions of our world. It seemed to me that other commonly used terms to me symbolised absence, lack, or subjugation. I see this research as contributing to the body of work oriented towards action and social change, and I therefore chose not to use terms which I consider to be oppressive. Therefore, the language I have used recognises the damaging impact of maintaining the dynamic of shame and fear associated with normativity and regulation.

Relatively little research has been conducted on the experience and actions of women who are childfree through choice, and it is interesting to me to see that the existing research bears out what the social commentary suggests; i.e. that the voice of these women is overlooked in favour of maternalism and the continued interest in the experiences of motherhood. My main research question therefore centres on that which has not yet been considered in the literature; how is being childfree through choice constructed by British women who self-identify with this term? The research suggests that where core differences are perceived on an interpersonal level, defensive strategies are employed to protect the self. This research gives consideration to the experiences of difference, as well as the strategies employed. This research builds on the existing research by exploring how it is to live childfree by choice through the voices of women who identify with this term. It thereby makes a valued contribution to clinician's therapeutic awareness in a culture where we are sensitised to gender, choice and conflict.

The experience of 'childlessness' or being 'childfree' has been the subject of feminist oriented sociological commentary (Morell, 1994; McAllister, 1998), whereby the modern cultural phenomenon of 'maternalism' or 'pro-natalism' is described; tracing the portraiture of women as nurturing and 'mothering' as a natural result of sexual maturity, arising from the birth of the modern industrial middle classes in European and American cultures. In the mid-to-late 20th century, much second-wave feminist argument was in support of women having an active choice to be both career oriented and to be mothers, and to value the work involved in 'mothering', rather than to perceive it to be of little worth and an assumed part of a woman's natural duties. However, Morell describes how the value placed on the role

and work of mothers has become "the source and ultimate expression of women's capacity for care, relational identities and superior values". (1994, p.10).

Ngoubene-Atioky et al (2017) states that the term 'childfree' originated in the UK as an "empowering outlook for the commonly stigmatising connotation of childlessness (Bartlett 1996, in Ngoubene-Atioky et al 2017). They echo the statement of other studies (Koropeckyj-Cox & Pendell, 2007; Letherby, 2002; Park, 2005, in Ngoubene-Atioky, 2017) that "voluntarily childfree women often suffer societal marginalisation and stigma as a result of their choice and disclosure of their childfree status" making reference to the existing research which has identified negative perceptions of voluntarily childless women such as being materialistic, selfish, less nurturing and less socially desirable. Additionally, they highlight that studies have noted that marginalisation of childfree women becomes more predominant the greater the age of the woman (Mollen, 2006; Park, 2005; Vinson, Mollen & Smith, 2010; Yang, 2012).

Theoretical constructions of reproductive choice

Within psychological theory, the view that human potential is achieved through a search for meaning, identity and worthiness underpins many concepts. For example, this notion forms part of Erikson's life cycle development (Erikson, 1950), Frankl's process of self-transference (Frankl, 1964), and Rogers' concept of congruence (Roger's, 1967). More recent thinking on development would suggest that motherhood is but one possible expression of creativity or generativity. In the context of generativity for women, is it possible to achieve full creative

potential and also full potential in motherhood, to the extent that the adult female is able to resolve and create a congruent identity? Within psychodynamic theory, the British object-relations school considers that a child's internalisation of important people or relationships have a major impact on personality development. Within this frame, as women are still predominantly assumed to be the primary caregiver for children, the female personality is theorised to form around connection and relationship; of which motherhood is only one possible aspect.

In exploring the history of women's oppression Chodorow (1989) observed that this phenomenon well preceded the inception of class society or remained limited to specific spheres of work. This led her to conclude that the act of women's mothering generated a defensive masculine energy in men, and a "compensatory psychology and ideology of masculine superiority" which maintained a culture of male dominance (Chodorow, 1989, p. 2). This directed her to turn to psychoanalysis as a basis for formulating feminist theory, recognising the centrality of exploring the impact of sex and gender in both psychoanalysis and feminism. She suggested that the experiences of being a man or a woman came from deep within, informed by our pasts and the unconscious meaning and fantasies experienced in our day to day emotional relationships.

