

**“JUST TRYING TO LIVE MY LIFE AS A NORMAL BLOKE”:  
A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF STRAIGHT MEN’S  
EXPERIENCES OF BEING CHILDFREE**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of the West of  
England, Bristol for the degree of Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology

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August 2020

**Declaration**

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## **Abstract**

*Background:* Increasing numbers of straight people in the west are choosing not to parent. The existing voluntary childlessness or childfree research evidence focuses almost exclusively on women in this obscured population with little consideration of the experiences of men.

*Aims:* The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of living as a straight man who decides not to have children and how these men build, maintain and make sense of their masculine identity.

*Methods:* A convenience sample of 69 mostly White, middle-class self-identified childfree men completed a virtual qualitative interview or online qualitative survey on living as a childfree man. The data were analysed using Thematic Analysis (TA) from a predominantly social constructionist perspective informed by critical theories of gender and masculinities.

*Findings:* The data revealed some resistance to the 'childfree' label and an orientation to being perceived as selfish, deviant, irresponsible or uncaring. The analysis identified an overarching theme of 'just trying to live my life as a normal bloke' which captured how participants engaged in extensive identity work to present themselves as conforming to expectations of traditional hetero-masculinity including independent-mindedness, rationality and responsibility. Paradoxically, stories of resisting pronatalist and traditional masculine norms and re-working masculinity also permeated the accounts along with substantial interplay of contextual and/or intersectional factors. Three themes nested beneath the overriding discourse of hetero-normativity: Theme 1: Variable alignment with the 'childfree' label, Theme 2: Rational and responsible decision making and Theme 3: Complexities of 'chosen' non-fatherhood

*Conclusion:* The stories portrayed by the men indicate that their ongoing investment in identity work enabled them to maintain their sense of masculinity in the face of a non-normative life choice. Some accounts reflected aspects of more contemporary masculinities including compassionate and inclusive masculinities. Implications for counselling psychologists, limitations of the study and suggestions for further research are considered.

## **Acknowledgments**

Thank you to all the men who gave their time and interest to this study and shared their views and experiences so generously. My thanks are also extended to Professor Amy Blackstone and Professor Kimya Dennis for their generosity of spirit in sharing their work and research on childfree living and circulating my calls for participants across their networks. I am also indebted to various childfree relatives and friends – some no longer with us – whose joyfulness, creativity and kindness has been a source of inspiration.

My sincere appreciation also goes to my two Directors of Studies (one of whom was initially my second supervisor), Professor Victoria Clarke and Dr Miltos Hadjiosif whose fortitude, scholarly expertise, dedication and commitment have been invaluable in supporting me through the different stages and practical challenges of this thesis.

Finally, my deepest heart-felt gratitude goes out to Kevin and Becky whose sheer patience, love and encouragement have sustained and motivated me throughout this demanding yet incredibly rewarding process.

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## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Background**

This literature review presents and discusses the existing research evidence regarding the experiences of straight men who choose to be childfree. In line with the research study which this thesis reports, the literature review will focus on any studies and theoretical perspectives which illuminate childfree heterosexual men's experiences of building and retaining their masculine identity and how they 'do' family (Blackstone, 2012; Oswald, Blume & Marks, 2005). Counselling psychology often draws on evidence produced by disciplines beyond its boundaries as does reproductive research (British Psychological Society, 2005; Clarke, Hayfield, Moller & Braun, 2019; Lohan, 2015). Therefore, given the limited amount of psychological literature on childfree men, this review will also examine research from other academic disciplines and research fields including work produced by sociologists and health researchers.

### **Increasing rates of childlessness**

Rates of childlessness – both voluntary and involuntary – are increasing in the western world with an estimated 25% of UK women born in 1973 remaining childless, while the level of UK male lifetime childlessness is one of the highest in Europe (Miettinen, Rotkirch, Szalma, Donno, & Tanturri, 2015). Voluntary childlessness – “an active and permanent decision not to parent” – has been growing incrementally both absolutely and as a proportion of the overall childless population in the UK, the rest of Europe and the US with more men, women and couples than ever before choosing *not* to become parents (Basten, 2009; Moller & Clarke, 2016: 206;). Data on trends in and current levels of childfree men remain elusive as statistics on childfree living i.e. voluntary or intentional childlessness were traditionally aggregated with figures for involuntary or unintentional childlessness. Even when voluntary/intentional childlessness is disaggregated and measured in its own right the data predominantly capture only women's rates of voluntary childlessness or conflate childfree “people” or “couples” so that data regarding the specific rates of childfree men is largely invisible (for example, Durham & Braithwaite, 2009; Matthews & Desjardins, 2017; Mawson, 2005)

The exceptions to this rule are demographic analyses conducted by Miettinen & Szalma (2014) and Waren & Pals (2013) which drilled down into national government survey data to report separately on rates of male voluntary childlessness respectively across the Euro27 nations and in the United States. The first of these analyses revealed that in 9.8% of men between 18-40 years of age in the UK in 2011 were voluntarily childless compared to 3.7% in Ireland (one of the lowest rates) and 19.1% in the Netherlands (the highest rate). Collectively all the 27 pre-Brexit European nations which had a mean rate of 7.7% of men (and 5.2% of women) identifying as intentionally childless and intending to remain so (Miettinen & Szalma, 2014). The second analysis identified 6.4% of all men aged 21-44 in the United States as voluntarily childless compared to 4.7% of women in the same age group and highlighted the voluntary childlessness rate of 7.8% among white men was nearly double that of Hispanic, African-American and Pacific Islander men (Waren & Pals, 2013).

### **Terminology**

This phenomenon of people who neither have nor desire to have children is variously described as “voluntary childlessness” or “childless by choice” or “childfree” by choice (Gold & Wilson, 2003; Tessarolo, 2006; Healey, 2016). Such language emphasises the intentional nature of these people’s decision not to have children, regardless of their physiological capacity to do so (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008)

Although the term voluntarily childless is used extensively in more mainstream literature, feminist research particularly rejects the use of the term child/ess because it implies a lack or something missing thereby potentially reinforcing the pronatalist notion that having a child is “natural” and the fulfilment of normal femininity and normal adulthood (Kelly, 2009). Feminists have replaced child/ess with childfree and though this term is also subject to criticism for example for valorising non-motherhood (Moore, 2014) or being potentially insulting to those who have children (Terry & Braun, 2012) or could be regarded as reifying childism (the societal devaluing of and prejudice towards children, Young-Brecht, 2012), it is often the least disliked term for those who choose not to parent (Peterson, 2014). Given the stigmatisation and marginalisation which people choosing non-parenthood can be subjected to (compared to parents) the descriptor “childfree” may also honour “the identity work done using this label and its importance in the reduction of felt stigma that many feel” as



well as highlighting that chosen non-parenthood does not preclude the possibility of a fulfilling life (Gillespie, 2003; Terry & Braun, 2012: 224).

This review uses the terms “voluntarily childless”, “childfree” and “chosen non-parent/fatherhood” interchangeably reflecting the use of particularly the first two labels in the wider literature, the fact that some people who choose not to parent or to have children do not align themselves with the specific identity of being ‘childfree’ and the contested nature of all three terms (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Avison & Furnham, 2015; Morison, Macleod, Lynch, Mijas & Shivakumar, 2016).

### **Scope**

My literature review focuses on the research evidence and theoretical perspectives regarding childfree heterosexual men and does not consider the evidence on childfree gay men (nor other non-straight identifying childfree men). This exclusive focus reflects my own positionality and biography as a straight-identifying cis-female as well as the very different contexts for living as childfree for gay and straight men. For instance, heterosexual men are far more likely to have children than gay men (with respective mean rates of fatherhood estimated as 90% and 20%) and therefore face different social expectations around parenthood (McKee, 2017; Miettinen, Rotkirch, Szalma, Donno, & Tanturri, 2015;). The two groups of men are also subject to differing expectations regarding masculinity and fatherhood. Virility, for example, for gay men is not necessarily associated with fathering children whereas traditionally it is for straight men (Schacher, Auerbach, & Silverstein, 2005). Furthermore, most gay men are childfree whereas though voluntary childlessness is increasing amongst straight men in some nations, it remains the minority choice (Mietten et al., 2015).

With regards to family life there are also distinct differences in how gay and straight couples ‘do’ family which also underpin the heterosexual focus of this thesis (Blackstone, 2014; Schacher, Auerbach & Silverstein, 2005). In contrast to heterosexuals, gay men (and lesbian women) have long considered many other or different types of relationships beyond those solely defined by biological or legal ties as ‘family’ (Gates, 2013; Weston, 1991). Consequently ‘chosen’ or ‘logical’ families composed of friendship and kinship networks (as

opposed to solely '*biological*' families that still predominate for heterosexuals) are well-established amongst gay people (Maupin, 2017; Weston, 1991;).

The notion of '*doing*' family versus *being* a family was initially proposed by sociologists and family theorists seeking to develop academic understanding of the changing structures and experiences of many contemporary families whether straight or gay or otherwise identified (Gates, 2013). This endeavour built on West and Zimmerman's (1987) and Butler's (2002) influential work which originated in the gay and women's rights movements of earlier decades and views gender as an accomplishment that is achieved or "carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented to its production" (West & Zimmerman, 1987: 126). Gender is therefore conceptualized not as something having an independent physical existence embodied in individuals but instead as something produced by means of an ongoing performance embedded in one's everyday activities. The ongoing and ubiquitous act of 'following or performing to scripts that are based on gendered ideals (was) reflected in the concept of "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987: 126). Central to this performative conceptualisation of gender is the notion of heteronormativity: the 'ideology that implicitly holds that heterosexuality is, and should be, the only, dominant, or taken-for-granted sexuality for all' (Thorne, Hegarty & Hepper, 2019: 244).

The socially constructed nature of gender and heteronormativity has been further elucidated by a ground-breaking theory known as Queer Theory postulated by Oswald, Blume and Marks (2005). This theoretical model can assist psychologists as well as family studies and sociology researchers in deconstructing how 'the complicated and pervasive ideology of heteronormativity' impacts profoundly on how we all (whether gay, straight, bisexual, male, female or gender-queer) experience and understand social activity and social identity as well as relationships (Allen & Mendez, 2018: 70; Bengtson, Acock, Allen, et al., 2005).

Queer Theory proposes that heteronormativity is an ideological amalgamation of 'three interrelated and analytically inseparable binaries: the gender binary, the sexuality binary, and the family binary' (Allen & Mendez, 2018: 70). Each constituent binary has 'an unambiguous and stable boundary separating the poles so that any given individual is located at one pole or the other' (Oswald et al., 2005 :144). Within the gender binary of heteronormativity "'real" males and females (i.e. cisgender, masculine presenting men and cisgender, feminine presenting women) are positioned against "gender deviants"' including

transgender, or feminine presenting, men (Allen & Mendez, 2018: 70). The sexuality binary 'marks heterosexuality as "normal" and pathologizes other forms of sexual behaviour' while the family binary polarises "genuine" families versus "pseudo" families' (Oswald et al., 2005: 145–146). Families positioned as "genuine" with the ideology of heteronormativity are therefore restricted solely to those defined by biological and legal ties such as the traditional heterosexual nuclear family. In contrast "complex" families reconfigure (or 'queer') family in ways that defy conventional claims about what a family is or should be and of whom it is constituted of (though these families can still include people linked by biological and/or legal ties).

This model put forward by Oswald et al. (2005) fuses the gender, sexuality and family ideologies inherent in heteronormativity into one monolithic 'theoretical complex' in which '(d)doing sexuality and doing family properly are inseparable from doing gender properly. For example, in a male's life cycle, socializing agents will constantly flood him with messages that to know oneself as a "real" man is to feel attractions to women, to have sex with them, and eventually to make families with them' (Oswald et al., 2005: 144). This dictate is as Queer Theory points out not inevitable or universal instead it is a result of history.

Queer Theory is pertinent to this literature review and the entire thesis as the framework identifies 'acts and ideas that resist heteronormativity by challenging the gender, sexuality, and/or family binaries described' to varying degrees (Oswald et al., 2005: 146). These acts and ideas or 'queering processes' are defined as forms of complex gendering, complex sexualities and complex families. Queer theory posits that "the points at which heteronormativity and queering meet are sites of tension in which individuals *do* gender, sexuality, and family (i.e. resist or accommodate heteronormativity)" (Allen & Mendez, 2018: 70). The model therefore informs the premise and focus of the present study as straight men who decide not to parent can be considered within it to have 'queered' their gender to the extent they resist the parent mandate of heteronormativity (Oswald et al., 2005). Likewise, childfree straight men can be considered to have "queered" their family by for instance defining it as (composed of) just themselves and their partner/wife (if in a couple) and/or their closest friends as well as a permanent absence of any children.

## Pathways to voluntary childlessness

One main concern other than critical conceptualisations of gender and family which has been addressed in the inter-disciplinary voluntary childlessness literature since the 1970s has been understanding why some people, particularly women (most voluntarily childless research has focused on women), choose not to have children and elucidating pathways to non-parenthood. As with statistical trends data, earlier lifespan research often did not distinguish between the voluntary and involuntary childlessness making it difficult to disaggregate findings on *voluntary* childlessness (Chancey & Dumais, 2009; Houseknecht, 1987). The voluntary versus involuntary dichotomy remains somewhat problematic as for some people there may be a combination of “voluntary and involuntary factors at play – when postponement forces the hand for example” (Basten, 2009: 4-5) in some people’s decisions to not have children.

Increasingly commonly used terms such as “childfree by choice” (Doyle, Pooley & Breen, 2012) and “chosen childlessness” (Stewart, 2012) indicate or assume people have agency in shaping their own reproductive lives. Some commentators have though challenged “this agentic point of view on the life course” which is exemplified in most research literature on voluntary childlessness (Keizer, Dykstra, and Jansen, 2008: 863). Researchers including DeOllos and Kapinus (2002) have problematised the framing of any type of childlessness as a choice given that even for people biologically able to reproduce, the majority “end(s) up childless without having explicitly pondered the decision whether or not to become a parent” (Keizer et al., 2008: 863). Furthermore, not everyone experiences reproductive freedom for instance in countries, cultures or religions where abortion is illegal, inaccessible or perceived/portrayed as profoundly immoral. Likewise, there are still many societies globally where access to contraception is limited or prohibited or results in punitive social and/or relational consequences for couples or individuals who opt to control their own fertility (Greer, 2009).

One of the few qualitative studies exploring the potentially negative psychosocial consequences of men’s (as well as women’s) reproductive and contraceptive choices was undertaken by Adongo, Tapsoda, Phillips et al. (2014) using twelve gendered based focus groups of adult male and female community members in two different regions of Ghana combined with in depth interviews of district and regional healthcare officials. The study

found that Ghanaian men undergoing vasectomies risk their wives divorcing them as the women considered the procedure a type of castration rendering men 'weak and incapable' of subsequently satisfying women's sexual needs (Adongo et al., 2014). The data also revealed that both genders including some of the health workers in this predominantly Christian country perceived vasectomy as 'an act against God which was punishable either by death or answerable on judgement day' (Adongo et al., 2014:1).

The enduring absence of reproductive choices across numerous nations and within some cultural groups renders notions of "choosing" childfreedom meaningless for many even for some people living in westernised countries purporting to be liberal democracies (Budhwani, Anderson & Hearld, 2018). Scholarly commentaries on childfree life choices therefore argue it is more appropriate to refer to "remaining childless" rather than explicitly choosing childlessness (DeOllos & Kapinus, 2002). This position also acknowledges that a proportion of people articulating intentions not to have children later change their mind particularly due to changing life circumstances such as a new relationship (Avison & Furnham, 2015; Healey, 2016). Likewise, some infertile or subfertile people who initially experience their continued failure to reproduce as a negative, lacking, 'child/ess' state may in time redefine themselves more positively as 'childfree' (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008).

Earlier research on voluntary childlessness focused almost exclusively on women's pathways into non-parenthood (Billari, 2005). These studies initially differentiated between "perpetual postponers" - women who end up being childfree due to serial postponements of parenthood and "early articulators" or "early deciders" - women who vocalised early in their lives a resolute intention to stay childless (Houseknecht, 1987; Keizer et al., 2008). A third group later identified were 'acquiescers' namely those people 'most often men, who are more neutral towards parenthood and go along with the childbearing decisions of their partner' (Avison & Furnham, 2015: 46; Basten, 2009). Yet as Moller and Clarke (2016) highlight subsequent predominantly qualitative research has questioned these categorisations by demonstrating that the decision to be childfree is not a fixed singular decision and many people including some apparently early articulators "don't view the choice to be childfree as a one-off, decontextualised decision" (Moller & Clarke, 2016: 207). Instead, their decision about parenthood is reconsidered and revisited throughout their life course and in response to changing circumstances and key transitions such as their own

parents' death (Clarke, Ellis, Hayfield, & Terry, 2015; DeLyser, 2012). This more fluid and fluctuating aspect of childfree identities is evident in the '*Never say never?*' theme constructed from the thematic analysis by Hayfield et al., (2019) of interviews with 23 UK-based childfree women. This theme conveyed how childfree women negotiated being childfree 'as ever precarious' and continually revisited and renegotiated their childfree identities 'in the context of their personal and social relationships within changing cultural contexts': findings which contrast with the previously assumed fixed parent-non-parent binary in most research from earlier decades (Hayfield et al., 2019: 1).

A recent thematic analysis by Blackstone and Dyer Stewart (2016: 296) based on interviews with straight North American childfree adults confirmed that the processes by which people 'decide not to have or rear children are lengthy and complex'. Analysis of data from qualitatively interviewing 10 men and 21 women identified two main themes in participants' narratives of their decision not to parent: firstly that it was 'a decidedly conscious decision' and secondly 'it occurred as a process as opposed to a singular event' (Blackstone & Dyer Stewart, 2016: 296). While the second theme reinforces previous research findings regarding the refining and re-negotiation of non-parenthood aspirations throughout the lifespan, the first theme contrasts with earlier commentators' challenges to agentic perspectives regarding childfreedom. This difference may be accounted for by the lack of social class, racial and sexual orientation diversity in the sample as well participants already overtly self-identifying as 'childfree' (Blackstone & Dyer Stewart, 2016). The study also concluded that women were more likely than men to reach their decision based on consideration of others and external factors such as their spouse's/partner's parenting preferences, a strong awareness of pronatalist pressure on women to become mothers and altruistic motives for not parenting. For the male participants (in contrast to earlier work defining acquiescers) the locus of the decision appeared more internal, personal and individual (Avison & Furnham, 2015; Blackstone & Dyer Stewart, 2016).

Socio-demographic analyses of voluntary childlessness patterns have also highlighted considerable heterogeneity in the life courses or "life pathways" of people permanently remaining childless (Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008). Nonetheless, certain features of pathways into voluntary childlessness have been identified by researchers suggesting that "people with different educational, occupational and marital backgrounds have different likelihoods

of remaining childless” and that men and women have different pathways into childlessness (Keizer et al., 2008: 863; Kiernan, 2004).

Analysis of data collected by the nationally representative Netherlands Kinship Panel Study 2002-2004 on the demographics of 2195 men and 2867 women aged between 40 and 79 found that higher than average educational attainment is linked to childlessness for women but not for men (Keizer et al., 2008). This data analysis - one of the few to consider ‘the gendered life course processes by which people remain childless’ and to highlight the extent ‘men have been largely neglected’ - also confirmed that an absence of any or multiple partnerships is particularly associated with childlessness for men though not for women (Keizer et al., 2008: 864). Those findings echo claims by Veevers back in 1973 that factors such as “birth order, family size, mother’s employment and perceptions of parents’ marital happiness can explain a (woman’s) predisposition toward voluntary childlessness” (quoted in Moller & Clarke, 2016: 207). Regardless of gendered differences or similarities the duration and patterns of people’s relationship history across their *entire* adulthood may therefore be more helpful in understanding their route into childlessness than just their *current* partnership status, behaviours, attitudes and aspirations (Hagestad, 2007; Kiernan, 2004).

Several key social changes are implicated in contributing to people’s – again not specifically *men’s* - pathways to voluntary childlessness. These include the rise of feminism, broader access to reproductive choice including contraception in most western countries and women’s wider participation in the paid workforce (Bartlett, 1994; Ireland, 1993; McAllister & Clarke, 1998). Commentators have also highlighted the impact of an overall decline in childbearing amongst married heterosexual couples and more people staying single as well as people’s attitudes and behaviours regarding competing interests and lifestyle choices (Galinsky & Matos, 2011; van den Akker, 2016). People contemplating parenthood now tend to “weigh up finances, career prospects and housing situations when deciding if and when to start a family” (van den Akker, 2016: 31). Socialisation factors have also been found to predict voluntary childlessness in both men and women with those opting to be childfree being less likely to hold traditional views of gender roles (Waren & Pals, 2013). The role of eco-anxiety (concerns about climate change and population) may be another factor that increasingly colours people’s pro-creative decisions (Paddison, 2019; Pihkala, 2018).

In addition to evident exclusion of men's perspectives in most research into childfree choices, the literature to date has focused primarily on demographic and other characteristics of the childfree and their pathways into non-parenthood. Minimal attention has been given to the lived experiences of people who elect to be voluntarily childless so the next section considers what is documented in the empirical and lay literature about the lives of those individuals.

### **What is it like to be childfree?**

Choosing not to have children marks out people as different as they contravene the still dominant pronatalist social norms for adult reproductive behaviour in western culture (Blackstone & Greenleaf, 2015; Gold, 2012; Moller & Clarke, 2016). Pronatalism is the social ideology or assumption that having children is a fundamental and pervasive natural human instinct and a marker of adult maturity and success (Moller & Clarke, 2016). It is also a key tenet of heteronormativity (for example, Oswald et al., 2005). Literature regarding the psychological impact on women of the socially and culturally produced meanings of parenthood inherent in pronatalism is gradually accruing (Clarke, Hayfield, Moller & Braun, 2019). However, the reach of pronatalist discourses extends beyond partnered heterosexual women as “(m)ost heterosexual (and many gay/lesbian) men and women both expect and are expected to be parents at some stage in their lives” (Terry & Braun, 2012: 210). Yet the motives and experiences of most people who choose voluntary childlessness remain under-researched and research that is published rarely concentrates on men, with certain groups of men (gay, bisexual, trans and single men) even less likely to feature in research (Moller & Clarke, 2016). Consequentially minimal research evidence exists exploring how men's decisions to be childfree may or may not interface with pronatalism or with assumed associations between masculinity, virility and fatherhood in our society (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008; Blackstone, 2014).

This failure to engage with the motives and experiences of childfree men is presumably because most researchers still implicitly assume social responsibility for both reproduction and reproductive decision-making lies with women (Almeling & Waggoner, 2013). Many commentators have advocated for greater breadth in social science research on gender and reproduction and highlighted how most studies of the psychosocial consequences of



childlessness have been undertaken with women (Culley, Hudson & Lohan, 2013; Fisher & Hammarberg, 2012; Hanna & Gough, 2015; Petok, 2015).

Predominantly heterosexual women's experiences of choosing childfree lives are gradually being elucidated by researchers including Gillespie (2003), Clarke, Ellis, Hayfield, & Terry (2015) and Petersen & Engwall (2013) to reveal both positive and negative aspects of the childfree lifestyle. Qualitatively derived research data on voluntary childlessness indicate heterosexual couples who perceive their childlessness as chosen may experience psychological and relational advantages including a closer relationship with their partner compared to couples with children (Gillespie, 2003; Shapiro, 2014). Drawing definitive conclusions from such research remains difficult though as variables such as culture, nationality and particularly gender are likely to be "important contextual factors that shape how the participants construct and negotiate their childfree identities" (Morison et al., 2016: 188). For instance, choosing not to have children can represent a stigmatised and censured non-normative identity particularly for women given the traditional expectation / association between motherhood and hegemonic femininity and the related moral imperative societies impose on most adult females to parent (Blackstone and Stewart, 2012; Shapiro, 2014).

Some further challenges of identifying definitive conclusions regarding voluntary childlessness research were presented by Morison, Macleod, Lynch et al. (2016) in their analysis of men and women's online posts about their childfree status. Using three dedicated childfree websites researchers engaged 98 individuals in online forum discussions on specific aspects of their childfree identity, related online activity and their experience and management of any stigma regarding their childfreedom. Participants were also invited to take part in follow-up email interviews though only four people elected to. Despite the websites being accessible worldwide most participants were North American or European. People identifying as women outnumbered men almost 6:1 in the online discussions and 3:1 in the email interviews (Morison et al., 2016). All participants were assumed to be heterosexual though the confidential nature and posting protocols of the online spaces hampered the researchers accessing full demographic profiles.

Narrative-discursive analysis of participants' online discussion posts demonstrated their strategic use of 'choice' rhetoric enabled them to sidestep stigmatised identities and so

challenge pronatalism and partially resist stigma (Morison et al., 2016). This was achieved in two contradictory ways: by drawing on a “childfree-by-choice” script which provided a positive self-identity ‘as autonomous, rational and responsible decision makers’ while also employing ‘a “disavowal of choice script” that allowed (them) to hold a blameless identity regarding deviation from the norm of parenthood’ ( Morison et al. 2016 : 184). There were no apparent gender differences in how participants scripted their childfreedom so the study indicated that some childfree men may (feel compelled to) opt for scripts that disavow (or highlight) their agency in their choice not to reproduce/parent (Morison et al., 2016). The relative homogeneity of the sample ethnicity-wise reiterates the challenge of identifying clear findings/conclusions regarding childfreedom given that most research into choosing to be childfree has been conducted with white middle-class people (Vidad, 2011).

In contrast to the two contradictory narratives articulated by participants in Morison et al.’s (2016) study, men (and women) participating in Parks (2002) fully embraced a positive childfree-by-choice identity which reinforced their right to self-determination and their sense of autonomy. Other than these two studies minimal research exists exploring any stigmatisation of childfree men and/or any related narratives that the men may develop to protect their self-identity. As Warren and Pals (2013: 152), point out, “scant attention has been paid to men’s experience of voluntary childlessness independent of women”.

Notwithstanding significant limitations of the evidence, it appears that for at least some heterosexual women and couples a childfree life has significant positive consequences. For instance, many of the 25 British voluntarily childless women in Gillespie’s (2003) qualitative interview study described specific factors including greater freedom from the perceived burden and responsibilities of motherhood and to pursue their own interests and relationships as attracting them to a childfree lifestyle whilst also citing their non-parenting as “a more radical rejection or push away from motherhood as a normative female gender marker” (Gillespie, 2003: 133). Recently Blackstone (forthcoming) has further elucidated this process of ‘gender transgression’ in how childfree people are perceived by themselves and others when they fail to adhere to heteronormative expectations. Through qualitatively interviewing five heterosexual married couples (5 men and 5 women) and completing focus groups with an additional 19 participants (5 men, 14 women) Blackstone (Personal Communication, 2017) found through her inductive analysis of the data that people who are

childfree by choice adopt strategies of either gender reification or gender resistance in their sense-making regarding their choice not to parent. The same study identified participants' redefinition of family 'in ways that do not rely on heteronormative binaries' and their 'pushing back against negative social responses and pressures to have children' as ways in which they resisted gender. It also found that participants reinforced and reified gender and family stereotypes by either not talking about gender (no men and only 5% of the women mentioned gender without prompting and only 9% of men and 27% of women participants stated that gender plays a role in the decision not to parent ) or referencing 'heteronormative ideals of gender and family' (Blackstone, 2017).