Furman (Furman, 2001) suggests that the relationship between mothers and their children could be considered to be experienced as a series of separations; starting with birth as the first potential separation where the child leaves (or rejects) the mother, then weaning where the child rejects the mother 'object' whilst simultaneously showing interest in other

'objects' (i.e. solid food) and how this is experienced by the mother. She makes the observation that the mother, if robust enough, can tolerate the pain of the rejection by her child, and is soothed by the joy of watching them grow and mature. Furman's hypotheses perhaps connect to the ideas of Chodorow (1989), in respect of the ways in which the experience of mothering contributes to the development of a defensive energy in men; leading to a rejection of women and a distancing from the importance of self-other relations. Furman (2001) suggests that when children are not made to feel guilty about their growing up, they allow themselves to perceive and sympathise with their mother's task. She refers to the work of Donald Winnicott (1957a, 1963a) who also discussed the importance of the development of concern for and appreciation of the mother's role. The theory and research behind the choice or preference to be childfree is light and I am left with questions around how the capacity to leave or be left features as a part of being a childfree woman. Furman's research illustrates how the dynamic between mother and child is enacted in their relationship, whereas Winnicott's work predominantly focused on the intra-psychic actions of this process within the child. Both these researchers seem to be considering the same observed phenomenon; that the relationship with key caregivers is important in how a child develops, becomes independent and matures into adulthood.

In her 2003 article, Mira Hird (2003) recognises the feminist project of seeking to articulate the experiences of women but notes that there is little research around the experiences of women who choose not to mother. She identifies the competing theories within psychoanalysis as well as within the feminist responses to these theories, deconstructing these theories and identifying the limitations of these ways of understanding gender in the

context of women who elect not to mother. Hird observes that as a consequence of the degree to which women are so closely associated with reproduction, that studies of women within this tradition have been theorised in terms of being delayed, or 'deviant' in their social development. In contrast, she identifies an alternative psychoanalytic theory of gender as one of concepts of identification and desire, often associated with the British and American Psychoanalytic Societies. Hird praises the work of Luce Irigaray, in that whilst Irigaray's theory of sexual difference is based on the recognition of two distinct ontologically distinct sexual bodies, Hird argues that Irigaray is able to demonstrate that women's conditions of being is not limited to reproduction. Competing theoretical voices from within feminist psychoanalytic and post-structural traditions propose the notion that bodies are constructed through social, political and cultural discourse. Within this frame, the body is always historical and available to change. Hird identifies the work of Judith Butler (Hird, 2003), which she considers is suggestive of childless women as transformative in terms of gender identity. She proposes that they challenge several stereotypes associated with womanhood; such as a woman's body as a producer of children, along with her desire for and liking of children, as well as men's bodies and the inability to 'mother', and men's assumed lack of desire for children. Butler suggests that childfree women challenge the social constructions of what it is to be a 'woman', not only because they do not have the necessary child, but that also their identity is not the opposite of 'man' (thereby threatening the stability of male gender identity). What is perhaps most striking to me is how potent and powerful a woman is who chooses not to reproduce, and how challenging the rejection of reproduction is to common understandings, expectations and perhaps even definitions of gender.

The ONS (2013) data suggests that the proportion of women who do not have children is growing within the UK population. When living and working in a pro-natalist culture, expressing a desire to be childfree may understandably bring about experiences of difference; of 'otherness'**.** John McLeod (2013, p.288) states that "cultural identity plays a crucial role in shaping and maintaining the way that a person… defines problems and solutions, and the assumptions he or she holds about what it means to be a person, and what it means to be in relationships". His words therefore suggest that cultural identity is a dynamic process; how we are in the world, and how we interact with others in our relationships.

Constructions of being a woman and being childfree in the research

Studies have shown childfree women to be seen by others as deviant and dysfunctional; labelled selfish, immature, unfulfilled and lonely (Gillespie, 2003; Letherby, 2002; Park, 2002). However, where the research is currently very light is in considering what it is like to be a woman who is likely to be perceived as "selfish, immature, unfulfilled and lonely". In her personal reflections on being childfree, Carolyn Morell (Morell, 1994) put this as "being childless means simultaneously to be reminded of your second-rate life and to be ignored. ... What I found is that writers and researchers simply assume all adult women are mothers." (Morell, 1994, p.xv). One aspect of assuming that all adult women are (or would wish to be) mothers, is the assumption that 'real women' are mothers.

American researchers Blackstone and Dyer Stewart (2012) explore the decision not to parent from a feminist sociology perspective. It is worth noting that the rationales given for being childfree identified include "freedom from childcare responsibility and greater opportunity for self-fulfilment and spontaneous mobility" (Houseknecht, 1987 cited in Blackstone et al). A later study (Carmichael and Whittaker, 2007, cited in Blackstone et al) discovered the following reasons cited by childfree women; "an aversion to the lifestyle changes that come with parenthood, an explicit rejection of the maternal role, selfishness, and either feeling unsuited, or proficient but unwilling to take on the role of parent." Perhaps of most relevance in the Blackstone research is the thinking done around deviance and stigma. What is clear is that the literature bears out differences in the perceptions of 'otherness' between those who are parents versus those who are not (Koropeckyj-Cox et al, 2007, Copur & Koropeckyj-Cox, 2010 cited in Blackstone et al). One interesting observation made is that when race is considered in how childfree women are viewed, it seems as though there is greater difference in favourableness between the perception of mothers and non-mothers from a Black African-American background, than between the perceptions of White American mothers and non-mothers. This suggests a relative safeness to the white woman to express her differences in contrast to those with other racial backgrounds. Research is therefore at risk of only exploring the experiences of white women due to their increased participation. In many ways, this mirrors a critique of earlier psychological research, only rather than the research being done by men about men, feminist research (including this piece) is done by white women, about white women.

In 'Choosing Childlessness', the sociologist Kristin Park (2002) explores the motivations of women, and men, for choosing childlessness. She acknowledges the continued experience of tension between parents and non-parents in regard to perceived imbalances in the allocation of benefits and expressed evaluations of social value (Belkin, 2000; Burkett 2000; Lawlor, 2000). In the context of continued pro-natalism she states that many childfree individuals engage in information control and stigma management in order to manage their "deviant identities" (Park, 2002, pp. 375). In terms of motivations towards childlessness, she observed that women, more than men, are often influenced by the observed parental models of significant others such as their own parents or within their social networks, frequently producing fear or anxiety in connection to the experience of parenting. Park noted the emotional content of these motives; yet the participants rationalised their decision as a means to an end goal of a happier life, by avoiding the perceived negative outcomes of the parenting experience. Additionally, Park identified that many women perceived motherhood as compromising on career and leisure identities that were currently experienced as satisfying and something to be continued. Building on the work of Park (2002), Blackstone et al (2012) recognise the childfree movement as one responding to an experience of being stigmatised, and a challenge to the characterisation of their actions as being deviant.

The research therefore suggests that where core differences are perceived, such as those associated with gender, sex or power, strategies are employed to protect the self. Where the literature has not yet gone, is to consider current theory of being childfree through choice in the context of the narratives of those women these ideas seek to describe.

Methodology

<u>*Design*</u>

This is a qualitative study based on a social constructionist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014) and semi-structured interviews to explore the constructions of living childfree by choice by British women. Full ethical approval was granted by the University of the West of England ethics committee.

<u>*Rationale for Grounded Theory*</u>

Grounded Theory is an approach to qualitative research developed by US sociologists Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s, oriented towards theory generation, and as an opposition to the 'grand' essentialist focus of the social sciences at the time (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Charmaz has crafted an approach which "explicitly assumes that any theoretical rendering offers an interpretative portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 17). It was this emphasis on developing nuanced and contextualised understandings of social processes which led me to select this methodological approach for this research project. I felt that it offered a way of connecting deeply with the narratives of the women who contributed to this study, and developing a contextualised way of understanding living childfree by choice.

Participants

Seven cis-women between the ages of 35 and 49 who self-identified as childfree by choice participated in the study. Additional data was used from a preliminary focus-group facilitated by the researcher prior to embarking on this research study. These participants were also cis-women, some but not all of whom identified as childfree by choice. The data from this group was highly pertinent to the present study as it focused on the meanings and constructions of being childfree by choice.

Procedure

Sampling

I was able to recruit participants from the online childfree by choice communities, predominantly on Facebook, as well as snowball email recruitment and attending several community and outreach organisations. However, despite the number of responses received, in practice all the participants identified as white British, with the majority being in heterosexual partnerships and describing themselves as middle-class. This bears out the assumption I posited in response to the Blackstone (2012) research, i.e. that whilst there is an observable negativity levied towards white non-mothers, there appears to be greater negativity levied towards non-white women in the same situation; thereby suggesting a relative safeness offered to the white woman to express her differences in contrast to those with other racial backgrounds. I am aware that this may limit the impact of this research enquiry to some degree, however I found it interesting to observe this cluster of participants form spontaneously, despite casting a wide net during the recruitment phase.