Research has also identified some less positive consequences of voluntary childlessness. A phenomenological study by Rich, Taket, Graham, & Shelley (2011) involving in-depth interviews with five childless Australian women aged 34- 48 highlighted the negative stereotyping the women were subjected to by others who frequently portrayed and stigmatised them as unnatural, unfeminine, unstable and selfish. To avoid imposing any definitions or prerequisites of what being childless constitutes the researchers relied solely on the self-identification of the women recruited and no other demographics apart from gender or age were reported (Rich et al., 2011).

Another Australian study highlighted that members of the public and first year psychology students (the majority of whom were female, under 20 and straight identifying) rated vignettes of lesbian and heterosexual women who chose not to parent far less favourably than those choosing to have children (Rowlands & Lee, 2006). Regardless of their sexual orientation, women choosing to be childfree were perceived as less happy, less mature and more individualistic than those intending to parent. Such evidence indicates that childfree women can be stigmatised as doubly deviant (compared to the involuntarily childless) as they not only don't *have* children but don't *want* them (Park, 2002).

Recent quantitative vignette-based research by Ashburn-Nardo (2016) found that US university students regardless of their own gender rated childfree male and female characters as 'less psychologically fulfilled' than those with two or more children. Participants also expressed higher levels of moral outrage towards characters who chose not to parent than the characters with children and equally stigmatised childfree male and childfree female characters. This led the researcher to conclude that 'these findings point

toward parenthood as an imperative rather than as typical choice and speak to the common socialization of boys and girls in the United States to aspire to become parents (Ashburn-Nardo, 2016: 399).

The impact of voluntary childlessness across the life course has been studied by researchers including DeLyser (2012) who found that as childfree heterosexual women become middle aged they do not (contrary to many pronatalist predictions) generally experience feelings of regret at not having had children. However, minimal evidence exists as to whether that is also the case for childfree men as they age. A comparison of the personal and social resources and psychological well-being of parents and non-parents amongst elderly people, concluded the presence or absence of children does not appreciably alter the lives of the very aged (Keith, 2003). No demographics nor separate data analysis based on gender were presented making it unclear if or to what extent Keith's (2003) findings relate to childfree men as they grow old.

As increasing numbers of people choose not to have children, understanding the life, identities and families they create and the social and psychological consequences of these families becomes ever more important for the men as well as the women involved (Blackstone, 2014). Though the phenomenon of choosing to remain childfree represents "one of the most remarkable changes in the modern family during the last few decades" (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008:347), so far "the childfree have rarely been studied through the lens of family" (Moller & Clarke, 2016: 208). This lack of research is despite childfree couples arguably satisfying many of the accepted functions of family (Basten, 2009; Blackstone, 2014; Gold, 2012). These functions include providing on-going emotional support for members, a shared home and economic provision, and social reproduction, that is "all the non-biological roles, actions, and responsibilities that are required to turn new human beings into participating and contributing members of society" (Blackstone, 2014: 57).

### **A failure to focus on men**

The widespread omissions in the voluntary childlessness literature regarding the pathways, lives, identities and experiences of childfree men is now well-established. One of the few and earliest publications to consider these aspects of men's childfreedom was Patricia Lunneborg's book *'The Chosen Lives of Childfree Men'* (Lunneborg, 1999). This drew on data

gathered from qualitative interviews with 30 US and British childfree men undertaken by Lunneborg, a former professor of psychology and women's studies who herself was childfree (she died in 2009). Participants were recruited from national childfree or non-parenthood organisations and a third had undergone pre-emptive vasectomies (Knodel, 2001). Lunneborg's main conclusion was that choosing to be childfree was far less problematic for men than for women particularly in terms of their respective social and gender identities. Though Lunneborg only interviewed men she based this conclusion on her own personal and academic observations that only women were subjected to lifelong pronatalist and gender identity pressures linked to parenthood (Greenhalgh, 1999). She also intimated that around half the men cited problematic relationships with their own fathers as influencing their decision to not have children. Furthermore, all the men who identified as having abusive fathers were early articulators of their childfree choice.

Criticisms of Lunneborg's ground-breaking work included its lack of methodological depth and clarity (including some inconsistency in how the criterion 'childfree' was operationalised) despite the substantial length of the book (Bancroft, 2001; Greenhalgh, 1999; Jacobson, 2001; Knodel, 2001). The *Reasons Exercise* (a list of 33 reasons why individuals may not want children) which participants completed before their interview drew criticism for appearing to 'shoe-horn' participants into one of several pre-prepared typologies of childfree men (Knodel, 2001). The study also failed to provide sufficient insight into the men's decision-making process nor any in-depth analyses of the broader cultural, political and economic contexts of the men's childfree choice (Greenhalgh, 1999; Bancroft, 2001). However, Lunneborg's book was written for lay rather than academic audiences so its lack of methodological detail is unsurprising (Knodel, 2001). Furthermore, the work should arguably now be contextualised within what were the relatively under-developed conceptualisations of gender identity and masculinities of almost two decades ago.

A more recent exception to the lack of research into men's chosen non-parenthood is Terry & Braun's (2012) qualitative interview study of twelve men who had pre-emptive vasectomies. Their research elucidated factors influencing men who decide to make a relatively permanent, proactive decision about their future reproductive capabilities. The study took place in New Zealand as part of a wider national research programme on vasectomy and recruitment methods included online and print versions of national

newspapers, features and reports on national radio stations and prime time national television (Terry & Braun, 2011). Participants ranged in age from twenty-nine to sixty-two (mean age 45), all were of white European descent with all but one identifying as heterosexual and all reported having 'professional' occupations. The researchers openly acknowledged the potential impact of the relative homogeneous and self-selecting nature of the sample on their findings.

The thematic analysis Terry & Braun completed revealed a range of narratives the men adopted regarding their choice to be childfree. The two main subject positions identified were that of their lifestyle and/or themselves as 'selfish' or alternatively of their lifestyle and/or themselves as unconventional and resisting and rejecting dominant models of masculinity including recent 'modes of involved fatherhood' (Terry & Braun, 2012: 208). Some participants also reversed the dominant pronatalist discourse by conversely positioning parents as 'selfish' while others referenced neoliberal notions of personal choice and individual responsibility as explanations of their choice to be sterilised (Terry & Braun, 2012). Neoliberalism refers to 'an economic ideology that promotes the penetration of market rule into the economy, the state, and everyday life through political-economic strategies such as the retrenchment and redesign of state supports, the privatization of state assets, and the mobilization of an ideal self-interested, self-reliant individual citizen through public and social policy' (Haley, 2017). Several academics and theorists across a range of disciplines including politics, international relations and gender studies have proposed that neoliberalism is 'predicated on a politics of heteronormativity that (re)produces the dominance of normative heterosexuality' (Connell & Wood, 2005; Griffin, 2007: 220)

Excepting Lunneborg and Terry & Braun's studies there is clearly a need for more exploration of childfree men's experiences particularly regarding how they build, maintain and if necessary adapt their masculine identity in the light of potential marginalisation rooted in societies' and cultures' dominant social ideologies regarding parenthood and fatherhood (Blackstone, 2014). Other suggested research priorities include if and how (and the extent to which) men's experiences of childlessness may impact on their perceived sense of masculinity and virility, what if any gender-specific stigma management strategies straight childfree men use and how they do family (Almeling & Waggoner, 2013;

Blackstone, 2014; Park, 2002,). Blackstone (2014) also details a range of unanswered research questions regarding childfree families and their coping strategies in the face of negative stereotyping. These questions include how childfree families differ in form (for example do they include more than two adults and are non-human animals [pets] considered family members), structure, function and social contribution from families with children (Blackstone, 2014).

### **Masculinities, identity and non-fatherhood**

One of the most influential conceptualisations of masculinity of recent decades has been Raewen Connell's hegemonic masculinity theory (HMT) (Connell, 1987; 2005). This theory drew on the philosophical concept of hegemony: 'a particular form of dominance in which a ruling class legitimates its position and secures the acceptance – if not outright support- from those classes below them... (who) believe that their subordinated place is both *right* and *natural*' (Anderson & Magrath, 2019: 75). HMT proposed that masculinity is not singular but multiple and hierarchical and that particular configurations of masculinity have throughout the ages 'embodied the currently most honoured way of being a man' and consequently have 'required all other men to position themselves in relation to it' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005: 832).

Hegemonic masculinity can also be understood as "the form of masculinity in a given historical and society-wide setting that structures and legitimates hierarchical gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among men" (Messerschmidt, 2012: 58). Connell advocated that becoming a man involves "taking on and negotiating 'hegemonic masculinity' and that (m)en's identity strategies are constituted through their complicit or resistant stance to prescribed dominant masculine styles" (Wetherell & Edley, 1999: 335). HMT's view of identity formation refutes essentialist analyses of masculinity which hold that masculine characters and identities are conferred simply by biology and embedded in men's bodies, personalities and behaviours (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Dar-Nimrod & Heine, 2011; Keller, 2005).

Given the dominance of binary heteronormative and pronatalist ideologies in modern western societies, current hegemonic masculinity continues to include an expectation that most straight men will become fathers (either of their own genetic offspring or of step- or other dependent children including adopted children) (Townsend, 2002). Therefore, straight

men choosing non-parenthood are at odds with the dominant discourse of masculinity and what it means to be a man. The power and reach of this discourse is arguably reflected in the dearth of published research regarding men's experience of childfreedom. This absence is also likely linked to sexist assumptions that position men as peripheral to childbirth and childrearing, and the special status public discourse confers on motherhood compared to fatherhood (Park, Banchevsky, & Reynolds, 2015).

There are however increasing criticisms of the monolithic hierarchical view of masculinity that some interpretations of Connell's HMT offer (Anderson & McCormack, 2014). For instance, the concept provides insufficient understanding of the fundamental processes involved in the negotiation of male identities and how men's conformity to that hegemony plays out in practice and its wider psychosocial implications (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). Furthermore, recent research such as the qualitative analysis of men's perceptions of manhood by DiMuccio, Yost & Helweg-Larsen (2017) has "concluded that understandings of masculinity and the precariousness of manhood vary cross-culturally and are tied to broader sociocultural values" (DiMuccio, Yost & Helweg-Larsen, 2017: 331). Their qualitative analysis highlighted how US straight men emphasised demonstrating their masculinity through what the male body "does", whereas Danish men focused on the embodiment of their masculinity through what the male body "is" (DiMuccio, Yost & Helweg-Larsen, 2017).

An alternative to the problems associated with some interpretations of HMT is offered by Christensen and Jensen's (2014) model combining HMT with an intersectional approach. This model allows analysis of "the complexities of differences and hierarchic power relations between men" whilst differentiating between "internal and external hegemony and emphasising that both dimensions of power presume an open empirical and contextual analysis" (Christensen & Jensen, 2014: 60). It also reflects other proponents' views (such as Ward, 2014, cited in Roberts, 2014) that the intersections between race, social class and sexuality are of equal if not more significance than Connell's hegemony when considering current debates and challenges regarding fatherhood. Equally relevant to exploration of identity in childfree men may be the intersection of "performances of family position, place and masculinity" for which Richardson (2015) coined the term: "embodied intergenerationality" (Richardson, 2015: 157).



Minimal research on masculinity so far has specifically focused on childfreedom within the contexts of race and ethnicity apart from Dennis's innovative study on childfree black people of the African diaspora which recruited and interviewed people from the US and five other countries across the world including the UK (Dennis, 2019). Her ground-breaking research highlighted 'interlocking [as opposed to intersectional] self-identities and cultural identities' among African diaspora childfree people as well as the previous omission or low response rate from that population in most childfree research and the elusiveness of childfree African diaspora men (only 3 men respondents were located compared to 59 women) (Dennis, 2019). Findings include most participants (regardless of their own identified gender) considered their childfree status and experiences were impacted by gender, race and ethnicity and some felt alienated and ridiculed in respect to their decision to be childfree – leading the researcher to speculate those feelings may be 'stronger for the childfree whose choice defies a number of norms and expectations, including racial and ethnic norms and gender norms' (Dennis, 2019). Notably the male respondents (in contrast to the women who took part) articulated that they experience few negative responses to their childfreedom and did not feel as much societal pressure. Two of the five men who participated reported 'difficulty dating because the majority of women across all cultures, and especially African diaspora women, either aspire to be mothers, are mothers, or are "on the fence" (undecided)' (Dennis, 2019).

This potentially more complex picture of the social construction of masculinities is reflected in the range of competing (heterosexual) masculinities evident over the last two decades in popular culture in western society, for instance the New Man versus the New Lad and the Metrosexual versus the Retrosexual (Oschner, 2012; Simpson, 1994; 2003). Analyses are emerging as to how the former two scripts are implicated, rearticulated and deconstructed in the establishing of masculine identity with a particular focus on fatherhood (e.g. Oschner, 2012). Apart from Terry & Braun's (2012) study of straight men who have pre-emptive vasectomies, no published works have analysed if or how any of these specific identity scripts interface at either a personal or societal level with some straight men's decision to be childfree.

Some qualitative research has though explored the impact of *involuntary* childlessness on masculine identity. For instance, in apparent attempts to protect their sense of virility, male

partners of women undergoing In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) produced a discourse that was complicit with, rather than resistant to, hegemonic masculinity (Throsby & Gill, 2004). Regardless of whether the IVF was required for male or female factor infertility, the men described “a gender-specific set of difficulties associated with a perceived threat to their masculinity [...] This theme was central to the interviews and is a consequence of a strong popular association between male fertility, potency, and masculinity” (Throsby & Gill, 2004: 336). Clearly, childfree men have chosen not to rather than found themselves or their partners unable to have children. Yet the reach of hegemonic masculinity may extend to straight men whose non-parenthood choice could still be widely negatively perceived by society as challenging the dominant, heteronormative and pronatalist discourses.

The potential impact of such perceptions can be conceptualised as reflecting some degree of Gender Role Strain (GRS) or discrepancy (Pleck, 1981;1995). This theoretical model proposes that men react to situations “in which their gender status is threatened with emotions and behaviors meant to reaffirm manhood. However, the extent to which threats to masculine status impact gender role discrepancy (perceived failure to conform to socially prescribed masculine gender role norms) has yet to be demonstrated empirically” (Berke, Reidy, Miller, & Zeichner, 2017: 62). Although no research has yet explored childfree men’s experience of identity within the framework of GRS (it has focused instead on contemporary fathering) the model may offer potentially useful understanding of psychosocial challenges to be navigated particularly as contemporary men themselves are “reconstructing fathering and masculinity in general” (Silverstein, Auerbach, & Levant, 2002: 361). The GRS paradigm originally developed by Pleck (1981, 1995) holds that modern men:

“face considerable pressures to fulfil the requirements of the traditional male role. This pressure or the unsuccessful achievement of these ideals can result in a range of negative outcomes. Furthermore, men who choose not to conform to masculinity norms are also susceptible to negative psychological consequences” (Rochlen, Suizzo, McKelley, & Scaringi, 2008: 194).

HMT would therefore tend to predict childfree straight men are more likely to experience GRS than their counterparts who are fathers. However, recent findings such as those from Silverstein et al. (2002) indicate the binary of fatherhood versus non-fatherhood may be less influential in the reality of contemporary men’s lives, not least given increasing recognition

that: “the experience of parenthood does not represent a unified phenomenon” (Galatzer-Levy, Mazursky, Mancini, & Bonanno, 2011: 384). The lack of existing research regarding the experiences of childfree men makes it currently impossible to conclude whether straight men’s experiences of chosen non-parenthood/-fatherhood is similarly heterogeneous.

In contemporary western society there is increasing mainstream acceptance of the plurality of masculinities which moves beyond the binaries of conforming to or resisting or rejecting hegemonic heteronormative ideals (Allen & Mendez, 2018). This highly significant change in how masculinities are perceived and experienced may be partly attributable to gay and lesbian parenthood and redefinition of family life leading the way as a challenge to traditional (heteronormative) discourses on gender, mother-/fatherhood and family (for example, McKee, 2017; Schacher, Auerbach, & Silverstein, 2005; Svab, 2007). One manifestation of this evolution is the notion that “fluid gender identities” may be experienced by and observed in groups of men who reject traditional masculinities such as stay-at-home fathers (Lee & Lee, 2018: 9). Such gender fluid identities echo closely the performance of complex gender as set out in Oswald et al’s (2005) Queer Theory. Potentially childfree straight men represent another such group of men and researchers not least as researchers such as Warren & Pals (2013) confirmed a greater prevalence of less traditional sex role beliefs amongst childfree men (and women) compared to their counterparts who are/become parents.

This plurality and evolution of masculine identities is also reflected in the concept of “emergent masculinities” which refers to men purposefully enacting or ‘living out new ways of being men in attempts to counter forms of manhood that they see as harmfully hegemonic’ (Inhorn & Wentzell, 2011: 801). Emergent masculinities can be conceptualised as a contemporary response to the narratives of “masculinity in crisis” and ‘toxic masculinity’ that emerged in the 1980s onwards particularly in the UK and US (Kupers, 2005; Parent, Gobble & Rochlen, 2019; Roberts, 2012). The masculinity in crisis discourse foregrounds a perception of the growing phenomena of (particularly young) men posing both a risk to their own health, wellbeing and social functioning and to that of other people (Roberts, 2012). Consistent with this ‘crisis narrative’ are “developments where men have emerged from being the *implicit* and assumed *recipients* (and makers) of social policy, to being named *explicitly* as the *concern* of social policy” (Roberts, 2012:3).

Closely aligned to the crisis in masculinity narrative is the narrative of ‘toxic masculinity’ a term coined for a subset of hegemonic masculinity “characterized by the enforcement of rigid gender roles” and the “need to aggressively compete [with others] and dominate others” (Kupers, 2005: 713; Parent, Gobble, & Rochlen, 2019: 278). Despite the extensive theoretical work regarding toxic masculinity, few empirical studies in this area have been attempted and the concept has arguably been insufficiently integrated into models of physical or mental health related behaviours (Parent, Gobble, & Rochlen, 2019).

Commentators describe toxic masculinity as typified ‘by a drive to dominate and by endorsement of misogynistic and homophobic views...and adherence to masculine gender role conformity’ (Parent, Gobble, & Rochlen, 2019: 278). There is currently no apparent evidence of either of these narratives influencing or explaining the life choice or experiences of any straight men who decide not to parent but given the overall dearth of research on this population that is unsurprising. Equally no theoretical or empirical work exists which explores the possibility some childfree men may align themselves with an ‘emergent masculinities’ perspective as explanation of their non-parenthood choice.

The increasingly nuanced and multifaceted view of masculinities is also reflected in inclusive masculinities theory (IMT) (Anderson & McCormack, 2014) which rejects the ‘masculinity in crisis’ narrative and instead privileges the crises in social class and racial inequality (Anderson & McCormack, 2014). IMT challenges the concept of hegemonic masculinity by contending that increasingly “there is no strict masculine hierarchy – instead there exists a non-vertical clustering of masculinity types” (Anderson & McCormack, 2014: 134).

Proponents of IMT draw on findings from various qualitative studies of diverse groups of men (including straight men who wear makeup and heavy metal ‘moshpit’ aficionados) that have found that homophobia and homophobia (straight men’s fear of being perceived of as gay) have significantly diminished in recent years. This shift opens up a much broader range of ways in which (particularly younger) men can choose to embody and enact their masculine identities (Anderson & McCormack, 2014). Again, though IMT makes no reference to childfree living, it offers a framework that rejects the pathologisation or crisis view of contemporary masculinity and highlights the complexities and frequently paradoxical nature of masculinity – or multiple masculinities (Gough, 2013; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009).

A similarly nuanced conceptualisation of masculinities known as 'hybrid masculinities' also moves beyond hegemonic masculinities and the binary of conforming to/resisting heteronormative expectations as well as providing commentary on contemporary changes in men's behaviours, attitudes and appearances (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Hybrid masculinities refer to "men's selective incorporation of performances and identity elements associated with marginalised and subordinated masculinities and femininities" (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014: 246). Most research and scholarship on hybrid masculinities has focused on young, white, heterosexual men and is primarily concerned with:

"the ways that men are increasingly incorporating elements of various 'Others' into their identity projects. While it is true that gendered meanings change historically and geographically, research and theory addressing hybrid masculinities are beginning to ask whether recent transformations point in a new, more liberating direction. The transformations addressed by this literature include men's assimilation of 'bits and pieces' of identity projects coded as 'gay', 'Black' or 'feminine' among others" (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014: 246)

Several observers have challenged the homogeneous focus of most hybrid masculinities work (on predominantly white middle class men) (for example, Messerschmidt, 2012; Messner, 2011). They have also cautioned regarding the notion of such a culturally dominant group appropriating or 'strategically borrowing' things from marginalised or subordinated groups such as from feminism because though ostensibly presenting as reducing gender (and other forms of) inequality their discourses and behaviours may end up (indirectly) reinforcing their privilege and/or further marginalising other subordinated groups for example men of colour, under-educated men (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Messerschmidt, 2010).

Relating this conceptualisation of contemporary masculinities to straight male childfreedom, the present author posits the possibility that some childfree straight men may de-emphasise the importance of their female partner/s having children and/or subordinate their own parenting aspirations (if they have any) to their partner's wish not to parent thus appearing more aligned to feminist perspectives. In doing so they may also render themselves more desirable potential partners to the growing number of straight women who do not want to have children. Alternatively, it may be the case that for some straight men who decide not

to parent masculinity has nothing to do with it – instead their non-parenthood is purely a personal choice rooted in their own biography, life circumstances and current stage in their life course.

In summarising the current plurality of masculinities, their scholarship and how they relate to Connell and colleagues' (Connell, 1987 and 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) original construct of hegemonic masculinity, Allen and Mendez's (2018) model of 'hegemonic heteronormativity' provides another potentially useful framework relevant to the research topic in this thesis. Their model confirms the pervasiveness of hegemony but purports that hegemonic *masculinity* is no longer the dominant social ideology having now been superseded by hegemonic *heteronormativity*. The three heteronormative binaries Oswald et al. (2005) originally proposed are still acknowledged but are now supplemented by:

“two additional characteristics of the heteronormative hegemonies: 1) the hegemonic categorizations are dynamic and evolvable, allowing for hegemonic power and normalcy to shift to other and/or additional groups ( e.g. hybrid masculinity: Bridges and Pascoe, 2014) and 2) hegemonies exist not merely within the realms of gender, sexuality, and family but also with the contexts in which those realms are embedded” (Allen & Mendez, 2018: 74-75)

Hegemonic heteronormativity therefore argues that the binaries of heteronormativity have adapted to various socio-political changes and today include more than they once did (Allen & Mendez, 2018). This means that ‘although some of the individuals and family units that were considered “deviant” or “pseudo” in the [Queer Theory] 2005 model remain as such in our new model, others now do family, gender, and sexuality in ways akin to heteronormative prescriptions , benefitting from social and legal progress” (Allen & Mendez, 2018: 75). Examples include legal recognition and protection of gay marriage and increasing acceptance of nuclear families headed up by gay or lesbian couples.

Within the framework of hegemonic heteronormativity it is feasible that some childfree straight men particularly if they are in an exclusive partnership or marriage with a woman, are white and cis-gender are benefitting from - or at least not as marginalised or subordinated to the extent childfree men were in previous decades - the ‘new modern manifestations of heteronormativity’ (Allen & Mendez, 2018: 76). Conversely, childfree

straight men who are single and/or from/of non-White background may still be 'relegated to "other" positions without the same social or economic capital' and so encounter (greater levels of) stigmatisation and exclusion (Allen & Mendez, 2018: 76 ).

The hegemonic heteronormativity model arguably predicts considerable diversity of straight men's experiences (and the impact on their masculine identities) of being childfree. This diversity is determined by the 5 contextual factors or 'spheres': race, class, dis-ability, ethnicity and nationality Allen and Mendez (2018) identified together with two time-based dimensions: the passage of time in the individual's life and historical societal change. The addition of these temporal dimensions ensured their model acknowledges the significance of events in both "the unfolding biography of the individual that alters schemes and processes" and " the broader social context that alters roles or values of individuals or families " (Bengtson & Allen, 1993 : 471) '. Those two dimensions combined with the five spheres of hegemonic heteronormativity enable researchers exploring any aspect of gender, sexuality or family to ' view the inequalities and lived experiences ... from a perspective that provides sufficient recognition to changes in social contexts, historical contexts, and individual development over time' (Allen & Mendez, 2018: 81). This comprehensive framework appears to offer a promising lens through which to consider the myriad influences be they demographic, historical, social, relational or psychological impacting on how childfree straight men construct, define and re-negotiate their identity as non-parents throughout their life course.

In addition to theorising specifically concerning how gendered identities are formed, perceived and re-negotiated socially, historically and individually, more general psychological theories of identity construction are relevant here. One of the earlier theories which aimed to elucidate how individuals develop a sense of themselves as different from or similar to other people was Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Somewhat ironically given its title, this conceptualisation highlighted self-categorisation as a fundamental aspect of identity formation noting that "contrasting one's own category or group with other groups is an antecedent of a sense of positive or negative identity with individuals within groups and of potential conflict between groups" (Dickerson, 2000: 382).

This emphasis on categorisation was further developed and generalised by Turner and colleagues (Turner, Hogg, Oakes et al., 1987) resulting in their Self-Categorisation Theory

which emphasised that “the category through which one constructs one’s identity is activated by the perception of similarities and differences between and within categories” (Dickerson, 2000: 383). This approach proposed three different levels categories may operate at i) the superordinate – which involves someone’s identity as a human being ii) the intermediate or group level and iii) the subordinate level of individual differences (Dickerson, 2000). The interaction between the individual person’s characteristics and those of the situation in hand are what determine which category becomes relevant at any point in time. Put another way, self-categorisation to a specific category supposedly occur when a person’s comparison between themselves and others in the category ascertains the presence of relevant similarities and then that those similarities exceeds their differences. By spotlighting the concept of contrast as the means by which someone self-assigns to any particular identity, Self- Categorisation Theory does acknowledge the multitude of ways in which people can define their subjectivity or ‘self’. It also alludes to the role the situational aspects may play in accomplishing an identity (Dickerson, 2000). Yet this theory and its precursors are limited due to their adherence to experimental psychology principles including information-processing approaches focusing predominantly on perception and cognition as well as their privileging of the scientist’s viewpoint over that of participants in some of the original studies (Edwards, 1998). Criticism has also been levelled at self-categorisation models of identity due to their insufficiency in explaining the social side of the individual-society divide of identity formation, power imbalances and social differences (Henriques, Holloway, Urwin at al., 1998).

An alternative conceptualisation of identity is offered by Dickerson’s (2000) discursive approach which advocates the central and ongoing role of constructing contrasts between oneself and others in ‘talk-in-interactions’. This approach holds that “such contrasts can be explored as flexible conversational resources which are variously deployed so as to attend to the interactional work at hand” (Dickerson, 2000: 383). It draws on a social constructionist perspective of difference and the perpetually incomplete and ongoing components of meaning espoused by Derrida and Weber (1995) as central to a person’s construction of (their) identity. Building on such ideas, Hall (1995: 51) proposed that identity can be considered ‘a “production” which is never complete, always in process’.



This emphasis on the role of unending and unfinished contrasts in identity formation is consistent with Foucaultian notions that socially sanctioned dichotomies or binaries such as good versus criminal or healthy versus ill (and in the case of the present thesis: childfree versus parent) do not represent 'tidy divisions within reality, but rather a "mode of objectification" or means by which one's very sense of subjectivity can be arrived at' (Dickerson, 2000: 383; Foucault, 1982;). This interactive production of any identity (be it childfree, masculine, straight or another) also acknowledges the importance of agency in that adults have capacities to select purposively from among the cultural or social components of any specific identity but in doing so often have to negotiate between social pressures to adopt certain aspects of the identity and their own preferences (Jancz, 2000).

### **Counselling, masculinities and childfreedom**

Until recently research "literature that specifically addresses the relationship between masculinities and fatherhood (was) sparse" as was published evidence taking a critical gendered perspective regarding counselling in relation to masculinity and fatherhood (Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005: 2). Though masculinities and fatherhood therapy-related literature has grown exponentially in the last decade or so contrastingly there remains very little evidence on counselling intentional non-parents of any gender and none which focuses specifically on counselling childfree men either regarding their non-fatherhood choice, related stigmatisation or any general life issues or mental health problems.

One exception to the noted lack of published research regarding counselling and talking therapies involving childfree people is the potentially helpful delineation of the different clinical needs and strengths of childfree and childless family systems offered by Gold (2012). He advocated that counsellors acknowledge "the decision to live a childfree lifestyle...is a purposeful choice to join a distinct societal minority" and assist childfree people in developing coping strategies "and a willingness to live out of one's particular value system in day-to-day interactions with the social majority" (Gold, 2012: 227). This validating approach to working with childfree individuals necessitates counselling professionals increasing their awareness of their own personal value stances regarding non-parenthood "and what implications these values may have for their counselling practice" (Gold & Wilson, 2002: 70).

The potential impact of counsellors' values regarding non-parenthood on their empathy towards childfree clients is highlighted in a recent quantitative study by Ngoubene-Atioky, Williamson-Taylor, Inman & Case (2017). This research found a "childlessness bias" amongst a sample of predominantly white middle-class female psychotherapists and uncovered differences in their tendencies to empathise with childfree women dependent on the women's age ranges or social economic statuses. Though Ngoubene-Atioky et al. (2017) only studied childfree women and female therapists (thus replicating the pervasive implicitly gendered research agenda regarding childfreedom and reproduction generally) their conclusion regarding the intersectionalities of age and social class in relation to counsellors' attitudes to childfree individuals clearly needs considering in relation to childfree men who seek counselling.

The notion of most counsellors' implicit biases against childfree lifestyles and their general lack of awareness of the insidious prevalence of pronatalism was also implicated in another qualitative exploration of childfree women's lives (Mollen, 2006). Though her study did not specifically focus on women who had undergone counselling Mollen offered practical suggestions for counsellors based on participants' narratives of childfree living. These recommendations aimed to raise counsellors' awareness of childfreedom and its stigmatisation and to encourage them to promote empowerment amongst the childfree women they work with clinically (Mollen, 2006). Several of Mollen's recommendations are gender specific. Others such as the need for mental health practitioners to challenge their own and others' assumptions about childfree people; to avoid pathologising them or their choices and to help the childfree "develop their voice around the reasons for their decision and recognize that there may be compelling and unselfish reasons (i.e. concerns about overpopulation) not to have children" appear applicable to mental health work with childfree men (Mollen, 2006: 281). However, no mention is made of the potential cross-gendered relevance of these suggestions in the original paper again reflecting the virtual invisibility of childfree men in all spheres of research and literature on childfree living.

## **Conclusion of the Literature Review**

Minimal evidence currently exists regarding the unique experiences of straight men who choose a childfree life particularly regarding their identity and sense of family. While it may

be assumed that there are various similarities and differences between the experiences of childfree straight men and those of childfree gay men; childfree women and involuntarily childless straight men (and other groups who in some way transgress heteronormative gender roles) there is simply not the evidence to support or challenge such inferences.

Contemporary critical masculinities literature now acknowledges the “great variability in how men enact masculinity” and their sense-making regarding manhood (Mahalik, Locke, Ludlow, Diemer, Gottfried, et al., 2003: 5). Likewise, theorists (including Anderson & Magrath, 2019 and Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) are increasingly developing more nuanced perspectives which move away from the binaries of conforming to or resisting hegemonic masculinity towards a greater focus on the fluidity, flexibility and complexity in the ways in which modern men enact, perform or ‘do’ masculinity. There is growing recognition across a range of theoretical frameworks of this plurality regarding fatherhood but not specifically in relation to chosen non-fatherhood (Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005). There is also developing awareness of the impact of intersectionality and social change in different men’s lives, their subjective sense of masculine identity and the relationships and families they form.

In seeking to contextualise the experiences of childfree men in relation to their masculine identities and to navigate the multiplicity of perspectives on contemporary masculinities, my research study is eclectically informed by HMT combined with intersectionality; IMT and hybrid masculinities as well as queer theory and hegemonic heteronormativity. The study that this literature review sets the scene for seeks to elucidate how childfree straight men negotiate and embody their sense of masculine identity and of family. In doing so it aims to: a) probe into straight men’s experiences of being childfree with particular emphasis on revealing how they construct and maintain their masculine identity, and, b) to increase psychologists’, counsellors’ and other health professionals’ awareness and understanding of how such diverse experiences may present or impact on straight childfree men’s help-seeking behaviours and support needs.

## METHODS

### Aims of the research

The aims of the research were:

- To produce new knowledge and understanding of the ways childfree straight men build and maintain their identity
- To establish how childfree men develop, navigate and sustain their masculine identity in relation to personal, interpersonal, social, and societal influences and pressures.

### Research design

My theoretical assumptions in approaching the study of the men's experiences were predominantly rooted within a Critical Realist (CR) perspective. CR ontology and epistemology hold that 'there is a 'real' world and it is theory-laden, not theory-determined... (and) all explanations of reality are treated as fallible (Bhaskar, 1979), including the explanations provided by research participants, theorists, and scientists' (Fletcher, 2017: 188). Accordingly CR posits that 'a pre-social reality exists but we can only ever partly know it' so an ultimate reality is assumed to exist but 'the way reality is experienced and interpreted is shaped by culture, language and political interests' (Braun & Clarke, 2013: 26; 329).

Doing qualitative research from a CR stance therefore involves establishing 'what is objectively real and what is subjectively accepted as truth' (Abdul, 2015; Taylor, 2017: 217). As CR straddles the positivism-relativism continuum, this philosophical framework suited the exploratory nature of my research question (Patel & Pilgrim, 2018). Its stance also appealed to me because as a non-biological parent myself, I am attuned to the objective physical reality as to whether someone has or does not have children. To paraphrase Bhaskar and colleagues, in not biologically reproducing (or parenting in other ways such as through step-parenting, adoption or surrogacy) "something" has (not) happened to childfree men and that "something (not) happening" has "an existentially intransitive reality" (Bhaskar, Danermark & Price, 2017: 42; Price & Martin, 2018: 90).

A CR approach enabled me to explore the range of experiences the men described whilst looking beneath those reports to consider the ideological and psycho-social mechanisms

that may constitute or at least contribute to the ways in which they curate and articulate those experiences. This latter endeavour particularly reflected my drive as a counselling psychologist to understand how straight men who choose not to parent conceptualise, experience, label and communicate that reality; how social constructions impact on their sense-making and how they understand social exchanges linked to their childfreedom.

CR's emphasis on 'the interior of social life' and other aspects of the 'layered ontology' of CR (Price & Martin, 2018: 92) appealed to me as an integrative therapist familiar with understanding 'individual responses as always embedded within social meanings' (Gergen, 1997; cited in Terry & Braun, 2017: 24). Furthermore, a CR approach can also illuminate the development across the lifespan of an individual's agency through consideration of their 'history of past interactions, interconnections (and) events' in relation to structural conditions that lead to the context of a decision (in the case of this thesis the decision not to parent) (Simmonds & Gazley, 2018: 152).

CR clearly distinguishes between 'structure' and 'agency' proposing that 'each possess distinct properties and powers in their own right' (Carter & New, 2004: 5). In this context social structures include:

"relatively enduring (but not permanent) features of the world that often precede and succeed our individual lives, but which human agency can reproduce or transform over time (Archer, 2010; Bhaskar, 1979). Agency, which is shaped but not determined by structures, can consciously or unconsciously shape those social structures (Bhaskar, 1979)... (and) includes our individual values, meanings, and ideas, and these can also shape the world around us" (Fletcher, 2017: 186)

The CR approach has however been criticised for a 'serious lack of appealing and accessible material on CR-informed methodology to set those new to these ideas off on a path to accomplish interesting and insightful research' (Ackroyd & Karlsson, 2014 :45). Likewise, it is rare for authors to demonstrate 'how CR ontology and epistemology informed their data collection ... and data analysis (e.g. coding)' or 'ultimately contributed to their findings' (Fletcher, 2018: 182). Notwithstanding these challenges, engaging with the literature on CR helped me to search for relevant social structures and consider participants' agency in order for my research 'to explain social events and suggest practical policy recommendations to address social problems' (Fletcher, 2017: 181). This potentiality within a CR framework for

improving the world by ‘analyzing social problems and suggesting solutions for social change’ (Fletcher, 2017: 182) is highly consistent with my values and identity as a counselling psychologist committed to social justice and integrative approaches.

The data collection methods I selected were consistent with a critical realist perspective which ‘presents a framework within which researchers can choose and apply methodological approaches as opposed to set or prescribed methods for undertaking research’ (Taylor, 2017: 217). Accepting that ‘to truly reflect the social world that is being researched then the research design needs to be methodologically *messy*’ (Taylor, 2017: 219) and as ‘the process of CR analysis is not necessarily linear’ (Fletcher, 2017: 184) I was not confined to a rigid research process and so chose to use two data collection tools: semi-structured interviews including a drawing task and an online qualitative survey. Both data collection methods were designed to elicit responses from the participants regarding their *experiences* and *practices* (such as their use or not of the childfree descriptor about themselves or whether they had undergone vasectomy) and to gather information about their views and perspectives: for example what they *consider* the advantages and disadvantages of not parenting. These data collection methods fitted in well with a CR framework for qualitative research which tends ‘to use data to map the recounted experiences or perspectives on to what *really* happens in the real world in a fairly straightforward way’ (Terry & Braun, 2017: 23 )

Similarly consistent with a CR perspective was my choice of Thematic Analysis (TA) as my method of data analysis given the method’s theoretical flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

#### *Thematic analysis – rationale for TA*

In contrast to most other qualitative methods, Thematic Analysis (TA) is solely a research method and not also a methodology. TA therefore does not dictate the type of data collection used nor any particular theoretical position nor does it impose certain epistemological or ontological frameworks on the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This multi-dimensional flexibility inherent in TA enabled me to utilise the method from a broadly critical realist epistemological perspective. It also aligned with the two methods I used to collect data.

The flexible nature of TA enabled a combination of inductive and deductive data analysis to be undertaken in the study (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Data analysis was partly inductive as the intention was to derive themes from the semantic content of data, namely the direct accounts participants provided, and, deductive as I intended to apply certain concepts and ideas to that data, as well as take an active role in the coding and theme development, bringing with me my own experience and interpretation of the research topic (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Though a combination of those two approaches was used in the data coding and generation of themes, the deductive approach prevailed particularly as my analysis was constructionist rather than essentialist in its theoretical framework (focusing mainly on how the stories the men tell portray themselves in certain ways) and brought a critical orientation to bear on those stories (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The primary critical orientation involved drawing on concepts of gender conformity and resistance, heteronormativity and pronatalism, in examining how the men signalled their masculinity in the responses they communicated (Connell, 2005).

TA compared to other qualitative methods such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: IPA (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) does not require significant homogeneity within the research sample and can be used with any type of sample (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This flexibility was invaluable as additional difficulties were encountered trying to identify a homogeneous sample of men as a range of recruitment strategies were required due to the relative invisibility of the population of childfree straight men. The ability of TA to systematically identify, organise and offer 'insight into patterns of meaning (themes)' through a relatively uncomplicated process for analysing large and variable datasets was important given the combination of interview and survey data in my study (Braun & Clarke, 2012: 57; Terry & Braun, 2017). TA also facilitates 'a deeper engagement with some of the less obvious themes that cut across participants' providing a means of data analysis that ranges from the descriptive through to more theoretical or conceptual responses (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Terry & Braun, 2017: 36).

## Recruitment

Purposive criterion sampling was used to recruit heterosexual childfree men initially for semi-structured interviews and subsequently for the online survey (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The inclusion criteria for the interview participants were:

- Self-defines as voluntary childless/childfree by choice (This criterion was made explicit in recruitment materials by including Dennis's (2019) elaborated definition of childfree as 'not just for the time being or until something else/ better comes along').
- Currently or previously has (had) no biological children of their own and not parenting any other children (such as adopted, fostered, or step, children).
- Identifies as heterosexual/straight and has had at least one heterosexual relationship whether currently single, partnered or married.
- Aged between 35 and 65 (men younger than 35 who had a pre-emptive vasectomy were eligible to participate if aged 18 or older).
- Resides in the U.K.

In the process of recruiting participants, several men came forward who were keen to participate in the research who were younger than 35 and staunchly childfree but who had not (yet) had vasectomies. These men in their twenties contacted me querying why such a 'relatively high entry age' had been set as they already considered their childfree choice permanent and met all the other criteria. The lower age limit was therefore reduced to 21 as recruitment progressed. No similar requests were received regarding altering the upper age limit from any potential recruits over 65.

Initially for speed and convenience of recruiting, participants were only from the UK. Recruitment difficulties and online expressions of interest from non-UK residents meant I later broadened this criterion to include the US, Canada, the Republic of Ireland (ROI) and other European countries. The inclusion criteria for the survey were the same as for the interviews.

The rationale for the initial focus on midlife childfree men was that generational issues may impact men's understanding of and experience of being 'childfree' and distinct factors



influence the experience of childfree living amongst (very) elderly people (DeLyser, 2012). Furthermore, most voluntary childlessness research has focused on adults in mid-life/post-35, on the basis that this represents a life stage by when decisions regarding children are assumed (more) likely to have been made and differences between childfree lives and the lives of peers with children are likely to be or be becoming salient compared to people in early adulthood.

The criterion requiring participants to have had previous experience of (at least one) heterosexual partnership was because distinct issues including high levels of social disconnectedness and isolation relate to being permanently single, male and straight beyond the scope of this study (Patulny & Wong, 2013). I was, however, keen to capture the diversity and fluidity of contemporary heterosexual relationship structures and not subscribe to heteronormative assumptions that privilege marriage over being single (Arend, 2016). Therefore, men who had previously had a straight partnership or who identified as unmarried though currently not having a female partner were eligible to participate as well as married or co-habiting men.

Childfree men are a largely invisible and hard-to-reach population (Wilkerson, Iantaffi, Grey, Bockting, & Rosser, 2014). Thus, to access a range of eligible men various recruitment routes were used. These avenues were predominantly virtual (online) though printed flyers were also distributed with relevant permissions in various settings (including local further or higher education departments) likely to be frequented, or staffed, by at least some men.

Participants were sought via targeted online advertisements and postings on online special interest childfree groups and communities such as *Facebook's* Childfree group. Prior to posting my call for participants on these sites, permission was sought where required from the site moderators. There were mixed responses to those requests and some concerns about engaging with researchers was encountered even once permission was granted. This led to some sites removing my posts sometimes within less than 24 hours due to feedback moderators received from regular posters. This hindered recruitment significantly and was disappointing given my efforts to be respectful and transparent in how I approached potential participants. One site's moderator did explain that members' former willingness to engage with research had been damaged by previous unscrupulous conduct of researchers on the site.

Once the residency criterion was expanded beyond the UK, I also posted calls for interview on *Reddit*'s main childfree SubReddit: *r/childfree* ([Reddit.com/childfree](https://www.reddit.com/r/childfree)). These posts unintentionally infringed *Reddit*'s strict anonymity rule (as my contact email address included my name) and so were removed within hours (though not before several men had privately messaged me to ask for more details of the study). Later attempts to publicise the survey on *r/childfree* or *r/AskMen* (the latter has 1.2 million subscribers) were also removed; this time remotely as a *Reddit* bot noticed I lacked a significant posting history on both subReddits. *Reddit* has been hailed as an increasingly popular source for online recruitment of research participants due to it facilitating rapid, free and targeted access to specific populations (Shatz, 2017). Unfortunately, my experience of trying to recruit through *Reddit* indicates it may no longer be the easy option it was once described.

As not all childfree people necessarily engage with childfree communities and groups online recruitment was not limited to dedicated childfree or men's organisations and forums (Clarke et al., 2018). Other recruiting strategies including posting adverts on social media platforms such as *Twitter* and through my own and my supervisors' personal and professional networks, including those linked to reproductive psychology, gender identities and masculinities.

## **Procedure**

### *Qualitative interviews*

Men interested in interview participation were invited to contact me at my UWE email address to request more information (my supervisor's telephone number was also provided for participants who do not use email). They were then given participant information about the study (**Appendix 1**) and the opportunity to ask questions. Those who wanted to proceed then provided written consent by completing and returning the consent form (**Appendix 2**) or a statement of their consent by email or post or by telephoning my supervisor to provide a verbal statement of consent. The men also completed and returned a demographic questionnaire (**Appendix 3**) at this point.

During the recruitment phase two men contacted me for clarification of whether they met the precise definition of being childfree as set out in the interview inclusion criteria. Both

readily consented for me to use their comments anonymously in my thesis to illustrate how fluid childfree/non-parent identities can be across the lifespan. Andy<sup>1</sup> questioned if he was 'childfree' as per the study criterion as he wasn't necessarily against having children but had not had any yet due to work commitments all over Europe until recently. He also explained he "hadn't really had the option either to have children or not" having not been in a long-term relationship for a while. Similarly, Tim<sup>2</sup> queried the stipulation that participants' choice to be child free must be permanent and 'not for the time being' stating: "I suppose I am somewhere in between. It's a strong preference but I couldn't say that it is definitely permanent. My decision could change in the next 2 or 3 years."

At the end of our illuminating exchanges I concluded that neither man met the Inclusion criteria given their current lack of certainty or permanence about their future parenting intentions. Somewhat ironically, later during data analysis it became clear that a few, particularly younger, participants though identifying as (currently) childfree simultaneously presented themselves as flexible about the future possibility of having children (either through birth or adoption).

Once a participant had confirmed their consent and submitted their demographic questionnaire they were given a choice of interview mode to allow them some degree of control over the interview process. Childlessness is potentially a sensitive and private matter for some men so providing a choice of interview method potentially reduced their feelings of psychological vulnerability and increased participants' sense of agency and willingness to talk more openly (Hanna, 2012; Terry & Braun, 2017). The modes available were synchronous interview via online instant messenger (IM), *Skype* (video or audio only feed), or telephone. Most of the men (seven) opted for a telephone interview, one of which was hosted on *WhatsApp Messenger* a cross-platform application which allows voice calls (as well as text messaging) over the internet. One man chose the *Skype* audio feed only, and one other selected IM (via *Skype Messenger*).

Each of the interview methods offered participants flexibility (including accommodating their preferred time of day especially when synchronising both parties' availability required

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<sup>1</sup> Andy declined the option of choosing a pseudonym and confirmed he was happy for his actual first name to be used in my thesis and any related publications

<sup>2</sup> 'Tim' is a pseudonym chosen by the researcher

navigating international time zones) and the interviews did not encroach on a client's 'private space' as face-to-face interviewing might. Participants were interviewed from their chosen 'safe' location which may have helped mitigate some nervousness. Again, these factors were especially important given the sensitive subject of the research (Hanna, 2012).

Allowing this flexibility is also in keeping with concepts of participant-centred research and giving participants a voice in how studies are conducted (Seymour, 2001). Though face-to-face interviews are often considered the 'gold standard' for interview research and virtual interviews merely a substitute when face-to-face interviewing is not possible, qualitative researchers are increasingly challenging this position (Braun, Clarke, & Gray, 2017; Hanna & Mwale, 2017). Recent literature on virtual interviewing, including research comparing different types of virtual and face-to-face interviews demonstrates that virtual interviews are more appropriately considered alternative interview modes, rather than mere substitutes for face-to-face interviews, and can provide data as rich or even richer than, and broadly comparable to, face-to-face interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Hinchcliffe & Gavin, 2009). Braun and Clarke (2013) argue that matching interview mode and participant group is a crucial consideration and the richest data will be generated not from face-to-face interviews, but from the best match between the participant group and the interview mode. For instance, in this study, including both telephone and online options allowed access to geographically dispersed populations, while not excluding those without internet access or with limited technological expertise.

To minimise potential problems in developing rapport in interviews relying solely on text or audio as they lack visual cues all interview participants received a link to an introductory welcome video of the researcher. Telephone interview participants were also offered a printed version of the transcript of the welcome video with a photograph of the researcher (James & Busher, 2009). This was intended to encourage participants to view the interviews as a more human rather than virtual interaction and to increase their sense of familiarity with the researcher in the hope of facilitating richer disclosure. None of the seven telephone interviewees took up the offer of the transcript and no participants were particularly concerned about accessing the welcome video. This may indicate participants preferred the researcher to remain as anonymous as possible to complement their own relative anonymity – potentially a strategy the men used to manage any sense of emotional

vulnerability discussing with a stranger (who was also a female) a sensitive personal topic which is potentially highly pertinent to their masculine identity (Pini, 2005).

Once the preferred interview method and a mutually convenient date and time had been identified the researcher then interviewed participants using a qualitative interview schedule developed specifically for the purposes of this study. Interviews are a useful method to gain insight into individuals' understandings and perceptions and a qualitative format gives flexibility in exploring these perspectives as well as providing space for unanticipated issues (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The method of qualitative interview was selected with the hope it would produce rich, varied data exploring participants' lived realities of voluntary childlessness with a focus on their experience of identity and family (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2005;).

The questions in the interview schedule were based my review of the literature, the aims of my research study and my interest in the topic itself. Drawing on the process used in previous qualitative interview studies of childfree populations the interview schedule started with broad questions about participants' childfree backgrounds progressing on to more specific and potentially sensitive topics (Clarke et al. 2018; Hayfield et al., 2019). To generate detailed answers providing rich data regarding men's experience of living without children, the interview guide (**Appendix 4**) included questions inviting participants to communicate regarding a range of issues starting with: When did you first start to realise that having kids was something that was you weren't all that interested in? and progressing to for example 'How did you come to the decision to be childfree? Standard probes such as '(can you) tell me more about that?' were used throughout the interviews to elicit or encourage greater depth of disclosure.

The interview schedule was designed to act more as a guide rather than a prescriptive framework. Its design was informed by several sources of published guidance on qualitative interview design which advocate a systematic process of formulating interview questions based on the aims or objectives of the research project and building up to more sensitive questions (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Hanna & Mwale, 2017). In developing the interview schedule I held in mind the literature on women interviewing men highlights various challenges and opportunities in cross-gender interviewing. For instance men may perform in such settings as having greater knowledge or power than the female interviewer leading to

male participants over-controlling the interaction for example excessively withholding salient information (Pini, 2005). Female interviewers may also unknowingly engage in performative aspects of traditional femininity by for example not robustly challenging such responses (Boonzaier, 2014).

Participants were also invited to construct a genogram (drawing their family tree or map) during the interview and talk about who they consider as part of their families and the meaning of family for them (Swainson & Tasker, 2005). Genograms are an established psychological technique for mapping family relationships and the concept of family trees is something all participants were familiar with (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Petry, 2008; Swainson & Tasker, 2005). The men were invited to explain and reflect on their genogram (particularly with regards to whom they included/excluded such as friends, pets). This genogram task aimed to stimulate discussion about how the participants define their own families and how they define and make sense of 'family' more broadly

The interviews were audio-recorded/captured by the IM software. The telephone and *Skype* voice interviews were orthogonally transcribed for the purposes of analysis, using Braun and Clarke's (2013; adapted from Jefferson, 2004) recommended notation system. The sole IM interview required no transcription as the software captured a record of the interview dialogue. This practical advantage of IM interviewing was balanced by the challenge of the stop-start flow of IM especially as I was unaccustomed to communicating professionally using this mode and am a slow typist (Lannutti, 2017). All interviewees' demographic information was collated and all interview data irrespective of the mode of collection were anonymised by the researcher changing or removing any identifying information from the transcripts. Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym but some chose to use their own name.

The limited quality of some of the interview data and the relatively small size of the interview sample achieved (nine childfree straight men), led the researcher to initiate the second phase of the study: the online survey.

### *Online Survey*

Online qualitative surveys offer the highest level of (felt) anonymity (Braun and Clarke, 2013). They 'generate rich, detailed and varied data, and are suitable for exploring a wide

range of topics' as well as for different types of analyses (Terry & Braun, 2017: 17). This adaptability and applicability were important as the present study aimed to gather data on the experiences of a largely invisible and relatively dispersed population of men regarding a personal and potentially sensitive aspect of their lives. Online qualitative surveys are also compatible with the chosen method of analysis in this study: TA. The *Qualtrics* platform enabled participants to choose when and where they completed their survey, allowing them to identify their own 'safe' and private location, therefore promoting their comfort and some degree of control over their participation. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions via email or telephone about the research before and after they completed the survey.

Recruitment for the online survey followed a similar process to that of the interviews as social media and email communications were used to publicise the project and seek participants. The transition from recruitment to actual participation in the survey was however almost instant compared to the interviews. A Participant Information Sheet (PIS) was provided at the start (adapted from that used in the interviews: **Appendix 1**) after which once an online consent form was completed, various anonymous demographic data were requested (using the same questions as the interview demographic questionnaire).

There were twelve main survey questions (**Appendix 6**) specifically focused on the men's childfree life. The questions used the term 'childfree' but participants were instructed that they could use whichever term they preferred in their responses. The survey questions reflected those in the original semi-structured interview schedule apart from the excluding the genogram. Recruitment to the online survey was certainly less challenging than for the interviews and sixty men fully completed the survey (out of a total of 149 who at least clicked on the first section of the survey) who did not 'roll-off' before finishing the full survey and excluded three women who completed the survey. Reflecting a phenomenon common to all online qualitative surveys, most roll-off occurred when respondents had to start writing responses rather than just clicking options (Terry & Braun, 2017). Some limited additional roll-off was evident at Question 8 of the survey which asked if participants have had or would consider a vasectomy.

This difference in take up between the interview and survey was possibly due to the extra anonymity the survey afforded, the lesser time investment required, and most people's

familiarity with completing web-based questionnaires generally. In terms of the depth of responses, the survey participants tended to offer as much or more detail than most of the men interviewed, evidencing the utility of qualitative surveys as data collection tools in their own right (Terry & Braun, 2017). Such variation may also have reflected differences in the two groups as a greater proportion of survey respondents identified as ‘childfree’ than the interview participants.

Participants’ survey responses were corrected for spelling mistakes and grammar to help readability and comprehension and verbal nods were removed from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In terms of transcription notation “[...]” indicates omitted data.

### **Sample Size**

The total sample size combining the interview participants and survey respondents amounted to 69. This dataset was large enough to capture a range of perspectives and to demonstrate patterns across the data but not so large as to be unmanageable in terms of the data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

### **Participants’ Demographics**

The combined demographic data from the interview and survey participants is presented in Table 1.

The demographic questionnaire also asked all participants to give their occupation if they had one. This revealed a broad range of occupations including police officer, fire fighter, gardener, airline pilot, maritime captain, bus driver, IT programming, nurse, psychologist, teacher/lecturer, charity executive, civil service, scientist, brewer, artist/designer, accounting/banking/investment, retail, engineering, armed forces, and media.