The research interview

Semi-structured interviews were used for this second phase of data collection. The interviews provided the opportunity to gather nuanced and individual narratives focused on how being childfree though choice influenced participants views of themselves; how this impacted on key aspects of their lives; and how they talked about their choice(s) to be childfree with others. The interviews all took place in the summer of 2015. In preparation for the interviews, I crafted a semi-structured interview pro-forma. The interview questions mapped to my main research question; 'how is being childfree through choice constructed by British women who self-identify with this term'? I found several women who wanted to talk to me about their experiences, within my stated age ranges, as well as beyond the bounds of this cluster. Grounded Theory methodology does not explicitly state the required number of interviews for a small study such as this; rather Charmaz emphasises working towards saturating categories, rather than data (Charmaz, 2014, p. 107). Therefore the objective of my interview recruitment was to initially recruit enough participants to craft coherent core categories upon which to develop my theory. I aimed to recruit between six and ten participants, and recorded seven interviews.

Data Analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in full. The transcripts were then analysed in line with Charmaz's (2014) guidelines, starting with initial line-by-line coding, oriented around the gerund, holding the question 'what's going on here' in mind. A second focused, more interpretative layer of coding followed which aimed to capture the actions of the initial codes. Charmaz suggests that "initial and focused coding will suffice for many

projects" (Charmaz, 2014). However, as I reached a point of having completed the second layer of coding I was left with a sense of disempowerment; I did not really know where to go from here. This was an indication to me that I had not yet tapped into the analytic power of my data. To help me do this, I started to pair clustering exercises with free-writing and writing memos. I credit the reflective skills I developed through the coding and memoing phases with helping me to clearly pick out the action-oriented focused codes and concepts I saw within the data. I became aware that I was searching for a way to make sense of the categories I'd created. It appeared axial coding could provide a structure to orient an answer to my research questions. Charmaz (Charmaz 2014) suggests axial coding is a method which can provide a structure for 'how' and 'why' questions; precisely the kind of questions I was asking in this research project. Whilst the containment of a structure was certainly appealing, it was not the only reason I considered adopting this approach; the more time I spent with my categories and codes, the more I saw how they related and interacted with one another. I was starting to get a sense of the function or action I was seeing within these codes. It became clear to me that my next step was to map the major categories, looking at the 'conditions' 'actions' and 'consequences' constructed within them. I found it helpful to visualise these categories as containers for each subsequent layer; that the conditions made sense of and contained the actions taken; and that in turn, the actions made sense of and contained the consequences experienced:
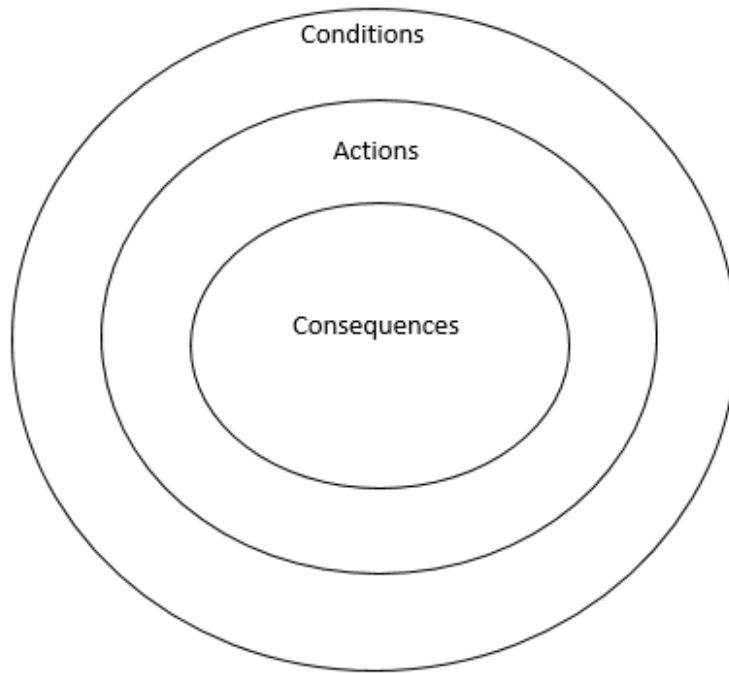
Fig. 1.