**Table 1: Demographic details**

Category	Sub-category	N = 69	Percentage
Age range	21 – 34	22	32%
	35 – 49	36	52%



	50 – 65	11	16%
Relationship status	Single	14	20%
	Married	42	61%
	Partnered / Has a girlfriend	13	19%
Ethnicity	White (including 'White British': N =7)	58	84%
	White Irish/ White Jewish/ White Other	4	16%
	White Latino/Hispanic	2	
	German	1	
	Persian	1	
	Philipino heritage	1	
	Inhabitant of Earth/Human Race	2	
Social Class	Working class/ Blue collar	7	10%
	Middle class (including lower- and upper-middle class: n = 4 and n = 5)	61	88%
	No class	1	2%
Employment	Employed	58	84%
	Self- employed	2	16%
	Unemployed	2	
	Full-time student	2	
	Not working (on disability benefits)	2	
	Retired	2	
	No occupation given	1	
Country of residence	UK	24	35%
	US	39	56%
	Canada	3	9%
	ROI (Republic of Ireland)	2	
	Europe	1	

## **Ethics**

Ethical practice was central to all stages of this research. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University of the West of England, Faculty Research Ethics Committee (**Appendix 7**) and the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics were adhered to (BPS, 2014).

## **Reflexivity**

Central to good qualitative research is the capacity and willingness for the researchers to reflect on their own positionality and its impact on how they formulate their research question and gather, analyse and report the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This process "begins with an understanding of the importance of one's own values and attitudes within the research process and this begins prior to entering the field. Reflexivity means taking a critical look inward - a reflection on one's own lived reality and experiences, a self-reflection or journey" (Hesse-Biber, 2007: 129). This means that I needed to consider how my own biography (and the particular social, economic, and political circumstances I exist within) impacted the research process including the question I chose to study (Hesse-Biber, 2007).

As referenced in the Participant Information Sheet and welcome video, I have no biological children. This embodied position in relation to the research topic meant I had some degree of insider status with the participants (Gallais, 2008). This insider position directed my choice of research topic as did my outsider position as a step-mother and a trainee counselling psychologist interested in the lived experience, well-being, and, 'othering' of people who transgress pronatalist and heteronormative ideologies. Being a woman also clearly positioned me as an outsider in relation to the gender of the participants. These insider and outsider positions also informed my discussion of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

As the data collection progressed and I listened to the audio recordings and read the transcripts of the interviews, it became apparent that I experienced some challenges in interviewing the men. My reticence to explore and elicit more details of certain points the participants made, initially came to light through supervision with my supervisor who also read the transcripts. There were several instances of me holding back from probing further

to gain a richer depth of detail from the men regarding their experiences. This was partly because I perceived at least initially (even if just at an unconscious rather than conscious level) the research topic as one of inherent sensitivity. I also evidently perceived some topics particularly vasectomies as especially difficult for participants to engage with particularly in a spoken interview scenario.

Some of this difficulty clearly links to my own processes including potentially unresolved ambivalence regarding my own lack of biological children (and past reproductive trauma). In hindsight, other obstacles included aspects of my therapist-self overconcerned with attunement and empathy as well as challenges inherent in cross-gender interviews. These factors will be considered further in the discussion as will how my tentativeness as an interviewer may also reflect my personal relationship to the childfree label. My difficulties in probing sufficiently in several of the interviews may have resulted in less richness in the data gathered from those participants. However, the overall data quality of the entire dataset was compensated by the addition of the sixty survey responses.

## **Data analysis**

The anonymised transcripts from all the interviews and the captured survey responses were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013) approach to thematic analysis (TA) which consists of six steps of coding and theme development. The type of TA undertaken on the data is a combination of descriptive and conceptual/interpretive styles of the method (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The particular form of TA used in this study integrates inductive and deductive analyses but emphasises a deductive, critical, constructionist approach (Braun and Clarke, 2012) informed by concepts including hegemonic masculinity, gender conformity, and, pronatalism (Connell, 2005; Park, 2002). This combination of TA forms was consistent with my stated epistemological approach of a social constructionist framework (Burr, 2003). The overall analysis process enabled me to develop a clear and compelling account of the story the data tell both within and across themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) .

Given many participants rejected the term 'childfree' as a personally meaningful description of their identity, from this point onwards that label will be avoided where possible to demonstrate that as a researcher I have listened to what participants told me. Alternative

terms such as non-parent, voluntarily childless and choosing not to have children will be used instead though it is recognised that these substitute terms themselves are not necessarily neutral and may be objectionable to some people.

## ANALYSIS

The Thematic Analysis (TA) process generated an overarching theme of *'just trying to live my life as a normal bloke'* and three themes which captured meaningful stories expressed in the men's interviews and survey responses. Three themes nested beneath the overarching theme and are considered later in more detail together with their subthemes.

The overarching theme conveys the diverse ways in which participants made sense of their non-parenthood status focused on identity construction and maintenance predominantly within the context of dominant hetero-masculine norms. In particular, the men seem to continually rework their stories to mitigate or protect themselves from socially, interpersonally and intra-personally negative responses to their non-normative life choice. This discursive reworking coincides with descriptive accounts featuring varying degrees of social exclusion in some settings and at times significant stigmatisation or marginalisation regarding their decision not to have children.

The overarching story of the entire combined data set is therefore of 'the pressures and concerns' the men 'attend to in discursively negotiating their' (masculine) 'identities' (Clarke & Smith, 2014: 1). The effort invested in participants' self-portrayals demonstrates that for straight men not having children is still perceived as a distinctly non-normative choice which transgresses a powerful gender norm within white western heteromascularity and heteronormativity potentially resulting in moral outrage and backlash (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Blackstone, forthcoming;).

The nuances, variations and contradictions in the identity work the men engaged in the interviews and in crafting their survey responses are interrogated in this analysis. My main interest is in how the men explain their parenting choice and protect their masculine identity in ways that 'make sense' and can be heard as coherent and justifiable in relation to various pressures they face as a marginalised group (Clarke & Smith, 2014). My analysis is therefore informed by research on the social construction of masculinity presented in the introduction and on the discursive negotiation of identity more broadly (Connell, 2005; Gough, 2013; Dickerson, 2000; Messerschmidt, 2012;). This epistemological perspective views people's construction of meaning and their sense of identity as fundamentally social rather than psychological practices and 'seeks to examine the broader sociocultural

discourses that underpin individual accounts of identity’ including ‘the regulation of normative masculinity ‘ (Clarke & Smith, 2014: 5; Gill, Henwood, & McLean, 2005;).

Terminology such as ‘chosen non-parenthood’, ‘not having children’ and ‘voluntarily childless’ will be used where feasible possible from this point onwards instead of ‘childfree’. This change reflects the problematic nature of the term from many participants’ perspectives which was revealed as Theme 1: *Variable alignment with ‘childfree’ label*. A thematic map is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Thematic Map / Overview of Themes and Subthemes**

Overarching theme	‘Just trying to live my life as a normal bloke’		
Main themes	(1) Variable alignment with the ‘childfree’ label	(2) Rational and responsible decision-makers	(3) Complexities of ‘chosen’ non-fatherhood
Subthemes	<p>‘I am happy to be childfree’</p> <p>‘We kind of stumbled into this life and now we embrace it’</p> <p>Being childfree is no big deal</p>	<p>Independent thinkers and non-conformists</p> <p>Ecological and altruistic considerations</p> <p>Knowing what it takes to be a good parent</p>	<p>The emotional labour of not fathering/ responding to pronatalist stigma</p> <p>‘Family doesn’t disappear because I don’t have kids’</p> <p>Existential considerations: who am I without children?</p>

This first theme highlights that many participants did not specifically identify with the term ‘childfree’ and considers how this **varying alignment with the ‘childfree’ label** may convey resistance to pronatalism and/or to stigmatisation and may protect or reinforce the men’s sense of masculinity. Three subthemes evident in the data illustrate the ways the men’s

differing alignment with a 'childfree identity' played out in their stories. The first subtheme: *'I am happy to be childfree'* focuses on participants who readily accepted and embraced the label often storying themselves as 'naturally' or 'inherently' childfree. The second subtheme: *'we kind of stumbled into this life and now we embrace it'* explores how some participants reworked childlessness or other more circumstantial factors regarding their non-parenthood into a 'childfree' rather than 'childless' identity. The third subtheme: *being childfree is no big deal* explores how some men's accounts worked to downplay the significance of their non-normative parenting choice.

Theme 2 tells a story of the men's self-presentation as **rational and responsible decision-makers** regarding their non-parenthood and how such portrayals protect and confirm their identities both as men and as well-balanced, contributing adults. These accounts often drew on neoliberal narratives around personal and individual (rather than social or governmental) responsibility. The three subthemes are *independent thinkers and non-conformists*, *ecological and altruistic considerations* and *knowing what it takes to be a good parent*.

Theme 3: **Complexities of 'chosen' non-fatherhood** considers the diverse and often ongoing inter- and intra-personal work and contradictions the men's accounts conveyed regarding threats to their personal and social identities and their emotional and psychological life. The first subtheme: *The emotional labour of not fathering/responding to pronatalist stigma* reflects how though their stories referenced a range of small potential freedoms and general contentment regarding not being parents, they also conveyed the often unrelenting nature of mainly social assaults on their identity and sense of manhood and personhood. This subtheme speaks of the stigmatising reactions and social exclusion participants encountered from individuals, groups or institutions due to their chosen non-parenthood which characteristically the men directly or indirectly challenged or stoically dismissed.

The second subtheme: *'Family doesn't disappear because I don't have kids'* reflects the variety of ways the men understand and engage in their version of 'family' whether or not those family structures reflect traditional heteronormative notions or embrace more 'complex' or diverse ways of doing family. The third theme: *Existential considerations: who am I without children?* captures the unprompted reflections some participants shared regarding their meaning-making of their non-parenthood in relation to their entire existence, sense of purpose and life span. This includes participants contemplating their

ambivalence about not parenting as well as their introspections regarding the personal significance or insignificance of leaving some sort of physical or symbolic legacy in the world.

In terms of differences and similarities between the interview and the online survey datasets, where there are substantial differences across the themes or subthemes that will be noted by delineating the two different sources. Quotations from individual interview participants are tagged with the participant's pseudonym; age; country of residence; relationship status. Survey respondents are identified by the letter 'P' followed by their unique number; age; country of residence; relationship status.



### **THEME 1: Variable alignment with the 'childfree' label**

This theme tells a story of varying degrees of acceptance, resistance or neutrality to a 'childfree identity' articulated in participants' accounts. The theme evidenced how participants had to "negotiate contradictory identity positions" in this case between permanently committing to non-parenthood versus not totally excluding the future possibility of parenting children biologically or as for instance, step or adoptive parents (Greenland & Taulke-Johnson, 2017: 83). This ongoing negotiation and flexibility around terminology permeated many accounts. Examples of participants rejecting the 'childfree' label included:

I don't think of myself as childfree, as a term. I just do not have any children through choice. (P22, 35, ROI, married)

I'm a guy. I don't know. I don't really use any terms I just don't have kids and don't want to have kids in the future. I'm free of children. Haha. (P32, 37, US, married)

By foregrounding his ambivalence to the label and presenting as an independent-minded man who will not be pigeon-holed by society (or the researcher), P32 (re)assert his masculinity. In doing so, he displays a socially dislocated individuality highly consistent with traditional heterosexual masculine norms of autonomy and being one's 'own man' (Pleck, 1995). The irony of this positioning is that it reflects both resistance and conformity: resistance to pronatalism via his evident conformity to conventional masculine norms of individuality. His performance of masculinity is further bolstered by this participant's indication of humour (Monaghan & Malson, 2013).

These and other accounts of resistance to being labelled by and categorised in a certain way suggest some participants' ambivalence to identifying permanently and wholeheartedly with a label that makes explicit a life choice perceived to contravene traditional heterosexual norms for men. The very act of resisting or rejecting (even partially) the childfree label indicates these participants are oriented to heterosexual masculine norms around sexual prowess being traditionally linked to procreation and fatherhood (Fisher, 2000). These variable identifications with or rejection of the 'childfree' label indicate a continuum of identification/non-identification with the term amongst the sample rather than a binary configuration. Some of the men fiercely resisted dominant pronatalist norms

and confidently asserted their childfreedom, some conceded the label may define them to an extent whereas others sought to actively distance themselves from the certainty of that position by resisting being labelled as 'childfree' (or indeed as anything). A temporal dimension may also intersect with their positionality on this continuum with older participants more likely to self-define as 'childfree'.

The first sub theme: *I am happy to be childfree* focuses on stories and positionings of (mostly survey) participants who portrayed themselves as comfortable with and in some instances almost proselytising regarding a 'childfree' identity. Several of these men worked up identities that they had always been childfree, conveying a sense their non-parenting status was inherent in their nature. As one participant who identified with the label 'childfree' put it:

I am happy to be childfree because I see childless as someone who might want kids and childfree as someone who has chosen the option to intentionally not have children as a positive. (P28, 36, US, partnered)

This participant emphasises the decidedly positive and chosen qualities of his 'childfreedom' contrasting that with the state of deficit or loss 'childless' implies. In doing so, his response (not necessarily intentionally) echoes the original linguistic reframing by feminist commentators of being voluntarily child/less into being *childfree* (Hayfield et al., 2019). Other responses to the first survey question: 'how did you come to think of yourself as childfree (if you prefer another term or phrase here to describe the fact that you don't have children, please indicate here)?' were more succinct and perfunctory with little or no emotional content and perhaps a degree of irritation with the question or the researcher:

It describes my lifestyle (P34, 37, US, married)

By not having children. Not something I really think about often. (P41, 33, US, married)

"Childfree" is a simple statement of fact; I have no children (P53, 55, UK, married)

Uhhh I don't have kids (P55, 34, US, single)

This apparent sensitivity or partial resistance to being labelled (as childfree) as well as distancing from any emotional narrative around their non-parenthood can be perceived as

reinforcing the men's performance of masculine norms of control and non-emotionality (Mahalik et al., 2003).

Several participants offered more detailed responses to this survey question, for instance referencing the reproductive aspirations of their female partner as the primary catalyst for their own emerging identity as childfree or at least as someone who chooses not to parent:

My wife helped me put a name (childfree) to my beliefs and helped cement them  
(P49, 36, US, married)

It (being childfree) was not something that I'd really heard of until I met my wife.  
Before that time I simply said I don't want children. (P50, 51, UK, married)

A few men specifically also credited their wife/partner with raising their awareness that not having children was even an option in heterosexual relationships.

I never really thought about it [being childfree] until I met my vehemently Childfree partner. (P30, 35, US, married)

I never really wanted kids but always thought it was something you do. It wasn't until my partner who is also childfree that I really thought about the choice not to have kids. (P45, 35, Canada, partnered)

In these accounts the men present themselves as respectful of women's reproductive decisions and therefore potentially as 'good guys'. One interpretation is that they are positioning women as reproductive gatekeepers and so reinforce the gendered division of reproductive decision making. The identity of childfree is framed as something handed to them by their wives/female partners not something they sought out or even previously knew about. This potentially signals a lack of investment in a childfree identity and therefore may indicate a lack of rigidity around this. The inferred flexibility distances the men from making a non-normative decision and may signal some participants may not be totally excluding the option of children in future.

Participants across both datasets also referenced online networks as sources of awareness-raising about childfree living or as a means by which they came to apply the childfree label to themselves:

The idea of having kids never excited me, if anything it overwhelms and depresses me. I never really had a word for how I felt, though close friendships with a few others who didn't want kids and discovering the Childfree sub*Reddit* helped me put a label on it. (P4, 31, US, single)

(M)y lack of desire to reproduce made me stand out as different in some way from the unquestioned status quo. I began to follow other childfree individuals on social media and found solace in our shared discomfort with the socially and culturally automatic assumption that having kids is somehow an essential part of a complete and fulfilling life [...] an assumption with which I strongly disagree (P35, 38, US, married)

The account P35 presents here foregrounds his resistance of pronatalist imperatives by highlighting his discomfort with and questioning of the status quo. He also conveys the potential benefits of being able to identify (with) a social group of like-minded individuals.

Overall, respondents who positioned themselves as inherently or innately childfree tended to present as most comfortable with the 'childfree' label. For instance:

Where most people look into themselves and ultimately crave kids and a white picket fence [...] Childfree is ingrained in me (P3, 37, Canada, partnered)

I have never wanted children [...] I've always known I wouldn't have children (P15, 38, UK, single)

I decided at a very young age that I didn't want children of my own or to raise a child (P54, 39, US, partnered)

These participants portrayed their current choice not to reproduce or parent as driven by their enduring lack of paternal desire which emerged relatively early in their lives. This narrative locates them in the categories of 'childfree by nature' and 'early articulators' in the voluntary childlessness literature (Basten, 2009; Blackstone, 2012). They are perhaps storying themselves as 'naturally childfree' to protect themselves from stigma regarding their non-normative life choice (Blackstone, 2012; Terry & Braun, 2012).

By positioning themselves as 'essentially childfree' these men's accounts framed being childfree as beyond their control, as being 'innate and immutable, fixed at birth ("born that

way”)' (Clarke, Hayfield, Ellis, & Terry, 2018: 4149; Morison et al., 2016;). This reflects existing evidence indicating the ways in which some voluntarily childless people (regardless of their gender or sexual orientation) story their childfreedom may serve to manage the stigma of their apparent 'chosen' non-parenting by paradoxically 'disavowing choice and minimising their responsibility for their childlessness, it just *is*. Thus, arguably the stigma of being childfree is such that it shapes even how people explain their “decision” to remain childfree' (Clarke, Hayfield, Ellis, & Terry, 2018: 4149).

Most but by no means all of the 'early articulators' in the present study stated that they had undergone a vasectomy or were hoping or planning to do so soon. Considering or having had a vasectomy was characteristically presented by participants as an embodiment of their essential childfree 'nature' and an indication of their permanent commitment to a childfree life (Terry & Braun, 2012).

My wife and I don't have any children, nor do we want any. I had a vasectomy when I was 23, which is a choice that my wife and I made together. We [...] never found the thought of having children appealing at any stage of our lives, including childhood.  
(P11, 46, US, married)

In this extract, P11 highlights his decision to have a pre-emptive vasectomy at a relatively early age as evidence of his innate and enduring childfree nature. By referencing this decision as one made jointly with his wife, his atypical choice is further mitigated as being collaborative not selfish.

There was a notable difference in the amount of detail offered by survey respondents and interview participants regarding the option of vasectomy and whether or why they had or had not considered having this procedure. Survey participants were far more likely to supplement their answer to the vasectomy question compared to the men who were interviewed. This apparent reticence the interviewed men displayed on the topic was probably due to the lack of rigorous probing from myself as the researcher or the greater anonymity the online survey offered participants.

Other participants told a different story of their pathway to non-parenting which focused on how the passage of time or delaying decisions about parenthood had eventually led them to the point when they were not bothered (anymore) about having children. Several men in

the survey and most of the interviewees gave accounts indicating they met the criterion for either the 'acquiescer' or the 'perpetual postponer' categories in the voluntary childlessness literature (Basten, 2009). The following excerpts illustrate these two pathways to not having children:

I can't say there was any one crystallizing moment. I never wanted kids but always used to think that I "eventually" would. When my wife and I were only dating we each described it (having children) as something we could "take or leave" and the older we got without actively wanting kids the more we described ourselves this way. (P10, 39, US, married)

It [being childfree] wasn't an active choice it just sort of happened and before we got married we never really sat down and said 'are we gonna have children yes or not if no then I'm gonna move on and as I've said ...I married Nina because I loved her ... and after a while I realised she was not gonna have any children or didn't want children and that was that as I wanted to be with Nina more than I wanted to have children (Sam, 49, UK, married)

Once we became older we never really thought we were ready financially but realised we waited because it isn't what we wanted. (P39, 31, US, married)

Most survey participants (apart from those positioning themselves as intrinsically childfree mentioned the insidious pronatalist imperatives central to heteronormativity that meant they had previously wanted or at least assumed they would have children. Their change in outlook regarding parenting as they matured was articulated in various ways as the following responses to the question 'has there ever been a time you wanted children?' illustrate:

Yes when I was young, simply because I thought it was what everyone naturally did. I hadn't really considered it. (P3, 37, Canada, partnered)

When I was growing up and just assumed the world was shaped like my suburban home town, parenthood seemed like an inevitable milestone like getting a driver's license, going to college, finding a job, marriage etc ....Once I finally started thinking about it, I realized how little it actually appealed to me. (P4, 31, US, single).

At one point I thought I did [want children]. I thought that was how life was supposed to be. Get married and have kids. Parents don't tell their kids that being a parent is an option not a requirement (P51, 41, US, married)

These stories of their gradual awareness of the option and their growing desire not to have children combined with the emergence of their identity as non-parents, tell an overall story of the men's developing thinking capacity to weigh up differing options and social norms. They also highlight the fluidity of childfree identities across the life span particularly throughout the early to mid-adulthood phases.

The second sub theme : *'we kind of stumbled into this life and now embrace it'* encapsulates the ways in which participants re-worked circumstances (including sub-fertility difficulties experienced by them and/or their partners or for some participants, current lack of a partner or socioeconomic pressures) into a 'childfree' rather than 'childless' identity. This subtheme also references that some pathways into not having children are not necessarily linear as well as the potential for some flexibility around the permanence of some men's decision dependent on their stage of life or changes in their life circumstances.

Socio-economic factors were enlisted by a number of participants as rationales for not parenting and for some their decision not to parent was presented as primarily the result of financial strain and economic necessity:

Financially it's easier on us not to have children. My wife doesn't have full-time work and our budget is kind of tight. We live well enough but we wouldn't with a child. I grew up very poor and don't want to subject a child to that (P24, 31, US, married).

P24 frames his jointly made decision not to have children as driven by challenging financial circumstances rather than by an unfettered lifestyle choice or any innate 'childfree' nature. The reference to the financial poverty in the man's own childhood further illustrates the economic and class factors at play in the supposed 'choice' some of the men (and their partners) make not to parent. Unsurprisingly such portrayals were far more evident in the accounts of men identifying as working class or unemployed rather than middle or upper class. Several of the men referencing socioeconomic factors also commented that parents may over-estimate how much extra disposable income non-parents had. As John put it:

Even though I'm childfree it doesn't mean I have an immense amount of freedom at my disposal or a much bigger amount of money [...] I'm not struggling financially I've got a nice place that I live in and [...] run a car that's reasonable and things like that [...] I'm not desperate in any way but it's not quite how people may imagine being childfree (John, single, 49, UK)

Several survey respondents articulated how not having children helped them (as part of a couple) to manage the pressures of housing costs:

The housing market [in Ireland] is crazy and we can live comfortably in a one-bed, whereas many of my peers [with children] have had to make major sacrifices to move up the housing ladder (P13, 37, ROI, married)

The emphasis in these men's responses on achieving and sustaining financial and accommodation security also tells a story of their efforts to portray themselves as responsible, hardworking providers akin to the traditional masculine 'breadwinner' role (Jancz, 2000). However, most men's accounts tempered or combined an emphasis on economic stability or achievement with other types of socially acceptable narratives for their choice not to parent. One participant who mentioned his childfreedom gave him greater disposable income than parents pointed out that specific advantage was far less important to him than ecological considerations he cited and several others participants linked improved finances from being childfree with their increased ability to engage in altruistic acts. For instance:

By not having a child, our double income goes a much longer distance, allowing us to have a more comfortable life and donate to charities that would help other less fortunate children lead slightly better lives (P40, 29, US, married)

This signalled participants' awareness of the risks of emphasising finances or other material factors as the primary motive for deciding not to have children as doing so may expose the actor to (greater) accusations of selfishness.

Closely linked to income and housing costs/issues some participants also framed their choice not to parent as driven by their concerns that they would be unable to provide or fund a safe and secure education and living environment for their potential offspring:



I live between a middle class and a poor neighbourhood and my wife works in the school system [...] Another reason why I don't want a child (is) I don't want to bring them into this society as it is right now. It's not a healthy place to grow up in. Especially with the threats of violence and guns in school. There have been stabbings in the local schools and guns have been found on school grounds. If I want my child to avoid that, I'd have to pay a lot more money to put them into a better school. Money I don't have (P24, 31, US, married)

Here P24 is storying the somewhat contradictory nature of his 'choice' to be childfree as though (in other parts of his account) he articulates a strong and permanent affinity with the childfree label this excerpt highlights the significance of negative social circumstances beyond his control in that apparent 'choice'. A few participants similarly asserted their contentment with their childfreedom yet simultaneously referenced significant contextual factors (as opposed to an inherent childfree propensity) that consolidated their decision not to have children. One poignant and eloquent example of this paradox was presented by P23 (a Hispanic Police Officer):

[Being childfree] was a decision that I did not come lightly to. There were a multitude of experiences that led to my current position but I'd have to say the most persistent was seeing and hearing about the difficulties over the course of many years. The difficulties that my profession is facing in the U.S. are compounding exponentially on an almost daily basis and I don't know if I could handle the obligations of child rearing along with the stress of work [...] I admit I have a disproportionately pessimistic view because of my profession. Police officers in the United States regrettably lead the charge in divorces, so conversations about child support payments, custody disputes, and child visitation schedules hang in the air like a thick fog at most police stations [...] I've cemented the decision and I'm very happy with it (P23, single, 33 USA)

Here P23 cites the substantial occupation-related stresses of his job as contributing to his non-parenting decision and conflates those stressors with concerns regarding the high level of relationship breakdown and the observed negative child-related consequences of that among his (presumably predominantly straight and/or male) co-workers. His portrayal of his no-parent 'decision' (notably he uses that word as opposed to 'choice') is then confirmed as

something permanent he is (ostensibly) 'very happy with'. In this way P23's story works to positively reframe or minimise significant negative contextual factors.

For several of the men a childfree identity provided a way of positively reframing their and/or their partner's sub-fertility or failed attempts to have their own biological children:

Neither of us could biologically produce kids and after a bit of effort decided we didn't want to adopt. So we kind of stumbled into this life and now embrace it (P7, 36, US, married)

P7's formulation of how he came to identify as childfree demonstrates that (in contrast to some other participants who describe themselves as innately, and by choice, childfree) he (and his wife) arrived iteratively at the identity. This portrayal references a non-linear process of positive identity re-configuration: 'we kind of stumbled into this life and now embrace it' from childless to childfree – that the couple have engaged in. Another participant described similar identity transition:

I began to think of myself as childfree when it became known that my wife would not be able to have biological kids of her own and neither of us felt strongly enough to seek alternate methods of raising kids (i.e. adoption, surrogacy, foster care) (P43, 45, US, married)

Several men highlighted how their own existing mental health problems (or those of their wife/partner) have shaped their decision not to parent. For some of those men though their responses stated they clearly identified as childfree they simultaneously expressed degrees of ambivalence as P40 indicated:

I think I would be a great father and still have thoughts that I would like to have children [...] because I could raise a really great kid, but the biggest struggle is to remind myself how much of a life altering event it could be and my mental 'difficulties' could make it very difficult for me (P40, 29, US, married)

Other participants referenced Autistic Spectrum Disorder and other long-term physical health conditions or disabilities as precluding them from having or raising children. One man (P25) stated his rationale for beginning to think of himself as childfree was because of having 'always been concerned about passing on a genetic disorder which has seriously

impacted' on his life. These men's portrayals may serve to positively re-work their identity from that of having to live with substantial health problems/inequalities that impact on their reproductive freedom and/or parenting options to the more apparently agentic and positive identity of childfree.

This reworking of childlessness by circumstance/s (particularly when linked to sub-fertility problems) into a childfree identity is well-documented by previous researchers (for example, Chancey & Dumas, 2009). In invoking this portrayal of gradually shifting from childless to childfree identities, the stories articulated above present the men's lack of children as beyond their control albeit due to a range of diverse factors. Those narratives (though initially very different from 'innately' childfree individuals) could then function to abrogate their responsibility for not parenting which in turn serves to (partially) protect their masculinity. Another reading of this pathway to non-parenthood is that this gradual appropriation of a 'childfree' identity may represent the men's way of grieving or adjusting to the loss of their reproductive or parenting potential.

The third sub theme focuses on the men's efforts to minimise the significance of their decision not to parent by articulating a sense that *being childfree is no big deal* and emphasising other ways in which they adhere to dominant masculine norms as well as other valued dimensions of their lifestyles. This subtheme encapsulates the men's efforts to present themselves as multi-dimensional individuals not solely defined by their non-parenthood and to position their decision as relatively insignificant in the scheme of things. The following excerpt from Eric illustrates:

Life's what you make of it isn't it? For me [...] I've made my life erm [...] I'm just trying to live my life as a normal bloke you know [...] I haven't got that erm [...] opportunity of going out with your kids or seeing your kids grow up but I feel my life's as good as one that my mate's got where he's a father (Eric, 56, UK, married)

Eric positions himself and his quality of life as aligned with other 'normal' heterosexual men whom he presumably considers are usually fathers. While his account demonstrates he self-identifies as 'normal' and he considers he has a good life, it also implies not necessarily intentionally the effort required to continually present himself as such in the gaze of

pronatalist heteronormative society given his non-parenting status set him aside from most of his straight male peers.

Nathan's story portrayed another variation of this sub theme in that he implies he can 'take or leave' the childfree label but finds it useful social shorthand and useful identity to strategically adopt at times to protect him from further social interrogation regarding his not having children:

I don't identify closely with the label childfree no, but I do use it regularly just as a simple explanation (Nathan, 32, US, single)

As a straight man who is single as well as childfree Nathan transgresses two important expectations of heteronormativity and so may well experience greater levels of stigmatisation and marginalisation compared to his married/partnered peers (Patulny & Wong, 2013). His flexible deployment of the childfree identity depending on context therefore becomes a stigma management tool on several levels as his apparent childfreedom could be used to justify his single status and vice versa.

Married or partnered men who downplayed the childfree label/identity typically accentuated a strong personal investment in performing the role of (good) husband or heterosexual partner with many pointing out the primacy of that relationship compared to the option of having children. Doing so may be an important strategy for emphasising their heterosexuality as well as their masculinity. The married or partnered men (who notably were by far the majority of the participants across the combined datasets: 61% and 19% respectively) articulated the centrality of their heterosexual partnership in accounts such as this P13 offered:

I don't have any real thoughts about it [being childfree] other than it is a conscious decision we have made as a couple and we're very happy with our lives as they are (and as we plan them to be in future) (P13, 37, ROI, married)

In stressing the strength of and their commitment to their heterosexual partnership the men's stories communicate their conformity with a key expectation of heteronormativity: a sexual relationship with women (Kirby & Kirby, 2017).

The data included other examples of participants working to downplay the significance

of their decision not to have children. These narratives were often elicited by the final two survey questions: Have you ever spoken about your experiences of being childfree to a therapist or engaged with support groups or discussion forums for childfree people? And: Is there anything else you'd like to add about your experience of being childfree? For instance:

I rarely give it [being childfree] much thought and don't have any strong feelings about it (P9, 34, UK, single)

This response P9 gives serves to minimise the significance of his choice not to have children. This may illustrate a highly normative masculine performance of downplaying the emotional impact of salient decisions, experiences or circumstances or of expressing any uncertainty (Fronimos & Brown, 2010). Alternatively or additionally it may allude to the fact that some individuals regardless of gender are genuinely disinterested in the entire question of whether to parent or not.

On the whole I have not personally found it [being childfree] to have impacted my life. I was more affected by not having my parents bringing me up. In my experience it seems to be other people and their narrow-minded views on the subject that are the issue! (P16, 55, UK, partnered)

This participant characterises his personal emotional wellbeing as unaffected by his non-parenting decision and positions this decision as totally unrelated to his apparent abandonment by his birth parents. Instead he frames the reactions of others critical of his decision as the only problematic aspect of his choice not to parent.

Somewhat contrastingly the following participant's ostensibly neutral view of his non-parenthood suggests engagement in substantial identity work to defend his choice by drawing on a neoliberal consumerist narrative (Griffin, 2007):

I would like to think that it [being childfree] was neither uncommon or a choice that requires scrutiny. It should be as common as any other choice a person makes, whether they want to buy a home, own a new car, etc. (P17, 32, US, single)

Here P17's account revealingly equates the decision to parent or not as synonymous with buying or owning an innate object. (Non) parenthood is therefore framed as a purely transactional endeavour with no emotional component thus strengthening P17's portrayal

of adherence to the traditionally masculine norm of emotional control (Mahalik et al., 2003). Other ways in which the men's answers told a story of their non-parenthood as 'no big deal' was to foreground the role their career had played in their decision. For example:

I just never felt the need to pass on my genes I am married to my work as they say  
(P57, 23, US, single)

Instead [of parenting] I've concentrated on my education and career (P16, 55, UK,  
partnered)

These accounts allude to the primacy of (presumably paid) work and the closely related pursuit of status as key traditional hetero-masculine norms still prevalent in most western countries (Berdahl, Cooper, Glick et al., 2018; Mahalik et al., 2003;).

In summary, this theme captures the differing identity positions the men presented regarding their identification with the childfree label and more broadly with their current non-parenting status, however they arrived at it. The theme illustrates the range of portrayals (including not having children being due to factors beyond their control be that an innate disposition, difficulties conceiving children, their female partners' parenting preferences or the men's commitment to their paid employment) that the men draw on sometimes as individual rationales but often as a combination of at times contradictory subject positions. This is perhaps an inevitable consequence not only of the expectations of dominant heteromascularity but also the fluid non-binary nature of 'being childfree' as well as the interplay of life circumstances across the life span.

## THEME 2: Rational and responsible decision makers

This theme explores the range of performances the men enacted to rework their transgression of the parenting imperative of heteronormativity this time by accentuating their rationality and responsibility (Blackstone, forthcoming). In presenting their stories of not having children, the men often oriented to notions of (masculine) rationality in their accounts and portrayed themselves not only as responsible decision makers but also as *independent thinkers and non-conformists*: the first sub-theme. Their responses often told stories of weighing up pros and cons as individuals or as a couple. Some men also cited broader social or even global considerations such as population growth and environmental issues as influential in their decision. The second sub-theme: *ecological and altruistic considerations* – focuses on how some participants' narratives framed their non-parenting within ecological and/or other outwardly-focused socially responsible rationales. The final sub-theme considers how the men worked up presentations of themselves as competent, non-deviant cognisant individuals *knowing what it takes to parent*.

The overall story here is that the men's self-presentation was highly consistent with a hegemonic view of heterosexual masculinity which emphasises rationality and devalues emotionality; the latter being stereotypically perceived as an attribute of women or gay men (Scott, 2015). This pervasive identity work in which rationality is emphasised is an important subject position available to the men which may help buffer them against the negative social consequences of their non-normative life choice. Their apparent compliance with or orientation to *some* aspects of dominant gender norms can be conceptualised as a performance the men engage in to distance themselves from accusations of being 'deviant', 'irrational', 'immature' or 'selfish' – all criticisms often directed towards childfree people (Morison et al., 2016).

Responses which drew heavily on a discourse of rationality and positioned the men as *independent thinkers and non-conformists* were evident both in the interviews and survey responses as the following extracts illustrate:

I mean it's to me it should always be a serious thing that [having children] you're going to get into cos you're producing another life and you've got to be prepared for that. I think it should always be a very clear and serious decision shouldn't it? (Barry, 64, UK, partnered)

[Some]times I've been with a friend's kid or my young nieces where I thought 'it'd be really cool to have my own little person to teach everything I've learned in life'. But to have children should be a much more thought-out process and when you consider all the other times when the kid will be screaming/unruly, the financial cost, and the complete change in my own lifestyle, the negative aspects outweigh any dreams of it maybe being nice (P40, 29, US, married)

These accounts of apparently logical, sequential 'decision-making' processes and cost-benefit analyses in how they came to not have children serve to emphasise the men's rationality and agency. This portrayal may represent a stigma management strategy the men engage in. However, the interviewees' emphasis on rational 'decision-making' and downplaying of any emotional aspects may also have been inadvertently encouraged by an interview prompt question which invited participants to recount how they came '*to make the decision* not to have kids' (my italics). The online survey rephrased this question as 'how did you come to *think* of yourself as childfree...' (my italics).

Stories of personal choice often supplemented participants' supposedly rational accounts of their decision-making process as the following excerpt illustrates:

For me it's [not having children] a personal choice. If people want like five or six children then maybe that's their choice then so be it but it's my choice and I don't want any (Paul, 40, UK, married)

Many of the men drew on the (pseudo-rational) language of choice in their responses and like participants in other research on masculinity were 'at great pains to appear libertarian and to defend the rights of the individual' (Gill, Henwood, & McLean, 2005 :49). Narratives focused on personal choice were far more evident in the men's accounts than were references to any negative emotional consequences of the process or current lived experience of deciding not to have children.

The lack of direct emotional content in participants' accounts of what is potentially a very sensitive and personal matter can be viewed as another instance of conformity to the expectations within traditional normative heterosexual masculinity of restricted emotionality and stoicism (Jancz, 2000; Scott, 2015). These repertoires of restricted (or non) emotionality may further bolster the men's performance of the hetero-normative masculine



subject position potentially decreasing stigmatisation, discrimination and social alienation from others (and protecting their self-esteem). In common with Terry & Braun's (2012) findings regarding men who have pre-emptive vasectomies most accounts in the present study minimised any negative emotional component in or impact of their choosing non-fatherhood. Some participants directly commented on how difficult it was to be emotional about (not having) something that they had never directly experienced:

For me it's [not having children] a bit like you know well I've not been to Argentina in my life it's just one of those things I haven't done erm it's not a fundamentally big loss or a big deal (Marco, 48, UK, partnered)

Here Marco's narrative is peppered with minimising language including equating having a child with travel experiences! His non-parenthood is framed merely as an absence: 'it's just one of those things I haven't done' which works to downplay the significance of his decision and therefore potentially prevents it being construed as a loss by him and/or others. This type of response may serve to shield the men intra- and inter-personally from normatively unacceptable expressions of emotions such as loss, sadness or disappointment (perhaps again by seemingly invoking the power of 'rational' argument). Alternatively, for some participants, this ultra-rational portrayal may work to silence less socially acceptable positive emotions regarding non-parenthood such as contentment and pride. Yet several participants did openly express a strong sense of happiness in being childfree:

It's awesome so, so, so, happy I don't have kids. People don't 'get it' but that's fine by me. (P28, 36, US, married)

In articulating his joy as well as an acceptance that most other people "don't 'get it'", P28 works to consolidate his identity as a strong-minded, independent yet libertarian, attributes which again signal his conformity to dominant masculine norms. Another means by which participants demonstrated their independent thinking was by turning assumptions that childfree people dislike children back on parents who regret having had their children. As Marco explained in his interview:

There's a taboo for parents to talk about actually thinking that it was a mistake having children [...] there was something on *Five Live* [UK radio station] people discussing that [...] you don't get that feedback from other people they wouldn't

dream of saying well most people wouldn't dream of saying 'Oh God I really wish we hadn't done it' [had children] (Marco, 48, partnered, UK)

This extract not only foregrounds Marco's thinking abilities but also potentially positions him as more authentic and honest in comparison to some parents.

This type of identity work (whereby most participants were neither 'too' regretful nor 'too' fanatical about their status as non-fathers) parallels closely phenomena highlighted by Greenland and Taulke-Johnson (2017) in relation to racial or sexual minorities. They noted black people or gay men in predominantly white or straight settings respectively, engage in particular subject positions such as 'moderate blackness' (Wilkins, 2012) or being a "'good gay'... straight-acting: discrete, moderate" (Smith, 1994) in order to navigate potentially racist or heterosexist/homophobic environments. Participants' performance of moderate but independent-minded rationality regarding their non-parenthood in this current study may serve a similar protective function. The following excerpt is an example of this moderation:

If no-one at all had children then the human race would be extinct so I respect other people's choices and they should also respect mine too (P56, 35, UK, married)

P56 portrays himself as rational and respectful whilst also drawing on narratives of individualism and a neo-liberal valorisation of personal choice (Griffin, 2007). Similarly robust responses offered by interview and survey participants to commonplace criticisms levelled against people choosing not to parent also emphasised the men's rationality, their resoluteness regarding their decision and their readiness and ability to 'fight their corner'. One participant embodied a performance of traditional masculinity in his forthright refutation of others' views of his choice not to parent by stating 'I don't give a fuck what other people think of my choice'.

By couching their resistance of pronatalist imperatives in defiant language the men strengthened their portrayal as independent agents vociferously rejecting the norms of traditional heteromascularity. Many participants also spotlighted their reasoning abilities by turning hackneyed criticisms back on the critics. Both types of performances can be construed as signalling the men's gender conformity or as a non-

gendered response to be continually 'othered' or criticised by mainstream society for their life choice.

[If others] call me selfish for not having kids I would just flip it right back at them and say 'well actually I think you're the selfish ones for having kids' [...] I'm the type of guy who will press the matter [...] a lot of people in Western society a lot of us don't like confrontation but I will I'll just come right out and say something [...] how they've been brainwashed and socially conditioned just like everybody else to you know automatically have kids. (Jeff, US, 28, has a long-term girlfriend)

By positioning parents as brainwashed and socially conditioned Jeff implicitly positions himself as an autonomous individual, someone who makes knowing, considered choices rather than unthinkingly and automatically conforming to dominant norms.

Few of the men's stories attempted to account for their non-normative choice through their own biographies or their social position or identity. Instead, for the vast majority their non-parenthood "just is". In this way participants' responses concentrated on presenting the men as independent thinkers, questioning and sometimes critical of such accepted social norms (that is as socially dislocated individuals) (Gill et al., 2005). In recounting stories of their independent thinking and actions the men simultaneously oriented to discourses of rationality, individuality and personal choice. A few participants went further by naming and countering traditional masculine perceptions of what (not) producing your own offspring can mean to (heterosexual) men:

Lots of men get drawn into the whole culture of macho showing off and men's egos are a big issue [...] it's difficult for people to step away from their own ego [...] and see what's really important but that's [...] the areas I'd say are important about being a man (Marco, 48, UK, partnered)

In this excerpt Marco works to distance himself from egotistical men – men who lose their individuality and rationality by being bound up in their own egos. By articulating and rejecting 'macho' stereotypes and referencing psychological constructs such as 'egos' and masculine identity issues, Marco paradoxically strengthens his portrayal as independent-minded, intelligent and well-informed while distancing himself from arguably outdated ways of 'performing' masculinity.

Another way the participants (predominantly those completing the survey) underpinned their identity as rational and responsible individuals was by framing their decision not to have children within *Ecological and altruistic considerations*. This occurred despite the survey questions not including any reference to ecological or environmental concerns. An ecological rationale for non-parenthood may represent an increasingly acceptable subject position available to the men to explain their non-normative choice. Growing media coverage and global concerns regarding the negative impact of population growth and expanding consumerism on the earth's finite natural resources give weight to this rationale potentially positioning the men as less deviant or less selfish (for example, Satterthwaite, 2009). Instances of such accounts for their non-parenthood included:

Over the years I've come to the conclusion that the world is over-populated and the human race is wringing the planet dry of its resources. I don't want to contribute to this. (P24, 31, US, married)

[My wife and I] tend to be very Earth conscious and reproducing is harmful to the Earth. There are already too many people and so much waste that we wanted to reduce how much we add to destroying the Earth (P42, 40, US, married)

As well as reasserting the men's rationality these ecologically oriented rationales implicitly positioned the men as not just responsible but as selfless. Such a position within the selfish/unselfish binary which is often used to differentiate, other, and stigmatise people deciding not to parent works here to refute the 'selfishness' of the childfree. The logic here seems to be: if I'm depriving myself of the opportunity to parent then I can't be (wholly) selfish as my doing so benefits other people's children, the rest of society, all living life and the entire planet. In such accounts the notion of having children as a social good is reworked as not parenting as a social good. As one participant expressed it:

Some people describe me as selfish, which is strange given the environmental benefits of not breeding (P15, 38, UK, single)

The (re)formulation P15 offers here works to present his account as self-evidently the case. As well as reinforcing a 'rational' and responsible stance his use of the term 'breeding' is interesting. This may subtly convey his resistance to dominant pronatalist norms and the

consequential stigma as related terms such as ‘breeders’ appear in some childfree forums including Reddit’s childfree page or ‘subred’ ([www.reddit.com/r/childfree](http://www.reddit.com/r/childfree)) and also: [www.tapatalk.com/groups/childfree](http://www.tapatalk.com/groups/childfree) [www.thechildfreelife.net](http://www.thechildfreelife.net) [www.refugees.bratfree.com](http://www.refugees.bratfree.com) as joking or derogatory references to parents, especially those who are irresponsible, entitled or ‘overfocus on their children and allegedly abandon their previous friends and lifestyle’ (“Breeder (slang)”, 2020). The etymology and current use of the slang term ‘breeder’ itself is increasingly diverse and contentious as though originally appropriated by childfree groups from the LGBT community, in recent years its popularity and acceptance within popular and primarily youth culture has grown significantly beyond specific childfree forums and communities to the extent it now has its own citations in the Urban Dictionary and Wikipedia (“Breeder”, 2003; “Breeder (slang)”, 2020)

Other surveys participants who cited ecological or environmental rationales did so in response to the question: what, if anything, do you experience as the benefits/advantages of being childfree?

Ecological considerations – another human means another lifetime of resource consumption and pollution (P6, 41, UK, married)

The knowledge that I am contributing far less to environmental destruction and climate change than other relatively affluent people with children (P35, 38, US, married)

[Being childfree] is the most environmentally friendly move that anyone could possibly make, greater impact than any reductions in my own lifestyle. That last [point] wasn’t a driving factor, but it’s a great benefit. (P60, 35, US, married)

These responses shifted the focus from individualistic rationales to social and global (and increasingly political) stories in which the men contextualised and justified their non-conformity to pronatalist and heteronormative expectations. As well as refuting the selfishness criticism of chosen non-parenthood, by highlighting the lasting (implicitly inter-generational) positive impact of their reduced carbon footprint due to not having children these accounts serve to position parents as potentially selfish, irrational and/or irresponsible. Deciding not to have children is framed as logically one of the most impactful decisions anyone can make for the entire planet, humanity and for non-human species. The

explicit or implicit emphasis within this rationale on ‘contributing’ also signifies the participants’ orientation to pronatalist discourses which purport people who don’t parent are not (fully) contributing to the common good.

Ecological framings of their decision were however rarely presented by the men as the sole advantage of or rationale for their non-parenthood. One survey respondent even disclosed their intentionally misleading use of an environmental rationale was a strategy for mitigating or deflecting others’ negative perceptions or criticisms of his childfree status:

If pushed I can always say it’s [childfreedom] for environmental reasons (narrator: it isn’t for environmental reasons). (P13, 37, ROI, married)

This participant portrays himself as astutely making strategic use of a contemporary concern as an acceptable rationale for choosing non-parenthood. In articulating that he highlights his ability and willingness to use reason and intellect to rebut and defend himself against stigmatisation. This reflects similar strategies of co-opting current social issues used by some childfree women to deflect pronatalist criticisms (Hayfield et al., 2018).

Other participants’ ecological rationales were directly couched in or combined with altruistic motives as the following excerpt illustrates:

I can focus on making my small corner of the world better for people and animals already in existence, rather than creating new children in an already over-populated world that I would be biologically predisposed to endlessly obsess over to the exclusion of nonfamily members (P35, 38, US, married)

In this extract P35 portrays himself as contributing to society and having capacity to be caring - attributes which evidences he is unselfish and his decision not to have children is not motivated by self-interest. P35’s story packs in a lot in just one sentence referencing several different and complementary rationales for his non-parenthood including implying his freedom from the hardwired obligated obsessions of parents broadens his sphere of altruistic impact.

Other participants’ stories foregrounded altruism as the sole or primary rationale for their childfreedom:

We [the man and his wife] like being part of the “village”. We have friends with children and like to be available to help them should they need/want it. We are also both mental health professionals [they are psychologists] so we help people on a daily basis and coming home to little humans might have lessened our abilities to help others (P42, 40, US, married)

Framing themselves as rational but altruistic in this way serves to refute stigmatising criticisms and potentially reduce their social exclusion. The following two participants similarly position their childfreedom in altruistic or externally facing/other-focused accounts emphasising it allows them to make ‘actual’ contributions to society and humanity in general. The inference again being that parents may fail to do so because of their pre-occupation with their own child/ren:

[Being childfree gives me] more time for [...] making actual contributions to society (P56, 35, UK, married)

This notion of being productive as well as making a contribution is articulated by P25 signalling his orientation to the requirement for this traditional masculine attribute:

I’m able to use my time to volunteer and otherwise be productive in society (P25, 28, US, married)

An alternative altruistic framing of their decision presented by some participants referred to prioritising (over having children) their responsibilities for practically, financially or emotionally supporting disabled or vulnerable relatives (including elderly parents or disabled adult siblings).

These portrayals of their more altruistic, caring side represent an important part of their masculine identity for the men involved and can be theorised within the emerging concept of ‘caring masculinities’ (Elliott, 2016). This framework defines ‘caring masculinities’ as ‘masculine identities that reject domination and its associated traits and embrace values of care such as positive emotion, inter-dependence, and relationality’ (Elliott, 2016: 240). So, collectively participants’ accounts that referenced ecological and/or altruistic motivations for choosing not to parent can be seen as reworking aspects of their masculine identities in line with more contemporary forms of masculinity which in turn can position them as more fully rounded and selfless human beings.

As well as storying their environmental and social concerns, their contributions and altruism many participants presented themselves as responsible and well-informed about the demands of parenthood and the attributes of ‘good’ parents/fathers. Jeff provides an example of this subtheme of *knowing what it takes* which reiterated his rationality and responsibility through his focus on “decency” in childrearing:

Once you have a kid erm if you’re a decent parent you will allocate or focus your finances to make sure the kid is raised in a decent environment (Jeff, 28, US, has long-term girlfriend)

Other men’s accounts drew on their observations of parents, previous partners, friends or colleagues’ experiences of children and from discussions within family, work or social settings as well as participants’ direct experiences of children. By presenting this experiential authority, the men conveyed they were knowledgeable and realistic about the challenges of having children, again strengthening their self-portrayal as rational and responsible decision makers. This in turn defended them against accusations or perceptions of being defective, naïve or immature in some way and of not knowing their own minds:

Three of my past partners were mothers. I was able to experience, second hand, and witness firsthand what being a parent entails. I eventually realised I wanted no part in it (P23, 33, US, single)

[Before deciding not to have children] I made sure that I spoke to lots of parents [...] and a lot of the people I work with were the industries I work in seem to be mostly the majority male (John, 47, UK, single)

Here John articulates how he engaged in a process of information gathering, drawing on the opinions and advice of his mainly male work colleagues. This ‘wisdom of the crowd’ (most of whom were presumably straight and/or fathers thus conforming to dominant masculine norms) works to give extra weight to John’s decision making.

Other participants highlighted their awareness of the practical and financial responsibilities of parenthood. The trope that ‘kids cost so much money’ (P32) was frequently articulated and participants highlighted the many material costs parents are presumably obligated to incur:



Clothing sizes constantly changing – buying new clothes, diapers, formula, crib, furniture, nursery decorations, food, presents, COLLEGE [participant's emphasis] (P32, 37, US, married)

In this excerpt, P32 conveys his awareness of children's needs (at least for consumerist goods) throughout their life span, communicating that as well as knowing what it takes to be a parent, he is oriented to the lifelong responsibility parenthood can involve.

Some men not only articulated an understanding of the requirements of 'good parents' but positioned themselves as possessing those attributes. This further signalled that their non-defectiveness: they could have had children and have the capacity to be a good parent; they simply chose not to:

If I had a child you know I'd be a great dad I know I'd be a great parent and I'd give all my love and heart to that child but I don't want to. (Jeff, 28, US, has long-term girlfriend)

Other ways participants positioned themselves as possessing the knowledge and capacity to be good parents included mitigating their non-parenthood by referencing their positive contact with children and by enlisting various tropes such as 'kids are nice but it's good to hand them back' (appropriated from grandparents). For example:

I enjoy my friends' children and [...] my brother's child very much but you can also hand them back [...] ((Laughs)) in the nicest possible way (Sam, 49, UK, married)

I don't dislike children but there are times when it's great to be somewhere where they aren't [...] so it's not a case of I've not had children because I hate them [...] I do like children and I find them very entertaining [...] I had a good friend from a large Catholic family [...] and I used to enjoy going round and seeing all the different kids 'cos they all had their own little personalities you know (Barry 64, UK, single)

The emphasis on 'enjoying' children's company and being child-friendly projects a positive yet non-threatening image of the men's interactions with children. It echoes the 'playmate' relationship with children and a propensity to appreciate children as individuals/people in their own right that previous voluntary childlessness research has identified (Blackstone,

2012). These narratives may also serve to protect the men against further stereotyping or marginalisation. The caring quality that also framed these responses is congruent with some emerging models of compassionate, inclusive masculinities (for example, Anderson & Magrath, 2019; Elliott, 2016). These self-portrayals signalled participants' orientation to the potential of being stigmatised as 'weird' or 'emotionally cold' as well as their conformity to expectations of more contemporary versions of masculinity.

Quite a few of the men also referenced their love and affection for children in their wider family network particularly nieces or nephews 'as confirmation that I don't need my own kids' (P45, 35, Canada, partnered). In emphasising their conformity to child-positive norms and refuting stigmatising criticism several participants who access online childfree communities differentiated themselves from other subscribers who (openly) communicate negative sentiments towards children. The following excerpt illustrates how one participant conveyed this distinction and in doing so positioned himself as compassionate, positive and protective towards children:

I find a lot of childfree groups online are full of toxic children hating assholes. Ones who openly talk about wishing children would get lost or die. 'Joke' about doing horrible things like poisoning food or breaking their toys. Personally I was just looking for a place to talk about how people treat me for not wanting kids, but instead I find cesspools of hatred (P24, 31, US, married)

P24 distances himself from other childfree people who sometimes express not only dislike for (some) children but also occasional derogatory or extreme views towards children. His account also indicates that social and ideological isolation can be experienced by some 'insiders' in such forums highlighting the heterogeneity of childfree people and some potential challenges of online childfree communities.

Several participants criticised parents who apparently fail to make responsible decisions. This countering of the 'irresponsible' stereotype often directed towards people who choose not to have children was another strategy the men engaged in to deflect stigma, discrimination or ridicule. This implicit and explicit criticising of and contrasting themselves with parents therefore serves to protect their masculine and marginalised identities. Marco articulated this contradictory identity work as follows:

I think I'm probably quite irresponsible and that possibly somewhere ties into me also maybe thinking 'maybe I'm not the best [person to be a] parent'. I'm irresponsible. I kind of I stick my head in the sand and just think 'what will be will be' ((laughs)) so maybe I'm just an irresponsible person and not the best to be a father in that respect [...] but it's irresponsible having children without having considered the impact on them and [...] on society as a whole so in that respect I think I have been responsible (Marco, 48, UK, partnered)

This responsible subject position was also developed by some participants openly identifying themselves as lacking (some of) the attributes necessary for parenting. By choosing not parenting because they do not have stable finances, work, housing or health or because they are supposedly innately unsuited to parenthood these men paradoxically (re-)claimed a position of being 'responsible'. An example of this narrative was:

(W)ith a history of mental illness in my family I felt it unfair to have them [children] (P19, 37, UK, married)

P19's account works on several levels to portray his choice as 'responsible' (for himself, any potential children and maybe even wider society) and 'reasonable' given his circumstances. Depending on the causative models of mental illness one subscribes to the apparent rationality and selflessness of his decision is more or less strengthened.