Analysis

Three key categories were constructed from the data; *Being the person people can't handle; Being available* and *Reflecting on mothering.* The relationship between the categories was represented as an axial map (see Fig.2.) For the purpose of this article I have chosen to limit my presentation to the key categories only, and not to expand on the sub-categories constructed due to the limitations of the publication.
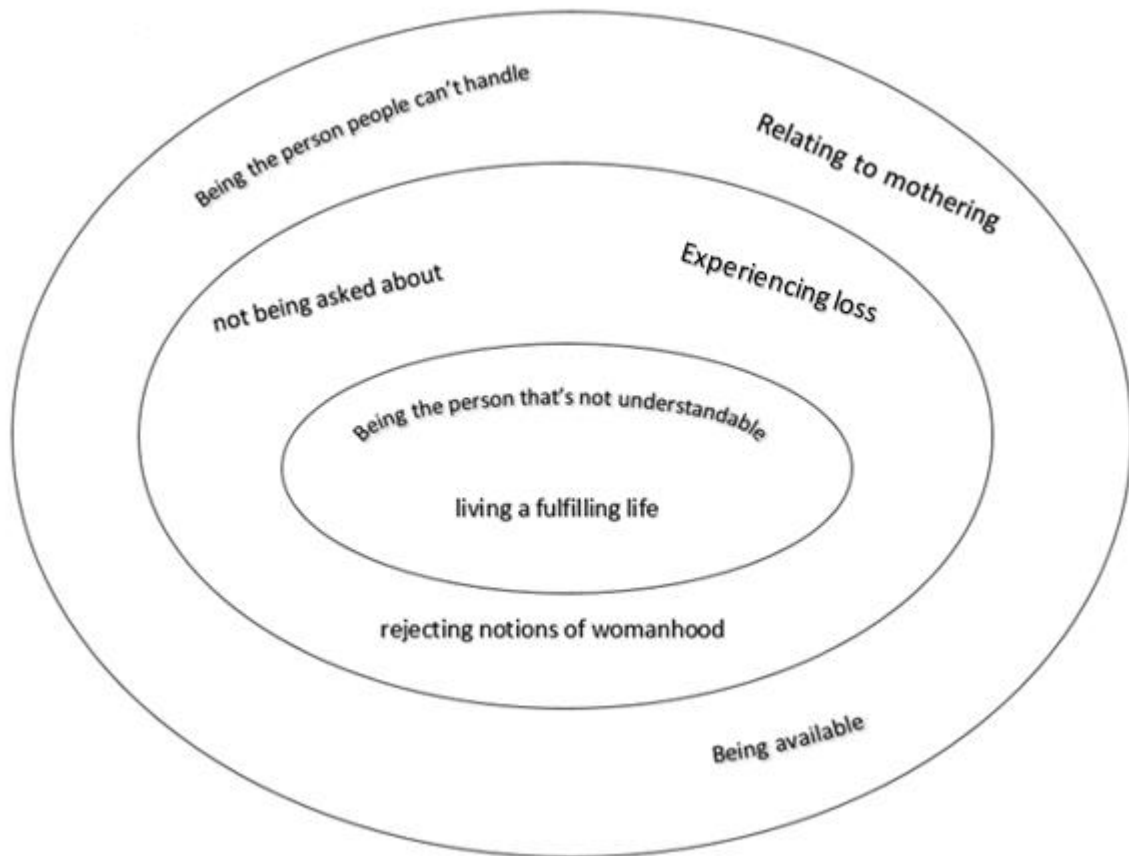
Fig. 2.

In *Being the person people can't handle* participants described experiences of suffering

discrimination, oppression and being perceived negatively by others. These experiences

were associated with the painful actions of *being the person who's not asked about* and

experiencing loss. Participants described their childfree-ness in terms of how this has

impacted on their depth of relationship and connection with others, noting experiences of

avoidance, neglect and shame. Participants articulated an experienced tension; recognising

the pull to protect themselves and others from potential harm, as well as experiencing harm

through others' inattention. Consequently, participants described constructions around *being the person who's not understandable.*

The second key category of *Being available* was described in several different ways across the accounts, reflecting the flexibility the participants perceived they had as a result of not being in a direct parenting role. This was described in terms of physical availability, as well as emotional and mental availability. The actions constructed within this key category oriented around *rejecting notions of womanhood*; in order to experience availability and flexibility there was an active recognition of a movement away from traditional gender expectations. The experience of challenging gender norms provoked a process of self-reflection for many of the contributors, and as a result, they described idiosyncratic negotiations and constructions around their understanding of *living a fulfilling life.*

The third key category of *Relating to mothering* described the constructions and concepts associated with mothering as referenced by the participants. This was a strong feature of many of the accounts, reflecting the power of observation through lived experience, transgenerational expectations, and witnessing the lives of others. This key category was associated with the actions of *disappointing others* and *imagining a life with a child.* These actions led to a constructed consequence of *being open to change.*

<u>*Being the person people can't handle*</u>

Participants described being treated differently, rejected or discriminated by others for their childfree-ness. Many of the accounts contained emotive examples of how participants experienced the attitudes and actions of others as indicators of their inability to accept their childfree status. These examples took different forms; in dejection around not experiencing acceptance and equality; in anger and fear at the perceived fatality of motherhood; and the gamble they take in their intimate relationships in deciding to be childfree.