Other men referenced their own positive or difficult childhood as evidence of their understanding what responsible fatherhood entails. This positioning themselves as understanding what makes for a good parent and what does not, represented further work to bolster their identity as non-defective and knowing what good parenting entails:

I had a fantastic childhood. My parents looked after me very well. I had two brothers who were very much loved and supported and provided for too and I would want if I did have a child (which I am not going to) that would be my ethos going forward (Sam, 49, UK, married)

[Good parents should provide] patience, empathy, respect that the child can think for themselves. The last part is something I didn't have much of as a child.  
(Nathan, 32, US, single)

In these accounts the men's choice was re-worked as making the ultimate selfless sacrifice: that of not having children. This portrayal again demonstrates the men were oriented to the prevalent norm that good parents should be prepared to be totally selfless and willing to sacrifice everything for their child's emotional, physical and material well-being, their health, safety and security. This in turn also conveyed their alignment with child-centric parenting norms increasingly dominant in most North American and European nations (Ashton-James, Kushlev & Dunn, 2013). Several accounts alluded to the modern world and life generally as harsh and sometimes dangerous. This naming of 'worry' echoes commonplace tropes such as 'children are a constant worry to their parents' and (good) 'parents never stop worrying about their children even when they're adults'. It therefore intimates that the men are working hard to portray themselves as fully cognisant of the many often onerous responsibilities inherent in modern parenting and so reiterates their orientation to both hegemonic heteromasculine expectations of being responsible and protective of others in their charge and modern models of involved fatherhood (Bach, 2019)

Another way by which participants' stories positioned the actor as reasonable, responsible and knows what parenting takes was through examples of their engagement in teaching or other child-care related experience. One example of this was:

I think everybody at times finds children annoying ((laughs)) [...] there's a teacher in me [...] partly due to the work I do and I've always liked the idea of passing on information so yeah sometimes I quite like being able to spend time with kids and [...] put some of my experience [...] or mirror it back to them cos obviously there is a part of me that wants to help [...] youngsters navigate their way through life (Marco, 48, UK, partnered)

Here Marco presents himself as well-rounded and comfortable regarding his relationship to children – a portrayal he enhances with the trope "everyone finds children annoying sometimes". Here the implication is that even parents can find children irritating so this aligns him with parents while also expressing his positivity towards contact with children

and furthermore his “obvious” wish to be involved in social reproductive activities. Marco’s assertion that “obviously there is a part of me that wants to help” conveys his child-friendliness and shows he is oriented to the potential his non-parenthood can be perceived as ‘child-hating’, selfish’, ‘antisocial’ or ‘uncaring’.

This emphasis in Marco’s account, and some other accounts, on social reproductive activities (for example, working with special needs children: P5) frames the men as well-balanced, socially engaged individuals despite their non-parenthood. By highlighting their involvement with pro-social and community activities they shift the focus from their non-normative parenting status to their conformity with other dominant expectations for straight men including making a visible contribution or being a protector (Anderson and Magrath, 2019). This strategy may provide the men with an alternative more positive subjective identity as well as shielding the men from further stigmatisation.

### THEME 3: Complexities of 'chosen' non-fatherhood

This theme captures the myriad often paradoxical subjectivities expressed by participants regarding their day to day lived experience of being childfree straight men. While advantages of being childfree were often articulated by participants these were often small, still-to-be realised freedoms such more travel opportunities, less financial demands and lower stress levels. And though many denied there being any negatives to their decision not to have children there was a clear thread throughout the men's stories of frequent encounters with implicit and sometimes explicit stigmatising reactions from other people to their chosen non-parenthood. The encounters participants described could be one-off comments from (usually random) others but more often occurred in the context of significant and/or ongoing relationships including their extended family or their workplace colleagues. Though most participants conveyed these experiences in a stoical, matter of fact manner their accounts gave a strong sense of the perpetual social demands they encounter to justify their life choice which is encapsulated by the first sub theme: *the emotional labour of not fathering/responding to pronatalist stigma*. The emotional labour or effort here is therefore not due to their actual lack of children but to other people's reactions to their life choice.

The second sub theme: *'family doesn't disappear because I don't have kids'* focuses on the participants' stories regarding the continued importance of family to them and the diversity of family configurations within which they 'do' family. The third sub theme: *Existential considerations: who am I without children?* captures the some participants' fleeting accounts of their sense-making efforts regarding the lifelong implications of their decision not to parent, how and if that relates to the meaning they ascribe to their own existence, mortality and legacy.

The men's accounts built a picture of the *emotional labour of not fathering/responding to pronatalist stigma* that is how hard it can sometimes be due to the mainly social censure and exclusion they encountered to live out their life choice not to parent. Their stories also spoke of how they navigated this censure and marginalisation including strategies and subject positions they employed to manage or mitigate stigma.

Non-parenthood remains a minority life-choice for straight men so unsurprisingly some participants identified various negative social disadvantages of not having children. These ranged from blatant rejection and personal condemnation (sometimes of their partner/wife too) from various sources including their own parents/relatives; other parents; co-workers; religious communities for not having children to more subtle exclusion and criticism as the following excerpts attest:

I was attending church [...] and some elders pulled me aside privately after the service and [...] said I must either adopt kids or I must divorce my wife [...] [and] said it would be sinful for us to remain married without ever having kids (P43, 45, US, married)

The overt stigmatisation P43 experienced at the hands of his presumably male church elders illustrates the immense pressure men (and women) who contravene the moral imperative for heterosexuals to parent can be subjected to (Blackstone, 2014). When that mandate is compounded by certain inherently conservative and rigid religious dictates around procreation, gender roles, and how families should be constituted, the pressure on non-parents to conform and the risk of exclusion or alienation from their faith community increases further. P43 is nonetheless signalling his resistance to the dominant narrative of his church (and in doing so is reworking masculinity). Similarly, the following participant names the prejudicial 'selfish' and 'devil worshippers' accusations he and his wife are subjected to but conveys that he rejects those labels and resists this stigmatisation.

We [the man and his wife] are prejudiced for being childless, usually as "selfish" and sometimes far worse by Christians as "devil-worshippers". (P11, 46, US, married)

More subtle social exclusion is presented in P4's alongside the more commonly cited stereotypes:

There is a social stigma that sees people without kids as immature, selfish, less responsible, unwilling to truly Grow Up, etc. Also as close friends begin to have kids of their own, their primary experience of life becomes one I can't directly relate to (P4, 31, US, single).

In addition to being the subtle indirect marginalisation due to their non-parenthood, some participants cited occasional direct attacks on their hetero-masculine identity even from their own family members as John described in this account of his sister inferring his non-normative decision to be childfree also intersected with (and potentially undermined) both his stated sexual orientation and his masculine identity:

(O)ne of my sisters could sometimes be critical about that [his childfree choice] [...] the one that's actually got two children herself [...] she used to sort of [...] imply because at the time I was single [...] she kept going on about me 'oh you're homosexual' [...] and I said 'No' [but] she seemed to have this attitude that because you haven't got a woman in your life then you're homosexual [...] and it seemed to be linked in with her attitude of 'why don't you want children?' you know (John, 47, UK, single)

The social disadvantages of not being a parent are encountered in settings beyond the men's immediate family and social circle with workplace marginalisation or discrimination described by many participants. Co-workers comments featured heavily in survey participants' responses regarding any disadvantages of non-parenthood or whether people pressured them to have children:

Some of my co-workers drill me. Say it's so sad we don't have kids. How my marriage won't last because there's no kids. Such a shame they say. (P32, 37, US, married)

Co-workers are often given preference for what shift they can work or leaving early or arriving late because 'children' is an acceptable excuse. There is inclusion-bias in the workplace against those who are childless. (P11, 46, US, married)

My manager in my last job asked (why I don't have children) and once I gave my answer they then said "you don't want a leadership role in this company do you?". No children equals unfit for leadership. I resigned and have been unemployed for 3 years since then (P16, 55, UK, partnered)

The references to stigmatisation of non-parenthood in the workplace are interesting as the survey did not specifically ask about workplace discrimination. So for the survey respondents who focused on this issue in their accounts, it may be that their stories honed



in on the work place as a social environment that is more legitimate in terms of normative hetero-masculinity, as allusions to work colleagues reinforced the men's portrayal as economically productive 'bread winners'.

It is also possible that the men's sense of masculinity may be more, or most, vulnerable in certain work settings such as male-dominated industries which require a restricted performance of masculinity. A recent theoretical framework by Berdahl, Cooper, Glick et al. (2018: 422) has highlighted that in all work settings 'work remains the site of masculinity contests among men... and the workplace is a context in which men feel particular pressure to prove themselves as "real men" '. One survey respondent and one interviewee referenced indirect or direct verbal challenges work colleagues had made to their sense of masculinity and virility:

[Male colleagues say] 'you can't have kids you're not a proper man' or things like that I'm sure they do [...] they've said it to each other you know and have a snigger but that's life (Alistair, 60, UK, partnered)

There have been comments along the lines of my not being a real man because I can't father children. The people making these comments seem to assume that I want children but can't get anyone pregnant and if I claim otherwise (as in I don't want children) then I'm simply covering up my inabilities (P50, 51, UK, married)

Some men's stories also conveyed their resilience and humour in the face of such workplace assaults on their (masculine) identity. As one respondent eruditely put it:

Why is it ok to ask "why don't you have kids?" but not ok to ask "why DO you have kids?" (P20, 34, US, married)

Other ways in which the men described pre-empting, deflecting or challenging workplace stigmatisation or discrimination were illustrated by Jeff:

I purposely don't talk to my co-workers about it [being childfree] who all have kids [...] I already know the reaction I would get [...] probably get something along the lines of what people at the [Reddit's childfree forum] *Subred* call 'a *Bingo*' like 'oh you know you say that now but you will change your mind' or [...]

‘what if you just give it a few more years?’ [...] the people I work with they’re awesome [...] I don’t dislike a single co-worker I love my job but I’d probably get that typical *Bingo* response [...] so I don’t bring it up and if discrimination at work due to not being a parent ever happened to me I would put my foot down (Jeff, 28, US, has long term-girlfriend)

‘*Bingo*’ is the term used in some childfree online forums (such as *Reddit’s r/childfree*) or social networks for the cliched pronatalist comments and questions people frequently direct at childfree people, the idea being of completing an imaginary *Bingo* card of the most commonly heard phrases (Reddit, 2018; Young, 2016 ;). Another survey participant (P38) also used this terminology which may represent another example of subtle linguistic resistance and communicating one’s insider status used by some childfree men to manage stigma:

*Bingo* comments at work do get rather old fast. "Oh it’s different when it’s your own", "Raising a child was the best thing I ever did", "Who will look after you when you’re old?" (P38, 29, UK, single)

Indirect resistance through a shared idiosyncratic use of language has been documented for other marginalised groups and by referencing ‘*Bingo* comments/responses’ in their accounts both participants are asserting their in-group membership to the researcher (Mhurchú, 2016). Another way in which some participants conveyed their resistance to work colleagues (and relatives) relentless questioning or criticism of their childfreedom was through postulating that hostility parents directed towards their choice not to parent was driven by those parents’ own dislike of parenthood (if not of their own children). For instance:

My family and co-workers harass me about it [being childfree] constantly. Most of them [...] seem to at least somewhat regret having children (or at least having had children when they did). I always assume that they’re pressuring me [to have children] because misery loves company (P23, 33, US, single)

Collectively the men’s stories of discrimination work to highlight the range of ongoing social difficulties that choosing not to parent can result in and the effort and determination they have to repeatedly muster to challenge such attempts to subordinate them. Participants’

stories powerfully conveyed the continuous challenge of frequent interrogations or personal criticisms of not only their parenthood status/choice but also of themselves as adults. For instance:

I have experienced direct bigotry from people, more than I thought I would  
(P16, 55, UK, partnered)

It [being childfree] seems to alienate me from some people. That may not be a disadvantage, but it seems to be an impediment to finding common ground. People assume things about me, such as I'm more selfish than them or that I've missed out on something really important to being a person (P21, 61, US, married)

Parents being disrespectful, losing friends because they get children, people in their 40s view me as nothing but a child under ten years because I ain't got any (children) of my own. It's disheartening really. (P37, 24, Europe, married)

These specific accounts of others stigmatising and marginalising them due to their non-parenting bear many similarities to the reported experiences of childfree women begging the question of how significant or not gender is in this aspect of living as childfree.

Setting aside the mostly constructionist reading of the data, it is notable that a few participants spoke of being 'worn down' to varying extents by frequent criticisms of their choice not to parent. A modest number of those voiced concerns, in response to unrelenting stigmatising of their life choice, that there may be something 'wrong' with them for not having children. Social and relational costs were also articulated by several participants : 'lack of dating opportunities' (P12) ; having 'lost lovers who wanted a relationship with a path to marriage and children' (P2) 'There's a vague inherent problem with the choice [of being childfree] as saying that you don't want children immediately excludes you from a lot of potential partners' (P17). One participant explained how these costs had recently manifest in his life yet he stoically framed that loss as the inevitable price of adhering to his values and intentions to remain childfree:

Choosing to be childfree ended my most recent relationship. I could have caved in and agreed to have children but I feel like it's important to stand by your beliefs and

it wouldn't be fair on the child to have an upbringing where a parent resents having them (P38, 29, UK, single)

Some participants also alluded to the potential social isolation childfree couples as a unit can experience due to difficulty finding 'other people/couples of similar ages without children' (P41).

Accounts of some relational and emotional disadvantages participants in the present study conveyed collectively build a picture of how hard it can be to live out this non-normative life choice despite twelve of the sixty survey participants categorically confirming there were no disadvantages to not having children (Q5) and sixteen out of sixty responding that they were not perceived negatively by others because they are childfree (Q7). Likewise, nearly all the survey respondents (but very few interviewees) affirmed that they had experienced pressure from others to have children (Q6). The varied sources of this pressure included their own parents or grandparents wanting some or more grandchildren, work colleagues/co-workers, customers, clients and even random strangers. These apparent contradictions within the men's individual accounts indicate the co-existing complexities and paradoxes in the competing subjectivities the men have to navigate as straight men deciding not to have children.

These complexities were further multiplied for some participants whose accounts identified various intersectionalities at play in relation to their how their chosen non-parenthood was perceived and constantly scrutinised in their wider family and community:

I'm Irish and culturally a rural catholic- my entire extended family views our marriage as a mere receptacle for impending children and the enquiries at each and every social event are not going to stop anytime soon. I've fielded direct questioning about my timetable for impregnating my partner/wife for over a decade now from sources covering close relatives, co-workers (by far the group most likely to cross what I'd consider the lines of impropriety in terms of direct or repeated comment and friends [from] [...] very close, old friends to just-been-introduced (P13, 37, White, ROI)

The potential psychological impact of this pervasive, persistent and socially sanctioned intrusion, criticism or condemnation evident in this sub theme as well as certain social or

interpersonal losses may be factors that contribute to depression in some men who decide not to parent (rather than their lack of children per se). There is no suggestion here though that voluntarily childless men have any higher prevalence of depression or other mental health problems than their parenting peers.

*'Family doesn't disappear because I don't have kids'*

The genogram task that interview participants completed elicited minimal detail regarding how the men perceive and 'do' family. Yet family featured in nearly all participants responses over and beyond the specific question (in the interviews and the online survey) regarding 'Who do you think of as your family?' The ways in which 'family' was diversely constructed and framed by participants often included pets and close friends. Nearly every man in a partnered or married relationship defined their wife/partner as their 'family' with many of those men identifying their family unit as solely comprised of them and their wife/partner. For those participants citing their family as constituted by their wife/partner and other identified individuals the participant frequently reiterated the prime position of their female partner in their hierarchy of 'family' often emphasising that she represented their 'immediate' family.

This focus on the primacy of their intimate partnership portrays an important way in which participants meet the heteronormative expectation of straight men having a sexual relationship with someone of the opposite gender. It also emphasises the relational investment in and perceived value the men assign to their partnership/marriage. Several participants defining their family in terms of their partner/marital relationship also emphasised the advantages not having children conferred in terms of freeing up (extra) time to invest in this relationship:

Pouring more into my marriage, having more time to care for myself too (P1, 26, US, married)

Ability to focus on ourselves in our relationship (P13, 37, ROI, married)

These increased opportunities to work on their partnership reflect previous findings regarding benefits cited by couples who decide not to parent (Shapiro, 2014). The visibility of diverse and 'complex' (as defined by Oswald et al.'s 2009 Queer Theory) family

configurations in the data conveyed participants' familiarity with re-working and potentially deflecting criticism of the ways in which they conceptualise and do 'family'. The following excerpts illustrate this additional labour some of the men's stories articulated regarding family and the value many afforded to friends' participation in their family and day to day life:

[My family is] my close group of amazing friends (P38, 29, UK, single)

My family they didn't disappear because I don't have kids. I've got many close friends and haven't time enough to keep up with all of them as things stand (heh many of them can't meet up anyway, they have kids, lol) (P13, 37, ROI, married)

[My family is] People with whom I have a solid connection with, not necessarily by blood (P17, 32, US, single)

If we're considering "family" as immediate daily and not blood related heritage, most of my family is my close friends who I've known for years. People who I see multiple times a week or have lengthy conversations with about life. People who I've helped make their lives better through emotional support. People who've always been there for me in tough times. There's always blood family, you don't always get along with them, but my real family is the ones who are there for me and I'm there for them. Blood has nothing to do with that. (P24, 31, US, married)

P17 and P24 clearly demonstrate their orientation to the norm of traditional 'blood' i.e. biologically related family configurations and the contrast between that and their way of doing family. This position them and the other men who identified friends as part (or the sole constituent) of their family at odds with the traditional heteronormative 'nuclear' family expectation not just because they have no children but also because they embrace a more pluralist definition of 'family' akin to that well-established in LGBT families (McKee, 2017). Their emphasis on the positive quality and reciprocal nature of the relationships offered by those in their chosen family further refashions the traditional notion of family based solely on biological connections and socio-legal obligations.

This portrayal of chosen 'logical' and/or kinship-based families as at least equivalent to traditionally dominant heteronormative family structures and ties evidences a reworking of

‘family’ in more contemporary, fluid and flexible ways. Even amongst the few participants who offered a very traditional and/or consanguineous definition of their ‘family’ many qualified their description by also identifying friends as additional key members of their family as the following excerpts illustrate:

Me and my wife are my nuclear family. My extended family includes my sister, grandmother, mother, aunts/uncles, cousins, nieces/nephews. Also we have some friends we consider “family” (P42, 40, US, married)

[My family is] My wife, my family of blood and my wife’s family. I extend the term to specific friends too (P46, 34, UK, married)

The diversity and hybridisation of family configurations evident in the men’s account (for instance of extended family members being considered family alongside wives/partners, friends and often pets) indicates participants oscillate between re-working, defying and conforming to heteronormative dictates regarding family.

In addition to participants often describing friends as their family many of the men also included their pets as family members. For example, P19 stated unequivocally ‘My wife and my dogs are my immediate family’ while P39 defined his family as ‘my wife, pets, extended family, friends’. As both these extracts show, where pets were identified as family members by non-single participants they were nearly always mentioned just after the man’s wife/partner indicating their relatively significant positioning in the man’s familial hierarchy. This may merely reflect the practical reality that most of the actors live apart from their friends, siblings and other extended family members while their pets co-habitate with the couple. Alternatively it may indicate some form of symbolic substitution of pets for the children they as heterosexuals are expected to have but don’t. Many participants identifying pets as part of their family conveyed in their accounts that they were cognisant of such commonplace assumptions of ‘substitution’ and worked to refute that interpretation while simultaneously expressing their positive affect for their pets. This at times contradictory identity work is evident in the following excerpts and demonstrates the competing pressures on the men regarding conforming to traditional heteromasculine norms or aligning to a more compassionate, inclusive masculinity:

[My family is] my wife, my parents and siblings. I'd also add my pet cats to that list. I don't consider them child substitutes but they are dependant on me and I feel a great deal of love for them. (P50, 51, UK, married)

I suppose we have a surrogate child in the fact that we have a dog [...] We both gave that dog lots of love as you would a child and it seems [...] there's obviously a bond between us and the dog I know it's not the same as a child obviously but I've never had a child so but we loved her as much as a child I think and we made sure that she was always well looked after (Sam, 49, UK, married)

Both P50 and Sam in common with most participants who mentioned their pets oscillated between conveying a loving, enduring relationship with their animals/non-human family members and emphasising that they 'know it's not the same as a child'. This ambivalence may work to distance them from those mainly female childfree and non-childfree individuals who consider their pets as substitute children or 'fur babies' (Irvine & Cilia, 2016). In contrast, Eric, in the next excerpt portrayed a sense of being comfortable referring to the couple's pets as 'our little babies' though he framed his closeness to his pets as both nurturing 'something' and displaying his responsible nature.

We've got three cats and a rabbit [...] they're part of the family [...] and we do probably do treat them like a kid [...] when we go away we miss them [...] as soon as we come home we don't because they're a pain ((laughs)) but they're our little babies as we say [...] I've always enjoyed having pets [...] round the house [...] there's that kind of something that I do like the responsibility of looking after something (Eric, 56, UK, married)

The importance several participants placed on (their relationship/s with) their pets reflects previous research findings that many people without children consider pets as family members (Laurent-Simpson, 2017). Though this identification of pets as family members is not exclusive to non-parents nor to straight people, in the present study the men's allusion to the significant role their pets play in their family can be considered another strategy for mollifying the stigma of not having children. Having pets which they are involved with and care for presents the men as capable of loving and caring for dependent beings (analogous to bringing up children) and perhaps positions them as more rounded individuals. The



commitment, time and effort they expend on their pets works up a sense of the men as connected and relationally engaged with other beings rather than isolated and lonely. Given the financial demands pet owning requires, their focus on their pets also confirms their ability to provide economically. This all acts to confirm the men's normalcy in terms of their family identity and therefore bolster their similarity to rather than difference from most other straight men and parents generally.

*Existential considerations: who am I without children?*

The men participating in the study including those who articulated some interplay of circumstantial factors in their decision (as detailed in Theme 1 sub-theme '*we kind of stumbled into this life*') all ostensibly portrayed themselves as content with their non-parenthood despite the myriad associated social disadvantages. Yet beyond this apparent contentment and prosaic acceptance of their decision some accounts occasionally intimated more in-depth introspection as to how or if their decision enhanced, undermined or otherwise altered their sense of purpose and meaning in relation to their own existence. Given the traditional masculine requirements of stoicism and knowing one's own mind combined with possible concerns of appearing vulnerable in the research situation, these moments of reflection tended to be conveyed by the men as transient lapses in their conventional masculine subjectivity, a brief dropping of their guard. Notably the individual actors sharing these reflections often rapidly rescinded, minimised or contradicted them soon after. Nonetheless these brief insights shone a light on 'the ever changing flux of experiencing' and existential and intersubjective complexities of 'Being-In-The-World' as a straight childfree/voluntarily childless man and person including considerations of the meaning of their own life, mortality and death (Heidegger, 1962; Mearns & Cooper, 2017;)

For some participants their non-parenthood made sense to them personally because it enabled the man to focus more singularly on his 'dreams/personal projects' (P8, 42, UK, married). This storying of non-parenthood enabling self-fulfilment through activities like creative projects is also portrayed by Marco in the following excerpt:

for me [...] my work [...] has kinda been my little baby my whole life so some people I think turn to children as a focus for their life [...] maybe they're doing a mundane job that doesn't inspire them whereas my kinda journey is about being a successful

designer artist [...] and you know when I come up with a design it's not obviously the same as giving birth to a child but that's my buzz that's my excitement that's the thing that drives me forward and my focus in life my main focus (Marco, 48, UK, partnered)

Marco conveys that his choosing not to have children represents not a loss but a lifelong opportunity to immerse himself in creating and giving life to something unique: his artistic designs. His counter-narrative to pronatalist imperatives and common criticisms directed towards non-parents works on several levels. For instance, his use of child- and reproductive-related metaphors such as 'my little baby' reinforces an alternative framing of his non-parenthood as something at least equivalent to siring or parenting an actual child. This account positions Marco as potentially more fulfilled in his life than some parents who fall into parenthood merely to escape unfulfilling lives and so works to counter criticisms of childfree people as leading empty lives. His account additionally presents him as someone who has grappled with the existential consequences of choosing not to parent. Other instances of participants' deeper reflections about the relative significance of not having children for them individually and personally include the following:

Occasionally in my quest for purpose I wonder if I missed something [by not having kids] (P52, 45, USA, married)

There's a certain "purposeless" life feeling that goes along with not having a child'. By that I mean I feel I am not contributing to the future of humanity in anyway. I believe this is more of an evolutionary behaviour all creatures have and is something we can overcome as humans as long as we understand it exists. There is much more to life and giving purpose to it than raising a child and by not raising our own child, we can improve the lives of others (P40, 29, US, married)

The ambivalence P52 admits to sets his account apart from the great majority of other participants whose storying worked to present predominantly positive portrayals of their non-parenting decision. This frankness indicates P52's courage in considering and articulating what may well be an existential dilemma for several other participants not least those whose autonomy in reaching the decision not to parent was evidently curtailed or limited by certain contextual factors (as captured in Theme 1: '*we kind of stumbled in to this life*') including deferring to their wife or partner's preference not to have children. In the

second excerpt P40 also courageously shares his deliberations regarding a potentially negative or unsettling existential framing of his not having children though he then reworks those concerns by drawing on biological essentialist and altruistic perspectives.

A minority of the men's stories conveyed a sense of wistfulness about their non-parenthood. This more pensive quality illustrated by the following extracts echoes similar accounts men shared in Lunneborg's (1999) compilation on the lives of childfree men:

I've got no one to like make laugh and no one to make me cry (Alistair, 60, UK, married)

I am deprived of the joy of the relationship that people have with their children (P2, 52, US, partnered)

There have been times when the idea of enjoying some of the rewards of raising a child was fantasized about. The idea that the daughter (for some reason never a son) would learn all that we had to teach her, accept the gifts we pass on, and do well as an adult. However, those moments are fantasy, like imagining what one would do if they won the lottery. It's not realistic (P11, 46, US, married)

Notably any glimpses of emotionality were quickly downplayed and often contradicted in the overall stories these men presented. For instance, P11's use of language (the third person phrase 'was fantasized about' and the use of the impersonal pronoun 'one') may serve to maintain some distance from the more expressive content. Framing his response in that way could, from a social constructionist perspective, be viewed as the man acting to reassert his typically masculine control over potentially emotional matters and in doing so re-confirm his conformity to gendered norms. In contrast a relational perspective might consider his framing a psychic defence strategy against repressed ambivalence and related emotions such as sadness, guilt or anger. Revealingly, this excerpt sits at odds with the rest of P11's responses which portrayed his decision not to have children as immutable. Such contradictions indicate the challenges of navigating contested identities for the men in the study regardless of the theoretical perspective enlisted to analyse their stories.

These brief moments of reverie may represent the only 'acceptable face' of emotional expression for the men involved as more overt emotionality could hinder their performance of hegemonic heteromascularity. Such portrayals are consistent with more contemporary

ways of 'doing' masculinity such as the 'new man' or other versions of inclusive masculinities, where 'real men' are strong enough to show their feelings (Anderson & Magrath, 2019). The fact however that these emotional insights were rare and often very abruptly ended by the men changing the subject indicates the pressure participants experienced to story their non-parenthood and subsequent life course as predominantly rational, matter of fact, rather than emotional matters.

A small number of participants spontaneously raised the issue of legacy in some form or other. Most of these men limited their discussion to practical matters such as explaining how they had already organised their wills either individually or as a couple to benefit for instance the next generation of their wider family such as nephews and nieces or bequeath money to causes or organisations they have a strong affinity with. Some accounts of legacy planning or consideration were linked to the notional responsibilities assigned to men in most Western nations of continuing blood lines and/or continuing the family name. Consideration of these intergenerational dilemmas was far more evident amongst the interview participants than the survey participants and among participants who were the only male offspring of their parents. Marco illustrates some of these dilemmas and how they can intersect with cultural and ethnic factors:

Some people have this urge to keep the family line going the blood line the name of the family and I think that's something that's just ego and that's what [...] society tells us we have to so I don't think I buy into a lot of that stuff [...] that society tells us we have to do whether guided by religious bodies (or) [...] the mass media.. but I guess I come from a Jewish background so there is a little pressure to you know keep the Jewish blood line going (Marco, 48, UK, partnered)

With regards aspects of legacy in general, a few of the men framed one disadvantage of being childfree is 'not leaving a legacy behind' (P16) while one participant asserted 'I don't care about "legacy" or whatever' (P60) though none defined what exactly the term meant to them. In response to my final mop-up interview question as to whether he had any thoughts of his experience of living as childfree that we had not already covered, John pensively articulated:

Um (...) not as such but I remember a couple of times when I've had conversations with people about the choice [not to parent] some people have sort of said to me

you know “Don’t you want to sort of be remembered as it were?” and “a bit of you to sort of live on as it were?” and I say “well it doesn’t really work like that because the child we create is not you it’s a new different individual [and] it may have elements of your personality and appearance and things like that because of course there’s going to be the issue of genetics isn’t there but (...) it’s not you it’s still a different person. (John, 47, UK, single)

Together the three themes ascertained through this analysis illustrate the identity work participants engaged in when articulating the complexities of non-parenthood and how those complexities were often navigated by assuming contradictory positions simultaneously and shifting between transgressing and conforming to pronatalism as well as sometimes reworking their masculine identities in line with more contemporary masculinities. Many also worked up accounts of resisting stigma through turning commonplace criticisms of chosen non-parenthood back on to parents or mainstream pronatalist society generally. Directly or indirectly the men’s responses painted a picture of the frequent social challenges regarding and demands to justify their choice not to have children. Workplaces were singled out as ‘hotspots’ for discrimination and stigmatisation regarding men’s chosen non-parenthood.

Despite the onerous social demands most of the men experience living out their life decision as non-parents, participants’ accounts conveyed a strength and willingness to defy or stoically cope with relentless direct or indirect attacks on their masculine identities and personhood. Such responses may be framed from a social constructionist perspective as for example reinforcing their alignment with traditional expectations regarding straight men’s responses to confrontation. Alternatively or additionally these responses may represent distinctly *non*-gendered ways in which any person who decides not to have children manages often relentless intrusive questions and stigmatising comments they can experience in family, social and occupational settings. Whatever the case the data and themes from this study indicate the participants experience and play out particular subjectivities which may often over-lap (and interact with for instance, their age/position in their lifespan ,ethnicity, dis-ability and class/income factors) and sometimes contradict as they construct and maintain their stories of their identity as straight men who chose not to parent (Henriques, Holloway, Urwin et al., 1998).

## DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the main findings of the thematic analysis are considered first and then the overall procedural challenges of the study are examined, particularly the contentious nature of the 'childfree' label/terminology as well as recruitment difficulties I encountered. The choice of research method and the specific theoretical orientation used in the data analysis are evaluated next before I explore reflexivity regarding my experiences of the entire research process and the study's findings. Possibilities for future research are then presented. The chapter concludes by highlighting potential implications for counselling psychology and offering recommendations for therapeutic work with heterosexual men who decide not to parent.

### Summary of findings

Viewed from a critical gender perspective the analysis of the full data set demonstrated the extent of the ongoing identity work that the men engaged in to work up a coherent masculine identity in the face of their choice not to parent. The overarching theme '*Just trying to live my life as a normal bloke*' captures participants' efforts to manage this pressure by generally portraying themselves in the stories they tell about their non-parenthood as conforming to several key norms of traditional heteromascularity. Most notable amongst the apparently gendered conformity they displayed was their performance of rationality (and non-emotionality), responsibility and reasonableness (Theme 2). Similarly, the emphasis nearly all married or partnered participants placed on their heterosexual partner/ship and the commonplace references to employment-focused implications (whether positive or negative) of not being a father align closely with (aspects of) traditional heteromascularity. Participants' stories also articulated degrees of resistance to pronatalist expectations.

A more nuanced reading of the findings invites us to consider how participants' accounts also worked to manage the stigma frequently encountered in their everyday lives due to their non-parenting decision. Thus, my analysis has identified both conformity to hegemonic masculinity and resistance to the imperative of fatherhood that is embedded within it. The analysis also revealed (specifically in Theme 3) the reality of the unrelenting (direct and

indirect) criticism and challenges the men experienced regarding their life choice. This marginalisation because of chosen non-parenthood mirrors other recent research findings that childfree straight men's reproductive choice increasingly attracts a level of stigmatisation at least equivalent to that experienced by childfree straight women (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017). The present analysis also confirmed that this stigmatisation of what heteronormative social expectations construe as the men's deviant choice occur in various guises and to varying extents including work environments. These stigmatising reactions may function to implicitly or explicitly channel the 'moral outrage' the men elicit by seemingly breaching, transgressing or rejecting the 'parenting imperative' (Blackstone, 2014). While there has been extensive commentary by feminist scholars of the 'motherhood imperative' or 'motherhood mandate' in Western cultures, the present findings suggest the existence of a comparable 'fatherhood imperative' or 'fatherhood mandate'<sup>3</sup> for at least some straight men though class, income, race, ethnicity, dis-ability and relationship status factors will (as previously identified in sociological studies of reproductive inequalities generally – see Greer, 2009; Patulny & Wong, 2013;) intersect differentially to determine the relative strength of that social obligation.

The analysis also illustrates that for some men the practical manifestations of the social and interpersonal disadvantages associated with their decision not to parent are pervasive and significant including loss of actual or potential partners and isolation from peers and/or from (members of) their family or community of origin (as captured in Theme 3). This finding regarding the social disadvantages, variable degrees of marginalisation and occasional discrimination that straight childfree men can encounter extends our understanding of the experiences of this group beyond the sparse corpus including the conclusions of Terry & Braun's (2012) study which adopted a narrower more precisely critical gender lens.

The marginalisation and stigmatisation described by participants needs to be tempered with the finding that many participants also viewed their childfree identity very positively as it expressed a key aspect of their innate nature, their 'right to choose' (their reproductive freedom) or an adaptive reworking of not being able to parent for various reasons (Theme

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<sup>3</sup> My use of the term 'fatherhood mandate' here should not be confused with recent secular and religious campaigns to encourage *existing* fathers to assume a more active, involved parenting role.

1) . Furthermore, many highlighted practical advantages/benefits of not having children. Equally significant is the finding that some of the men portrayed their non-parenthood as not necessarily fixed for the rest of their lives. This accords closely with the '*Never say never?*' theme of Hayfield et al.'s (2019) thematic analysis which highlighted childfree women engage in continual reviewing and renegotiation of their childfree identities depending on changing life circumstances and socio-political contexts. The present study's finding regarding this fluctuating of childfree/chosen non-parent identity across and within the life span raises the possibility that this aspect may increasingly be *non*-gendered and instead reflect the changing priorities in people's life/circumstances and relationships as they pass through different stages of their life as well coinciding socio-political changes.

Despite the potential psychological costs related to the 'emotional labour' of managing others' reactions to their childfreedom some of the men incurred, few reported needing or seeking any mental health support. There were also many instances of the men resisting and reworking the stigma or marginalisation they experienced in ways that involved altruism and compassion and reinforced or reflected an apparent commitment to social reproduction, social justice (sometimes even on a global scale if one considers the ecological aspirations participants expressed) and to 'family' life whatever form that takes. A social constructionist perspective may explain many if not all of those ways the men framed their non-normative life choice and experiences as conveying their non-deviancy particularly in terms of their heteronormative masculine identities but also their identities as adults. Yet aside from hegemonic masculinity interpretations, the data can also be viewed as demonstrating the men's reworking of their masculine identities reflects more contemporary and complex ways of doing masculinities including inclusive, compassionate and hybrid masculinities. For some of the men those performances of masculinity not only sustain a positive reworking of the substantial stigmatisation and social exclusion they can experience in pronatalist societies and cultures but may also support them with both their here-and-now and their existential sense-making regarding them not having children.

One other key analytic finding is that the variable ways in which participants defined (their) family closely echoes the notion of 'complex' families and so aligns with a 'queering' of the (concept of) family (Oswald et al., 2005). This trend (which some commentators could consider a borrowing from or appropriation of LGBT identities/culture) may be specific to



how straight childfree men (and women) *do* family in contemporary Western/north European societies. The findings may also indicate the usurping of hegemonic *masculinity* by hegemonic *heteronormativity* as the dominant hegemony reflecting social change (whereby some forms of complex sexualities and families such as monogamous gay or lesbian partnerships producing and/or rearing children are now considered hegemonic) and also the role of technological advances (such as IVF) in that shift (Allen & Mendez, 2018; Moller & Clarke, 2016). This progress for some previously other marginalised individuals and families may paradoxically result in future increases in the stigmatisation of childfree individual and families. This shift from hegemonic masculinity to hegemonic heteronormativity is reflected in John's account:

[People] say [...] "wow! I thought you woz married with kids" you know ((laughs)) [...] it's a little bit puzzling but then I think well I don't find it offensive because I suppose [...] the majority of adults form relationships where they have children I mean even in this day and age you've got homosexuals [...] looking to you know adopt children or [...] the IVF stuff [...] with a surrogate mother you know even they can have children [...] of course gay men can [...] like Elton John and whoever [...] It's a reasonable assumption to make that if you're an adult and you're [...] in a fairly long term relationship that you'll have children (John, 47, UK, single)

The findings of this present study therefore go some way to illustrating that the diverse family, gender and sexual identities that childfree straight men build and constantly re-negotiate -and 'the hegemonic forces that create and sustain them' can best be understood within 'a more contextual, intersectional queer model' such as Allen & Mendez's (2018: 73). Given that Allen & Mendez's model has so far only been applied to families *with* children, the finding from this analysis help inform and build understanding of the 'the increasingly visible diversity of families' and gendered identities thus ensuring that childfree families no longer continue to be largely overlooked in family studies and related disciplines.

## **Procedural challenges and limitations**

### *Terminology*

The decision to express the main inclusion criterion using the term 'childfree' proved highly problematic, potentially contributing to the limited uptake. The term 'childfree', which is supported by researchers with a predominantly feminist agenda (for example, Kelly, 2009; Peterson, 2014) was tricky in several other ways not least that many participants were simply unfamiliar with it. Perhaps if a better term (or conceptual-definitional framework) was available then more men would have enlisted. Also, a less contentious term might have featured more prominently in the interview data. Addressing this terminological challenge, the first question in the online survey explicitly stated: 'if you prefer another term or phrase to describe the fact that you don't have children, please indicate here'. Likewise, when interviewing I encouraged participants to identify the terminology they felt most comfortable with. However, those provisions proved insufficient. Another way to look at this is that the study has, indeed, probed into the experience of being 'childfree' and determined that the strength of identification with this term on the part of straight men is both loose and variable.

As Theme 1 highlighted, the data point to the inherent fluidity and non-binary nature of 'childfree' identities. Several of the youngest survey participants voiced a potential lack of permanence with regards their decision not to parent whilst simultaneously confirming they were definitively childfree and 'not just for the time being' (as per the Inclusion Criteria – see Appendix 1). There was less overt ambivalence regarding the 'childfree' label amongst older participants or men who had undergone vasectomies.

In hindsight, given the other two themes of the analysis, it is unsurprising that identification with the 'childfree' descriptor was so variable and at times inconsistent even within individual participants' accounts. For some of the men accepting and owning the label 'childfree' was incompatible with the identity work they engaged in to resist the pressure of heteronormativity and pronatalism. Others may have rejected the 'childfree' terminology on ideological grounds perceiving it as having a specific agenda (to normalise the non-normative). Conversely for other participants this label was embraced as a positive

reworking of their non-parenthood which for some was more linked to difficult life circumstances or reproductive losses.

These observations tally up with what discourse analysts and other critically-orientated psychologists have long argued, that identity is not the fixed property of individuals, but a discursive accomplishment with variable functions (Coyle, 2016; Hadjiosif & Coyle, 2017; Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Widdicombe, 1998). It can be argued that when psychologists deal with adults who have voluntarily chosen not to parent, they should accept a degree of ambivalence and even confusion as to whether this amounts to a meaningful and salient identity in the same sense as other well-researched identity-denoting markers of diversity (for example race, sexuality and certain forms of disability).

### *Recruitment difficulties*

Recruitment, particularly for the interviews, was difficult and prolonged. Willingness to participate may have been hindered by some sensitivity around the research topic itself. Significant obstacles included reluctance of online childfree forums to share the call for participants given those platforms' negative experiences with researchers who masqueraded as genuinely childfree individuals gaining unethical access to members and their opinions. The access to some online forums I managed to achieve was no guarantee of recruitment to my study as female members far exceed male members in virtual childlessness communities often to ratios exceeding 9:1 (Malik & Coulson, 2008). This meant that even in receptive online communities, my calls for participants potentially had very limited reach. Unsurprisingly, given the nature of the topic and its gendered sensitivity, participant snowballing did not enhance interview recruitment significantly despite most interviewees offering to ask other eligible men they knew to consider participating (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Patton, 2002). Assistance from key national and international figures in reproductive and gender studies/research and from my supervisors all of whom agreed to circulate my call for participants via their contacts and networks was vital in achieving the numbers obtained.

My initial disappointment about not recruiting more than nine interview participants subsided as I became immersed in the interwoven phase of analysing and writing up my qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Indeed, it became apparent that a much larger

number of interviews may have weakened my case for Thematic Analysis (TA). So perhaps this was the best design after all: the mix of interview and survey participants as a pragmatic solution to the initial recruitment challenges. Recruitment to the online survey was certainly less challenging possibly due to the anonymity the survey afforded, the lesser time investment required, and most people's familiarity with completing web-based questionnaires generally. In terms of the depth of responses, the survey participants tended to offer as much or more detail than most of the men interviewed, evidencing the utility of qualitative surveys as data collection tools in their own right (Terry & Braun, 2017). Such variation may also have reflected differences in the two groups as a greater proportion of survey respondents identified as 'childfree' than the interview participants.

Combining the relatively modest number of interviews with completed survey responses produced a reasonably sized data set given the time, financial constraints and the invisibility of the target population. The rapid uptake of the survey once it went live online vindicated my decision to introduce a second data collection method. The overall sample size achieved compared very favourably with the few previous qualitative studies of childfree men (Dennis, 2019; Terry & Braun, 2012). It was also precisely the 'invisibility' of straight non-parenting men both in society and research that originally prompted me to undertake this study, so recruitment was always going to be tricky. Nonetheless, I underestimated the full extent of the challenge as even online recruitment efforts targeting more general platforms for straight men, encountered difficulties. In contrast to previous researchers championing the benefits and ease of *Reddit* recruitment, my postings on *Reddit* for research volunteers were summarily removed by moderators or remote bots within hours (Shatz, 2017).

Within and beyond *Reddit*, site moderators and subscribers on various online communities appeared to perceive contact from researchers as unwelcomed incursions by outsiders into protected spaces where people who identify as 'childfree' can speak their mind without being made to feel as if they are abnormal or some strange phenomena 'worthy' of, or requiring, scientific scrutiny. This reluctance to host adverts for the study potentially represented a collective and pre-emptive defence against stigmatisation. It reflected well-documented difficulties that 'outsider' researchers encounter when attempting to engage with 'insiders' of marginalised groups (Gallais, 2008). Disclosure in my posts, adverts and

Participant Information Sheet of the rationale for the study, its ethical approval and of my lack of biological children proved insufficient to mitigate those concerns.

This 'siege mentality' I encountered was an unfortunate but understandable reaction to previous researchers' unethical practice which potentially increased even further the community's sensitivity regarding outsiders' interest and motives. This manifestation of how members of marginalised populations can manage stigma and discrimination echoes responses of demonized visible minority groups such as Muslims who after 9/11 were deemed a 'suspect community' (Cherney & Murphy, 2016).

'One consequence of feeling under siege is that it can promote an outlook that one's social group is being persecuted and that this is the deliberate act of powerful groups, who want to enforce their own agenda, and misrepresent and discredit a group's ideology' (Cherney & Murphy, 2016: 489).

Pervasive criticism of chosen non-parenthood online and offline generally and in the daily lives of the people involved may therefore have rendered potential participants (or their female partners) suspicious of my motives and so disinclined to participate.

These types of coping strategies adopted by some members of marginalised and stigmatised groups need acknowledging by future researchers looking to explore further aspects of the lives of non-parenting men and to recruit a more demographically heterogeneous sample than I achieved. Potential researcher strategies to increase engagement of dedicated childfree networks with legitimate research include investing far more time in pre-recruitment efforts than I achieved to build a genuine online presence. For example, actively and frequently posting opinion pieces and articles of potential interest on more generalist social networks like *Facebook* and *Twitter*. Another way of improving access to dedicated childfree communities would be to seek formal collaborations in the planning stage with trusted key figures or relevant organisations willing to sponsor and publicise the study.

Those strategies do not though address the fact highlighted in my findings that many men without children choose not to engage with issue-specific networks and do not self-identify as 'childfree'. Diverse and creative strategies are required to improve identification of and recruitment from this even more elusive, dispersed population. Therefore, an additional or alternative future strategy of circulating participant calls on the basis that anywhere (in the

virtual or real worlds) ‘normal blokes, regular guys’ tend to frequent may prove fruitful. This might include workplaces traditionally dominated by men such as heavy industry, construction, transport, or IT companies and certain sports venues.

It is also advisable given several participants articulated they did not readily identify with the term ‘childfree’, that future researchers pay closer attention to the inherently *non*-binary nature of the ‘childfree’ identity and if and how this intersects more or less with different age groups of men or with any other significant demographic variables. One potential solution is for future studies to incorporate several stages of interviewing enabling self-identified sub-groups of men without children to be more precisely distinguished (for instance: non-parents by circumstances; non-parents by innate choice; undecided/non-parents for the time being).

The paradox of my excluding two potential recruits (Andy and Tim) due to their uncertainty about their future parenting intentions only to find in my data analysis similar ambivalence amongst some included participants highlighted the slipperiness of the binaries of permanent/impermanent and childfree by choice/childfree by circumstance. This indicates that future researchers in this area may find that having rigid inclusion/exclusion criteria along these themes is not necessarily helpful.

These observations lend further support (if any was needed) to following transparent and ethically minded recruitment steps such as crafting accessible Participant Information Sheets that allow and encourage people to obtain more information directly from the researcher. In addition, and more specific to this study, they raise the ethical issue of what happens if a man that has participated in this study becomes a parent in the future. Will having taken part give rise to feelings of discomfort and distress? Whilst it is not within the remit of this study to answer this question, it feels important to highlight so that future researchers are aware and take steps to mitigate negative psychological consequences of participating in similar studies.

### *Homogeneous sample*

The overall sample was largely homogenous in demographic terms -predominantly white, middle class, married and employed - reflecting samples in previous research on childfree people (Bulcroft & Teachman, 2004; Mollen, 2006 ; Somers, 1993). The dataset did include a

small number of men who identified themselves as from minority ethnic (i.e. non-white) backgrounds or as working class or disabled. As TA aims to look for patterns across data it was not appropriate to interrogate the data for differences between the participants from those intersecting minority or marginalised backgrounds. However, future qualitative research should encourage greater participation from men who belong to legally recognised minority groups and have chosen non-parenthood to add richness to interpretations and claims made about childfreedom. The importance of recruiting non-parenting men from diverse backgrounds was illustrated by one interview participant articulating his ethnically diverse heritage as well as his parental non-normativity was often perceived by others as yet another way he transgressed 'normal' society (Nathan, 32, US, single). Demographic details of any religious (non)affiliation/identity were not requested in the present study yet religion was referenced in several men's responses indicating it may be important for future researchers to capture and maybe drill down further in some questions regarding that variable.

The UK participants' stories often contrasted with those US participants told regarding others commenting on their non-parenthood, indicating a potential cultural difference between the two nations. This may reflect a greater dominance of pronatalist norms in the US to some extent – a nation which ostensibly is still more dominated by religious and cultural heteronormative discourses than the more secular UK (Margolis, 2018). There is also much wider public disagreement regarding contraceptive and abortion rights in the US than the UK (Flowers, 2018). Accounts offered by participants in the US indicated that it may be more culturally accepted (even expected) for people including co-workers and strangers to socially interrogate and 'police' the reproductive and parenting choices of others. An extreme expression of this 'social policing' and associated vilification of chosen non-parenthood is voiced by certain North American authors blaming childfree heterosexuals for the demise of the US economy and culture (Last, 2013).

The present study's findings regarding differences in the national context of the men's choice not to parent suggest (as one UK participant did directly) that for some it may be easier to be a childfree man in the UK than other more staunchly pronatalist and religiously conservative Western nations (Burns & Busso, 2005). It should nonetheless be noted that this study has only identified Anglo-Saxon tropes of childfreedom which cannot be

presumed to map onto the experiences of straight men in other regions, including some European countries such as Greece where familism remains the most important cultural orientation (Loizos & Papataxiarchis, 1991) or predominantly Muslim nations such as Turkey, where many believe 'it is their religious duty to populate the earth' (Husnu, 2016). Furthermore, this study did not capture the experiences of an exceedingly under-addressed population namely Black men and men of the African diaspora who choose not to parent (Dennis, 2019). The lack of any take up of the present study from Black men highlights how reproductive and gendered decisions such as that of whether to have children or not are intricately bound up with myriad cultural and historical influences for different groups of men (Dennis, 2019). Additionally, my own background as a white female researcher bringing a critical lens informed to some extent by predominantly white feminist perspectives, may have alienated some Black childfree men given 'how Black people have practiced resistance against reproductive control throughout history' (Brown, 2018).

### **Critique of the research and method of analysis:**

#### *Survey questions*

The survey questions (which were drawn from the most salient items on the interview schedule) were generally well-received (notwithstanding the terminology issue) apart from Question 11: have you ever spoken about your experiences of being childfree to a therapist or engaged with support groups or discussion for childfree people? Having analysed the responses to that question it became clear two separate questions should have been presented instead of conflating accessing childfree online or support groups with accessing therapy or mental health services. Several participants unsurprisingly challenged the inference that they should need *any* extra or psychological support merely because of their choice not parent.

#### *Method of analysis*

Initially I set out to do Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: IPA (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, 2009) but changed to TA for several reasons. These included the need to adopt a method that was able to accommodate large and variable datasets once it was apparent



that some of the interview accounts lacked richness and so required additional data to be generated via the online qualitative survey. TA's epistemological flexibility allowed me to engage with several literatures and theoretical positions (for instance, critical gender; feminist; masculinities and social constructionist) without committing to either a purely phenomenological reading, whereby the key concern is to 'give voice to the participants', or a view of my data as purely textual, and therefore unable to give me any insight into thoughts, feelings, intentions and other internal states.

Overall TA aligned with my critical realist framework and allowed me to adopt a predominantly critical rather than experiential orientation to the data. That meant I was able to 'interrogate the latent meanings, the assumptions and ideas that lie behind what is explicitly stated' by the participants (Braun and Clarke, 2012: 58). At the same time I believe that to some extent, this study represents, explores, and respects the often marginalised or unheard voices of men in reproductive research: an area that has focused almost exclusively on women's experiences (Culley, Hudson, & Lohan, 2013). This stated intent recognises however that contrary to essentialist claims of there being a "knowable world" out there simply waiting for some "truth" to be uncovered by researchers as if they were archaeologists, instead my position as the researcher in this study was much more akin to the role of sculptor (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

TA is also suited to the exploration of matters of identity, personal experience, and the meanings individuals hold about their experiences - all topics central to the research question of this study (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The method is well-positioned to provide insights regarding how men negotiate aspects of their identity in relation to their gender and (hetero)sexuality (Clarke & Smith, 2014; Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Monaghan & Malson, 2013). Furthermore, TA has already been used in researching aspects of reproductive-related psychology including men's experiences of infertility and those of men who have had pre-emptive vasectomies (Malik & Coulson, 2008; Terry & Braun; 2012).

The process of thematic analysis using a broadly social constructionist approach which holds that 'the self is not a psychic entity that exists inside individuals but rather a dramatic effect created by performance and interpretation', helped refine my analytic lens to focus predominantly on the 'performative self' the men presented (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2001: 90). Nonetheless, at times I struggled to overlook what may be 'going on inside the head' of

participants as their accounts were infused with many levels of meaning above and beyond any purely performative stance. As a counselling psychologist and practising psychotherapist, searching for that psychic meaning is somewhat my default and the more readings of the data I did the more difficult it became to ignore glaringly psychological aspects of each account. However, the epistemological approach I selected opened my eyes to the pervasiveness of gendered performances in research contexts which previously I had been largely unaware of.

In hindsight it may have been productive to undertake a TA which integrated psychodynamic insights with those from critical theory and social constructionist lenses. For instance, how might the shame that some men experience at not matching up to heteronormative ideal of fatherhood manifest itself intra-psychically as well as interpersonally in their lives and the responses they gave me? However, that task would have been both time-consuming and theoretically tricky (particularly in terms of attaching psychoanalytic theory to a social constructionist perspective). To avoid producing an incoherent analysis that scrambles across unconscious, cognitive, and social levels of explanation, I opted for the approach detailed in the method chapter; even though I recognise that scholarship exists that has successfully married seemingly contradictory orientations and epistemological assumptions.

#### *Psychotherapeutic considerations*

As a counselling psychologist who subscribes to the notion that what people say is laced with unconscious defences, the complexity of participants' responses is undoubtedly evident in some excerpts presented in the analysis. There is clearly scope for psychodynamic interpretations of the men's parenting decisions and their explanations for those decisions. For instance, a few men citing 'freedom from worry' as an advantage of non-parenthood evidently perceived the world or life in general as harsh and sometimes dangerous. Likewise, the adoption or rejection of the term 'childfree' itself was ripe for psychodynamic formulations. For instance, as a defensive strategy against loss for participants who indicated they identified as childfree due to external circumstances, such as not wanting to pass on medical conditions or lack of a suitable partner.

A relational perspective could therefore supplement or supplant the critical theory reading of the data (while still using thematic analysis as the method of data analysis) if I were to repeat the study. In retrospect, ignoring relational aspects of the data was a weakness in this thesis. There is an untapped richness and symbolism in the men's stories which are permeated with examples of ego-defensive mechanisms including denial, splitting, projection, rationalisation and sublimation lending themselves to relational interpretations (Holmes, 1995). After all, the decision whether to parent or not is surely one of the most relational decisions we encounter as adults. A systemic perspective is also glaringly absent from the analysis and future research might wish to explore couples' perspectives on the topic. One promising approach to addressing that gap (which may also further inform understanding of the changes across the lifespan as well as social and generational changes regarding non-parenthood) is a method of interviewing couples with a narrative timeline developed by Frost and colleagues (Frost, Hammack, Wilson et al., 2019).