Participants spoke about their experiences of not being accepted by others; that somehow their childfree-ness made them 'other':

> *Louise: "well it's like the old kind of, erm, myths about witches, I mean, they're all childfree, there's something about the old woman in the Hansel and Gretal story, you know, there's something about women not having children being er, being cold, being ah I don't know, people can't handle that."*

This 'other-ness' was echoed by Helen, drawing from her own experiences in the workplace. She talked about how the expectation was that somehow it was more acceptable to treat her less favourably than her parent colleagues:

> *Helen: "I suppose there's the kind of issue in work, that there's the kind, the little bit of the expectation that if you don't have children you're going to be available all the time you know, erm, all through the year, possibly at any time of the day or night, erm, in a way that I think parents get a much easier time"*

The concept of being treated less favourably than others was echoed by Amanda, likening her fight for acceptance with other examples of discrimination:

> *Amanda: "I mean that, I think it's enormously sad that I felt that way erm, but I just think, even when I was of an age, you know, where you want things like, legalising gay marriage, all these things I've been supportive of, you know, you still have to, have to almost fight in order to be accepted as childfree, in some situations."*

In some accounts, participants spoke with strong feeling in response to the expectations and dominant discourse around motherhood. In these accounts, the feelings seemed to convey a power and strength, communicating the force such expectations exerted on the speaker:

> *Helen: "[I feel] A bit annoyed really, a bit angry that people have this expectation that you have to have children in order to have a fulfilled life, because I just don't see that at all"*

Sophie used the metaphor of being washed away; vividly evoking a risk of being carried, swept up by the great dominating force of social expectations:

> *Sophie: "I'll dig my heels in to the end erm because of this assumption, or sort of current of various factors that attempts wash you into the, down the river, into the sea of motherhood. It takes some doing to resist that in various ways"*

Acceptance by others does not seem to be limited solely to the participants' intimate partners. Alice describes being accepted by others, seemingly conditional on her 'being good with children', suggesting something normalising about this:

Alice: "I think generally, because I get on with kids, people with kids, just accept that I don't have kids."

In the accounts there are many examples of how participants experience 'being the person others can't handle'; that this is experienced as discrimination, less favourable treatment, resonating with the dark coldness associated with characters in fairy tales and fantasy. However, there is a recognition that there are others who can 'handle' them; and that through so doing, they experience love, companionship and connectedness.

Being available

In the coding of the participants' accounts, a key category of *Being available* was constructed from the data, oriented around what I observed as the consequences of living a fulfilling life, and rejecting notions of womanhood. I saw *Being available* in several different forms across the data; the physical availability of time and energy; and the availability afforded to others to engage in conversations and reflections not bounded by expectation and cultural norms.

Alice described how she was available for others, that she was viewed as a helpful adult:

Alice: "so if, if they're stuck for a babysitter, or, you know, I'll pick them up give a call, some friends with their first children they'll be up all night and they're losing it, and I'll get a text (unclear) "can you pop round for half an hour cos I'm losing it", so I can

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do some of that and be supportive with that, so I see that as being important and

something I can do because I don't have children."

Both Helen and Madeline spoke about how their childfree status enabled them to connect

with others, and to allow conversations to unfold, unfettered by a need to conform to the

dominant discourse.

> *Helen: "when I still said I wasn't interested in having children we actually had a really*
>
> *interesting conversation where she said, actually, I think if I'd had my time over again*
>
> *I might have decided not to have children. And that was a real breakthrough because*
>
> *I really felt she understood at that point, and that she wasn't going to give me a hard*
>
> *time about it."*

Whilst Helen's account suggests her difference allows for this level of connection,

Madeline's perspective is that the connection over similarities which allows for connection:

> *Madeline: "we talk about things that are collective, rather than talking about things*
>
> *that are different. So we'll talk about relationships in terms of what's going on in the*
>
> *relationship, we won't talk about this in specific terms"*

Relating to mothering

Several participants spoke about how they related to the concept of mothering, which

seemed to tap into ideas around the construction of family. For some participants, there

was a sense of not belonging within a family structure, whereas for others, they spoke about

constructing a family that fit them. For example, Alice spoke about not 'being somebody's

something', i.e. that she didn't have a role or a sense of belonging specific to someone else as a consequence of not being a mother:

> Alice: "It does, I mean you don't have the role of being somebody's. I mean I talked about the negatives of responsibility there obviously, there are positives that come from that as well in terms of your identity as a mother."

However, Helen spoke about encountering other people's meaning of the word 'family' in contrast to their understanding of this word:

> Helen: "one of their first questions they said to us after we'd introduced ourselves was "do you have a family?" and I was baffled by that question because I thought well I've parents, I've got a sister (laughs) I've got aunts and uncles and it didn't occur to me until several seconds later that they meant "do we have children?""

This account suggests the construction of family as being a collection of relatives and friends; not necessarily including direct offspring of their own. However, the account suggests that others' constructions of family may follow a more traditional, nuclear template.

Additionally, Madeline spoke about the depth of connection she enjoys with her partner, which she perceived would be difficult to sustain with children. In prizing their partnership, she and her partner have crafted a family which fit them:

> Madeline: "we spend an awful lot of time together, we plan to do things together and we think about things in the future, so yeah, it does give you a closeness and an

intimacy that I suppose you would, you would struggle to maintain if you had

children."

Connecting to a previous category of 'being available', Amanda spoke about how she held a

compassion for all human beings, and in so doing, was able to value and prize every child;

she was available for all children, not solely direct offspring:

> Amanda: *"I have compassion for all human beings so you know, I think not having my*
>
> *own children means I don't have that bias almost towards my own progeny, like, I*
>
> *feel very much that every child is important."*

Discussion

The grounded theory proposed in this study describes the psychological and relational

processes involved in how being childfree by choice is constructed by British women who

identify with this term. Additionally, it illuminates how being childfree by choice influences

the participant's views of themselves, how they talk about their choice to be childfree, and

how living as childfree by choice impacts on key aspects of their lives. The theory was

influenced by my social constructionist and feminist positions, and my insider position as a

woman who has also identified as childfree by choice. The aim of this research project was

to build on and contribute to the body of work in this field, relating to interests across the

social sciences sensitive to aspects of power, gender and culture. I therefore link my

research findings to feminist research and psychoanalytic theory, as well as positioning it in

the context of theoretical constructions of 'the other' and existing research on being

childfree by choice.

The key categories of *Being the person people can't handle, Being available* and *Relating to*

mothering were all 'conditions' constructed from the participants narratives in relation to

being childfree by choice. In this way, the theory describes the participants' negotiations in

navigating the tensions and harms of living differently, their reflections on how living in this

way impacts on their capacity to value difference, and the emotional response to reflecting

on aspects of gendered expectation and experience. In essence, the narratives reflect how

the respondents are conflicted, upset and disturbed by crossing a deep social binary.

The rationales given for being childfree identified in the literature included "freedom from

childcare responsibility and greater opportunity for self-fulfilment and spontaneous

mobility" (Houseknecht, 1987 cited in Blackstone et al, 2012). A later study (Carmichael and

Whittaker, 2007, cited in Blackstone et al, 2012) discovered the following reasons cited by

childfree women; "an aversion to the lifestyle changes that come with parenthood, an

explicit rejection of the maternal role, selfishness, and either feeling unsuited, or proficient

but unwilling to take on the role of parent." Whilst these elements are evident in the

categories of *Being available* and *Relating to mothering*, what the previous research has

failed to cover are the meanings and constructions made by women of their experiences.

For example, rather than the pursuit of career being a selfish endeavour, my research

strongly suggests this to be perceived by the participants a generative endeavour; offering

something of value to a greater number of people, rather than limiting one's efforts and resources to one's own offspring.

In rationalizing the decision to be childfree Park (2002) noted the emotional content of these motives; yet the participants in my study described their decision as a means to an end goal of a happier life; by avoiding the perceived negative outcomes of the parenting experience, again evidenced in the tensions between *Being available* and *Relating to mothering.* Additionally, Park identified that many women perceived motherhood as compromising on career and leisure identities that were currently experienced as satisfying and something to be continued. Whilst my work connects with these motives, Park's work ends with the perception that career and leisure identities would be compromised; whereas by exploring the constructions and actions in the narratives of my participants I identify what these careers and leisure activities mean to the women. Rather than this meaning a compromise to, or an end of a selfish or self-driven endeavour, motherhood is frequently seen by my participants as a way of curtailing pursuits which are of value beyond the individual; they nurture the self, others, the family and the community at large.

My research, particularly around the category of *Being available* and descriptions of being a 'spare adult' highlights the valued contribution to family and community my participants make, and also the value of these relationships to the participants. My research demonstrates that beyond the traditional nuclear family, the notion of 'family' is flexible, recognising the value and function of non-parent adults in the development and nurturement of children, supportive adult relationships, and valued contribution to the

community. It is the recognition of the role of the childfree adult in relation to their constructed family unit which this research highlights, and gives voice to from the perspective of those it seeks to describe.

Limitations and Critique

The participants were all white, mostly middle class, predominantly straight & partnered people. I consider it important not to naively suggest that race, class, sexuality or other aspects of power and privilege have not influenced the findings of this research project. Most participants in this study will have had access to education, to a voice, to financial and personal independence; a capacity to expect to move around society in safety. The limitations of this research are therefore clearly one of intersectionality, and certainly invite further research. I consider it would be exceptionally valuable to be able to explore the degrees to which British women from different ethnic, social and economic backgrounds share or differ from the ideas developed in this project around expectations, assumptions and actions in response to being childfree, and the degree to which a choice is experienced. I perceive this to be imperative to the work of the Counselling Psychologist, covering aspects such as social justice, social policy formation, and ethical clinical practice. I would suggest the white middle class perhaps woman holds an expectation of the right to be outraged; to respond by growing taller & louder. To what extent would a woman who does not have financial independence, a belief in equality of voice or agency, connect to *Being the person people can't handle, Being available,* or *Relating to motherhood?*

Throughout the research project at times I have reflected on how partners and society respond to a woman's expression of choice around being a mother. I have continued to reflect on this, drawing from my own experience, and noting my own interpersonal experiences in connection to *Relating to mothering* and *Being the person people can't handle.* In recognising the degree to which my personal experiences connect with the constructed grounded theory, I have also been mindful of the risks or limitations of being an insider researcher. Throughout the research project I have made active use of the reflective support of my research colleagues, as well as maintaining a reflective journal. This has allowed me to step back from aspects of the research and to process what was coming up for me at the time. As a result I was able to stay close to what I saw in the data, not what I wanted to see through a lens of loyalty or resonance. Additionally, I was able to keep going with the research by using a reflective space to process what was emotionally charged or difficult for me.

Implications

The grounded theory above suggests that rather than there being a clear 'way of being' in terms of constructions around being childfree, there are conflicts, tensions and negotiations in terms of inter- and intra-personal interactions. Participants seem to move between defending or responding to external pressures and expectations, and curiosity, awareness and compassion towards internalised pressures and expectations. There is a risk that this continual movement and negotiation could be repeated in the therapy environment, and it is therefore important for the practitioner to be mindful of not reproducing the individualising and personalising stance of being childfree as a problem.

Being the person people can't handle suggests very clearly a sense of not being acceptable, and therefore not safe. In terms of further research in the area of childfree-ness, it is important for researchers to recognise the risks felt by potential participants in participating in such research projects. The experience of recruiting for this project, despite being met by warm and enthusiastic responses, suggests that this is a powerful area for further study, but in order to recruit non-white, non-middle class participants, particular focus needs to be paid to the aspects of shame, judgement, and the cultural norms and expectations associated with gender, reproduction and power.

Recommendations

I consider this research project to be a valuable and original contribution to the field of Counselling Psychology. The research project has provided an opportunity to update practitioners' awareness of social change, attitudes and awareness of social identity; thereby helping to maintain therapeutic awareness in a culture where we are sensitised to gender, choice and conflict. Indeed, recognising the impact of *Being the person people can't handle* brings to mind a rationale for revisiting aspects of ethical practice in terms of equality and inclusion. For example, the BACP have published a Good Practice Guide to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion within the Counselling Professions (2018). Within this guide they specifically refer to pregnancy and maternity as a protected characteristic under the Equalities Act 2010. I would therefore argue that the attitudes, expectations and presumptions levied towards many of the participants in this study on the basis of the *intentional absence* of pregnancy and maternity is one of ethical and inclusive concern. I

would therefore recommend further development in terms of ethical practice recommendations, bringing into awareness the potential harm of living differently to expected norms, and the vulnerability this provides to discriminatory actions and practice.

Conclusion

The culture in which we live has the potential to harm us, as well as to support us in our growth, development and fulfilment. This research project has demonstrated the delicate navigation of our pro-natalist culture by a group of women who have often been vilified, overlooked or second-guessed. What this research has shown is the ways in which the process of living, following one's own path and experiencing the response of others to it can bruise us, but also offer hope, courage and inspiration. In concluding this research, I have been struck by the boldness, the courage and the generosity of the women who took part.

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