## **Reflexivity**

### *Gender-related interview challenges*

In addition to the identity work the participants undertook in their stories to mitigate their non-normative parenthood status, the interviewed men also engaged with various ways of 'doing' masculinity during our contact. Some of my participants offered only superficial information regarding their lived experience of not having children or minimised any challenges their life choice entailed. Excessively 'holding one's counsel' can be a strategy that men being interviewed by a woman engage in to maintain control as expected by normative masculinity (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2001).

Conversely, I sometimes unwittingly colluded with participants' limited disclosure through my reticence to take more control of the interview process by staying with potentially difficult topics for longer and probing more robustly. This illustrates my own gendered identity (including the occasional performance of an over-compliant femininity) in the interview situation and how that interacted with the men's gendered performances (Boonzaier, 2014; Lee, 1997). Furthermore, given the profound gendered connotations of the entire project, 'the research topic and my 'positionality' intersected to produce the

gendered encounters' that played centre stage to the data collection process (Pini, 2005: 212).

For men participating in any study with a female researcher, let alone research on a topic so pertinent to straight male identity, the onus falls on them 'to signify possession of an essentially masculine self, a self with the desire and capacities that warrant membership of the dominant group' (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2001:90). Interactions during some interviews reflected this in the men's performative inclinations to subtly dominate proceedings mainly through withholding or brevity of disclosure. However, the context of being a woman interviewing men alternately appeared to encourage some of the men to drop their guard as by the end of their interviews a couple of men commented they had found talking about their non-parenthood useful compared to their normal practice of shutting down any such emotionally-referent discussions. This may reflect expectations that women are more receptive to, less judgmental of, or positively value, emotionality in men indicating that 'the masculine self is thus always the product of a performance tailored to the situation and audience at hand'(Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2001: 90). Such a perspective on how the men settled into the interviews could be criticised as reductive and inadvertently over-emphasising cross-gender factors, while ignoring the relational aspects of human communication and the potential loss and ambivalence some may have experienced around the subject matter.

#### *Interview skills and schedule*

Reflecting with my supervisors and in my personal research journal on my experience of undertaking the interviews has clarified my blind spots as an interviewer. On reviewing interview recordings and transcripts, missed opportunities to use follow-up probe questions to gain richer data were evident. It is now clear that initially I viewed my research topic as one of inherent sensitivity. Though this may have been the case for some interview participants (particularly as interviewing precluded total anonymity) it was not necessarily so for all. I seemed to particularly struggle to probe more about participants' decisions to have a vasectomy or not. This diffidence – irrespective of the gender difference - may have partly been due to my implicit values regarding reproductive decisions being private matters, which in turn links to my personal history. I was also anxious not to unduly distress

or offend any participants both from an ethical therapist perspective and from a pragmatic perspective of a novice researcher who needed participants to engage in the interviews.

I noticed that at certain times I shut down potentially developing topics by moving on too soon to a new area of inquiry. This tendency may have been partly self-protection against my own emotions and partly due to there being too many questions in my original interview schedule. Regardless of the motivation for my actions, my grasp of the important qualitative interviewing skill of discerning the need for probing and for when to progress to a new topic (Lannutti, 2017) was somewhat lacking in earlier interviews. By the final interviews I 'found my feet' interview-wise, resulting in significant improvement in the research encounter which was far more intuitive, enjoyable and conversational in its flow. Those interviews were also far less constrained by over-adherence to what in retrospect now appears an overly long interview schedule as (with my supervisor's agreement) I jettisoned many of the original questions for the last few interviews. In hindsight, undertaking a more formal piloting of the interview schedule at the onset may have proved beneficial. Part way through the interview stage I started asking participants at the end of their interview for their views about the range and delivery of the questions and incorporated their feedback into future interviews.

### *Data analysis process*

Initially in the analytic process Theme 3 captured and further analysed into subthemes the men's experiences of living as non-parents and responding to pronatalist stigma. On reflection, and following further re-readings of the data, my sense was that the original Theme 3 failed to capture adequately the richness and multidimensional quality of the men's accounts of their meaning making regarding both their lack of children and the resultant marginalisation and stigmatisation they can encounter. The complexity and intertwined nature of these two factors resonated strongly with me given my own experiences of biological childlessness in my current partnership. I therefore later reformulated Theme 3 as: '*complexities of 'chosen' non-fatherhood*' and redefined its subthemes to better explicate important aspects of the data initially overlooked or subsumed within other themes and their subthemes. This restructuring of the analysis so that it acknowledged my own subjectivity and positionality as well as better reflected the

range of participants' subjectivities of being childfree gave greater coherence to the chapter overall and I believe strengthened the qualitative scope of entire thesis.

The reorganisation also helped me recognise and then purposefully step back from the 'narrative smoothing' (Davy, 2010) I had unknowingly fallen into in my keenness to adhere to a social constructionist stance in some of my earlier analytic discussions by trying to pigeon-hole the many masculine subjectivities the men portrayed into a binary of conforming to/resisting norms. The iterative process of amending my themes enabled me to more fully illuminate the lived complexities of respondents' lives' (Oswald et al., 2005). This position was far more in keeping with my originally stated philosophical perspective of critical realism and enabled me to 'avoid any commitment to the content of specific theories and recognise the conditional nature of all... results' (Blaskar, 1979: 6).

### *Am I 'childfree'?*

At the end of his interview, the final interviewee asked if I was childfree. I instinctively answered "Yes" but once I put the phone down felt highly disingenuous towards both him and my wonderful non-biological daughter (and recent granddaughter). But seen now from the position of what the data collection and analysis has clarified – namely the essentially non-binary and fluid nature of 'being childfree' - I now recognise that earlier in my life I initially identified as childfree by choice and then partially modified my identity into circumstantially childfree having reworked my own lack of biological children yet simultaneously also identifying as a distinctly non-childfree step-mother. This serendipitous exchange and my current paradoxical position encapsulate the evolution of my own precarious and variable identification with the 'childfree' label both over the entire duration of this research study and as well throughout my personal journey in my adult life so far: from vociferously childfree twentysomething through to unexpectedly becoming a step-parent in my thirties when I met my current partner followed by unsuccessful attempts at biological parenthood which then faded into the background as I became fully immersed in the multi-generational family life I now have as a parent and grandparent. *My logical family!*

Reflecting further on my experience of the entire research process as well as the themes identified I now recognise that it's as much about '*doing*' childfree (or 'non-parenthood' or whatever someone's preferred term) in whatever way makes sense to someone at any

particular point in their life as it is about ‘being’ childfree. It's about celebrating the diversity and heterogeneity of non-parenthood (and of many different configurations and flavours of family, kinship, and caring relationships).

### *Personal Therapy and my Therapist Self in the research process*

The wistfulness and wearisomeness evident in some of the interviews and survey responses at times resonated profoundly with me. I was inspired by the resilience of those men who had reworked their circumstantial childlessness and how many participants’ resistance of gender and heteronormativity stereotypes had led to them (re)defining family in ways that do not necessarily depend upon fertility, genetic heritage, or parenting. Like me they too can celebrate the families they have chosen that are often multi-generational and enriched by many close friends and the occasional pet.

Personal therapy provided an invaluable environment for me to reflect on and process those and other counter-transferential experiences and parallel processes. The glorious messiness of qualitative research particularly regarding the contested, fluid and non-binary nature of ‘being childfree’ revealed during the study was ironically mirrored in my life when my therapist (whom I’d contracted with long before this study was ever envisaged) eventually revealed he was in fact ‘childfree by circumstance’.

The entire research process has oriented me as a female therapist to the insidiousness of pronatalist ideology in men’s lives and the gendered way this can play out. This is something I had little awareness of as prior to starting this research journey I was unknowingly immersed as many (female) therapists are within an Anglo-Saxon ideology and culture which usually privileges women’s role and responsibility in procreative matters almost to the total exclusion of men’s voices. This has further sensitised me to the exclusion straight men often face individually and collectively when issues of reproduction and parenting are considered in a world dominated by heteronormative and gendered dogmas. This has enriched my clinical work with clients struggling with societal pressure to parent regardless of their own circumstances or preferences.

The reorganisation of Theme 3 to include a subtheme reflecting participants’ existential meaning-making regarding their childfreedom/non-parenthood (‘Who am I without children?’) was another significant point in my journey towards more fully ‘sculpting’ the

analysis and my own non-linear journey regarding the 'childfree' label. The improved capture of the complexities and contradictions inherent in the men's childfree/non-parenting 'choice' in the re-structured Theme 3 resonated profoundly with and re-energised me in the analytic and then writing up stages. Marco's (one of the interview participants) metaphorical description of the creative work he produces as being 'his baby' was particularly powerful for me – as a woman who has never actually given birth to a child.

In hindsight I now recognise the implicit strength of this metaphor grew/gestated within me and then took a life of its own in the processes of transcription, immersion in and then analysis of the data followed by discussion writing, thesis production and amendment. This at times non-linear labour took increasing hold of my time, life, physical and emotional energy ( and often that of my immediate family!) and energy as did the inherent ups and downs and the possibility of eventually producing, giving life to something enduring. The vital role of my academic supervisory relationship in this 'birthwork' whereby my supervisor's skilled and transformative accompaniment in the particularly tumultuous later stages prioritised a focus on me as the 'expert' in the analytic process and overall thesis production rather than focusing on the 'product' of my journey i.e. the thesis - was transformative and vitally sustaining (Fanin & Perrier, 2019).

### **Implications for future research**

Interesting avenues for further qualitative studies include explorations of the experiences and meanings of chosen non-parenthood for certain populations of straight men. For instance, those who openly acknowledge their dislike of children or members of population-control interest groups such as the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT) or BirthStrike in the U.K. who have pledged in response to climate change concerns and related political inertia not to have children (Paddison, 2019). Similarly, qualitative investigations of ways men from recognised minority groups such as those who decide not to parent because of physical, or mental, health problems, disability or inheritable genetic conditions (a small number of participants referenced these rationales) or those from strongly pronatalist ethnic minority cultures (including some Hispanic, Black, and Asian communities) or faith traditions, sustain their masculine identities would be illuminating.



Future studies could take the form of case series involving individual in-depth qualitative interviews (with a far less prescriptive interview schedule than the current study) or surveys incorporating the adaptations already highlighted to overcome the limitations of the present study. Focus groups – both online and offline - might also constitute a useful data collection method as would qualitative analysis of posts left on online childfree discussion forums and story completion tasks or vignette-based studies portraying male characters with different rationales for not parenting (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Clarke, Hayfield, Moller et al., 2017; Fox, 2017; Giles, 2017). Those latter secondary data methods may mitigate some of the sensitivity around the research topic. An intriguing possibility for building on the findings of this study might use vignettes to explore how non-fathers are perceived if their situation is couched in an environmental compared to a personal choice rationale. Given the lack of awareness of pronatalism and chosen non-parenthood I encountered anecdotally amongst mental health colleagues, quantitative questionnaires measuring practitioner attitudes to common myths or stereotypes regarding straight men (and women) who decide not to have children may also be useful.

### **Implications for practice**

Counselling psychologists by virtue of our training and professional codes and ethos are committed to advocating for and empowerment of recognised minority groups and marginalised populations (BPS, 2014). This research study has expanded the corpus of research regarding a uniquely invisible and (in some ways multiply) marginalised population. Choosing not to fulfil the parental imperative positions the participants as doubly – stigmatised (not only do they not have any children, they don't actually want them) and potentially even as further stigmatised by virtue of gendered stereotypes that position men as peripheral to parenting and reproductive issues.

Counselling psychology is however a relatively small domain so it is unfeasible for the discipline alone to assume the role of challenging (mis)perceptions of practitioners, clients, and the wider public, regarding straight men who chose not to parent. Therefore, the following implications are directed more broadly towards all practitioner psychologists,

counsellors, psychotherapists and other mental health professionals including psychiatrists, mental health nurses and social workers.

Practitioners should be alert to the possibility (fuelled by persistent social stigmatisation and/or affronts on their masculine identities) that some heterosexual men without children may internalise heteronormative ideology and end up self-stigmatising rather than celebrating their status and circumstances. Such presentations may be complicated by the gendered pressure on straight men to maintain a stance of 'strong-mindedness', independence and restricted emotionality. Practitioners who do encounter non-parenting men in therapy settings should engage with their subjective experience by being aware of the possibility of not only their potential stigmatisation but also of their (hidden) social exclusion including the social and relational costs articulated by some participants including loss of partners or potential partners and perceived or actual isolation from their peer group or family or community of origin.

It is also important that mental health practitioners are vigilant when working with straight men who decide not to parent regarding any countertransference, including outrage or pity, that their choice may evoke in us as individuals. This may be particularly pertinent if one is already a parent or one's own parenting aspirations or experiences have not played out as originally envisaged or one holds particular religious or cultural beliefs regarding procreation and parent/fatherhood. Practitioners who do encounter non-parenting men in therapy settings should engage with their subjective experience by being aware of the possibility of their (hidden) social exclusion including the social and relational costs and the stigmatisation as well as the fluidity of childfree identity some participants articulated. Likewise, mental health staff should recognise that while virtual spaces and communities for people who decide not to parent exist and can be beneficial, they are not for every non-parenting man and have downsides including the risk that men's voices are less present or less heard than female voices.

## Conclusions

The study findings also reiterate the importance of practitioners of the 'psy disciplines' not exacerbating any stigma by formulating straight men's decisions not to parent as indicative of any pathology, personality defects, or a desire to oppress women (Parker, 2005; Parker, Georgaca, Harper et al., 1995). Instead, practitioners need to recognise and advocate that a life without children can be, and often is, a rich and rewarding life for many men (and women) enhancing rather than diminishing intimate partnerships, opening up diverse opportunities for 'doing' family beyond conventional nuclear heteronormative family structures and freeing up time, energy and resources for other life interests and community-facing endeavours including, ironically, working with children and other social reproductive activities (Blackstone, 2012 & 2014).

Though I have discussed earlier the potential benefits of analysing the present findings through a psychodynamic lens, mental health practitioners should not be seduced into searching for 'developmental' explanations for non-parenthood. Though a very small proportion of participants referenced a difficult childhood as pertinent in their non-parenting decision, many more described their childhood as happy and contented. Furthermore, those men highlighting adversities in their own upbringing as salient in their decision were nearly all from lower socio-economic classes and/or minority ethnic backgrounds and/or currently single. This finding highlights key intersectionalities for men who choose not to have children which practitioners need to recognise and reminds us 'how gender is classed and raced' (Jankowski, 2017: 14). Most notable of these in the present study is that of inequality of income as comparatively low pay levels and other work pressures or housing costs were cited by several men as significant factors in their 'choosing' not to parent.

In the face of a resurgence of essentialist psycho-biological/evolutionary discourse both in psychology and mainstream media (Dar- Nimrod & Heine, 2011) counselling psychology as a discipline can offer a more pluralistic perspective which can unpick supposedly 'innate' 'biologically driven' behaviours such as (non) parenthood alongside traditional masculinity and expose the role social construction and pervasive ideologies play. In doing so there is a genuine opportunity to decrease the stigmatisation of non-parents. One option for disseminating the important findings of the present study beyond counselling psychology is

through awareness raising and stigma reduction amongst all mental health, reproductive health and teaching professionals. This should include those practitioners involved in any therapeutic, health-focused, educational or community work with boys and young men communicating, in the words of one participant, 'that being a parent is an option not a requirement'.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **6.1. Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet**

**(REMOVED DUE TO IDENTIFYING PERSONAL INFORMATION)**



## 6.2. Appendix 2: Consent Form



### Men's experiences of being childfree

#### Consent Form

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research on men's experience of living as childfree.

My name is Jenny Droughton and I am a psychology postgraduate student in the Department of Health and Social Sciences, University of the West of England, Bristol. I am collecting this data for my Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology thesis. My research is supervised by Dr. Victoria Clarke (Associate Professor). She can be contacted at the Department of Health and Social Sciences, University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QY [Email: [Victoria.Clarke@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:Victoria.Clarke@uwe.ac.uk)] if you have any queries about the research.

Before we begin I would like to emphasise that:

- your participation is entirely voluntary
- you are free to refuse to answer any question
- you are free to withdraw at any time [within the limits specified on the information sheet].

You are also the 'expert'. There are no right or wrong answers and I am interested in everything you have to say.

Please sign this form to show that you have read the contents of this form and of the participant information sheet and you consent to participate in the research:

\_\_\_\_\_ (Signed)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_ (Date)

Please return the signed copy of this form to me (via post or email as indicated)

*This research has been approved by the Health and Applied Sciences Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC)*

## 6.3. Appendix 3: Demographic Questionnaire



### DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

#### Men's experience of being childfree

##### Some questions about you

In order for me to learn about the range of people taking part in this research, I would be grateful if you could answer the following questions. All information provided is anonymous.

Please either write your answer in the space provided, or circle the answer, or answers, that best apply to you.

1	How old are you?			
2	I am:	Full-time employed	Part-time employed	Full-time student
		Part-time student	Other: _____	
2a	If you work, what is your occupation?			
5	How would you describe your racial/ethnic background? (e.g., White; Black; White Jewish; Asian Muslim)	_____		
6	How would you describe your social class? (e.g., working class; middle class; no class category)	_____		
7	Do you consider yourself to be disabled?	Yes	No	
8	How would you describe your relationship status?	Single Partnered Married Separated Divorced Other: _____		

**Thank you!**

*This research has been approved by the Health and Applied Sciences Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC)*

## 6.4. Appendix 4: Interview Guide (Original version)

This is a discussion about your experiences of being childfree. I have a number of questions to help guide things, but we'll only be following them loosely. We'll start with some broad questions about how you got to the decision and then move onto talking about your life as a childfree man. I'll also ask you to draw a family map/ family tree. Please feel free to interrupt at any time, if you need me to clarify what I'm asking, and let me know if you need a break, or want to stop things (you don't need to give me a reason for stopping the interview early).

### Introductory questions

- When did you first start to realise that having kids was something that was you weren't all that interested in?

**Prompts** (if necessary)

How did you come to make the decision that you were never going to have children (if that's how it happened)?

Motivations – work, partner relationships, not liking children, childhood experiences, never had a desire to have children, partner's role in decision-making.

Have you *ever* wanted to have children?

Have you taken (or considered taking) any permanent steps to become childfree, such as having a vasectomy?

- Is being childless/childfree an important part of who you are? Can you tell me why/why not? Do you use the term childless/childfree to describe yourself? Are you very open with others about the fact that you are childfree/identify as childfree?
- What are your current thoughts about fatherhood (more generally)? Have these changed over time, if so, how?
- What about children, how do you feel about them generally? Has this changed over time? If so, how?

### Relationships with others (prompts – if not addressed above)

- Please can you tell me about your partner relationship(s) and how these relate to you being childfree (if they do)?
- What sorts of experiences have you had with different partners across your life in relation to being childfree?
- Have you ever felt expectations/pressures from others about having/not having children (e.g., parents not being grandparents, friends who do/do not have children)? How do these expectations and pressures manifest?
- How do other people generally respond to finding out you're childfree? Can you give me an example?

- How do you introduce the idea that you do not want children to new people/partners?
- Do people ever assume that you have children (or grandchildren)? What is that like?
- Do lots of your friends have children? Have friendships changed when friends have children?

#### **Experiencing children (prompts – if not addressed above)**

- How do you feel spending time with other people's children? (do you have times you enjoy children's company? Times that you find children annoying?)
- How do you experience 'child friendly' spaces? Do you seek out childfree spaces – if yes, how has this worked out? If no, any particular reasons?
- How you experience other people's discussions and sharing of their children's lives (e.g., at work, on social networks)
- Do you do any community or voluntary activities with children (e.g. unpaid youth work or supervising kids' sports teams/scouts or brownies? [If answer 'yes']: does your being childless make a difference? [If answer 'no']: does being childless make you avoid such activities?)

#### **Stigma and marginalisation**

There are lots of negative assumptions made about childfree people/ men – one that they are selfish. How do you feel about this? Another negative assumption is that they are immature/not fully adult. How do you feel about this?

- Have you ever felt stigmatized for not having children?
- Does not having children make a difference at work?
- Does it make a difference in your social life? Who you spend time with?
- If not addressed above: How do others respond to your voluntary childlessness?
  - Intimate relationships (parents, family, close friends etc.)
  - Wider social circle
  - Strangers

#### **Sense of family (prompts – if not addressed above) and Family Map (interview conversation & participant draws family map using pencils/pen on A4 paper)**

- How do you think your life is different from that of men who are fathers? How would your life have been different if you had children?
- When you think about families and family life, what comes into your mind? Who comes into your mind? How does this relate to your experiences of not having children?
- Who is in your family? Do you think of you and your partner as a family?

- Would you draw me, or help me draw, a map of your immediate family /your immediate family tree to help me understand more about how you think about/define your family?
- Can you tell me who you would put in your family (map/tree)? How would you describe their relationship to you? Is there anyone else you want to put in?
- Are there people that you haven't included on your family map? Please tell me about your decisions here.
- How has your family map changed over the years?
- Are there any other important people for you? Are they like family, or not, in any way?
- Do others assume that you have some form of 'substitute' for children (e.g., pets / other people's children) and how you feel about this? Do YOU think you have substitute children?

**Life impacts of being childfree (prompts – if not addressed above)**

- The typical life course now is job – marriage/CP – kids... (or kids, marriage/CP!) how do you see your life course? Do you think about your expectations/plans for the future? What do you see as your major life landmarks?
- Whether (and in what ways) you think being childfree impacts on your:
  - friendships – currently, and in the past (if they talk about lots of friends having children, have you made new friendships? Spend time with different types of people? Do different things?)
  - work – currently, and in the past (how has being childfree impacted on your career progression? Do you think you've been able to have different career path because you are childfree? Do you think you are treated differently in the workplace from men who are fathers?
  - leisure time, currently, and in the past
  - home life, currently and in the past
- How do you organise your life / spend your time in a culture that expects people to focus their leisure and life on their children? Does being childfree impact on what you do? Who you spend time with?
- How does being childfree impact on your plans and expectations for the future
  - friendships
  - work
  - leisure time
  - home life
- Have there been changes over (time/the years) in the way you think and feel about your voluntary childlessness?
  - Getting older/growing up
  - Existing relationships/new relationships

- Social situations
- One of the concerns expressed about people who are childless/childfree centres on social care in old age (the assumption being that elderly people will be cared for by their children, and childless people won't have *anyone* to take care of them), particularly during periods of ill-health. Is this something you have thought about? Something that concerns you? Is this concern misplaced? What are your plans/expectations with regard to old age? Would you care for a friend who was childfree if they were ill/infirm? What would it be like to have a friend care for you? How do you feel about paying for care?
- Have you thought about your decision in relation to environmental/sustainability concerns? Chicken/egg

### **Seeking support**

- Have you ever sought professional help such as counselling in relation to your voluntary childlessness?
- Or any other sort of support regarding being childfree e.g. online forums / support groups?
- How helpful did you find treatments/ sources of support?
- As a trainee counselling psychologist, I'm interested to hear what you think counsellors and psychologists need to know about living as a childfree man (in order to work effectively with men who choose that lifepath)

### **Closing Questions**

- OK, so that's basically all of my questions, at this point I'm just wondering if you have any questions about the project, or thoughts about your experience of living as childfree that we haven't really covered?
- Anyone you know who might want to take part?

THANK YOU FOR TAKING PART IN THIS INTERVIEW.

DO YOU WISH TO RECEIVE AN EMAIL COPY OF THE REPORT ONCE IT'S PUBLISHED?

IF YES, IS IT OK TO KEEP YOUR EMAIL ADDRESS SECURELY SAVED ON FILE?

Yes or No.

## **6.5. Appendix 5: Interview Guide (Amended version)**

This is a discussion about your experiences of being childfree. I have several questions to help guide things, but we'll only be following them loosely. We'll start with how you got to the decision and then move onto talking about your life as a childfree man. I'll also ask you to draw a family map/ family tree so please have a blank sheet of paper and some pens/pencils to hand.

Please feel free to interrupt at any time, if you need me to clarify what I'm asking, and let me know if you need a break, or want to stop things (you don't need to give me a reason for stopping the interview early).

### **1) HOW DID YOU GET HERE/HOW DID YOU COME TO THE DECISION TO BE CHILDFREE?**

i.e. Journey to being childfree/not having children & was that decision made alone or in partnership with their current (or previous) female partner/girlfriend/wife

**Have they've had a vasectomy** (NB for apparent 'Early Articulators' ask this as soon as they've identified themselves as such but for apparent 'Acquiescers' etc, defer till later on)

### **2) WHAT ARE THE DOWNSIDES/NEGATIVES/DISADVANTAGES OF BEING CHILDFREE?**

EXPLORE:

#### **Any psychological or emotional downsides**

E.g. any perceived negative impact of being childfree for their identity as a man?

#### **Any relationship downsides**

Currently and/or in past partnered relationship(s) with women?

Currently and/or in the past from family members e.g. siblings with kids or own parents wanting to be grandparents? From friends with or without children?

#### **Any social downsides**

For e.g. in work settings re holiday allocation/sharing information on social media?

How others perceive them in relation to children given they are a childfree man i.e. any stigma? Any suspicion?

There are lots of negative assumptions society often makes about childfree people/ men –

Have you encountered any of these? What assumptions/stereotypes have you come across?

What about the assumption that childfree men are selfish or that they are somehow immature? Another is that they are missing out by not having kids? How do you feel about these assumptions?

Sometimes in society there's an association between being virile and spreading your seed – what's your view about that (in relation to you being a childfree man)? What response would you give to someone who said/implied that sort of thing (i.e. 'you're less of a man') about you as a childfree man?

**Any practical downsides** Current and/or in the future e.g. concerns about care in older age?

### **3) WHAT ARE THE UPSIDES/POSITIVES/ADVANTAGES OF BEING CHILDFREE?**

EXPLORE:

#### **Any psychological or emotional upsides**

**Any relationship upsides** Currently and/or in past partnered relationship(s) with women?

The impact on his partnership(s) e.g. more time & energy to invest in being a couple?

Currently and/or in the past regarding family members e.g. having time and emotional and/or other resources for nieces/nephews (if any) or own siblings (if any) or own parents (if still around)?

**Any social upsides** e.g. in work settings? In wider friendship network(s)?

How others perceive them in relation to children given they are a childfree man?

**Any practical upsides** Current and/or past or future ability to immerse self (with or without partner) in interests/travel etc? Any financial upsides?

**4) Please draw me the map of your family as you see it. This will help me understand the range of people in your family, the different roles you give them and how you think about/define your family**

**While you're drawing it, talk to me about your immediate family network and who you consider is in it. You can use people's names to explain who's who and so I understand what their relationship is to you e.g. sister, niece, friend, pet, as I'll anonymise the family map afterwards so no names will appear on the final version**

**Once you've drawn it, please take a photo of it and send it to me**

### **5) Closing Questions**

- **OK, so that's basically all my questions. At this point I'm wondering if you have any questions about the project, or any thoughts about your experience of living as childfree that we haven't really covered?**
- **Anyone you know who might want to take part?**
- **I'm interested in how you found the interview. Were there any questions you found particularly difficult or particularly helpful?**

**THANK YOU FOR TAKING PART IN THIS INTERVIEW.**

**CAN YOU GIVE ME A NAME THAT I CAN USE INSTEAD OF YOUR REAL FIRST NAME IN MY REPORT TO PROTECT YOUR ANONYMITY?**

**DO YOU WISH TO RECEIVE AN EMAIL COPY OF THE REPORT ONCE IT'S PUBLISHED?  
IF YES, IS IT OK TO KEEP YOUR EMAIL ADDRESS SECURELY SAVED ON FILE?**

**Yes or No.**



## **6.6. Appendix 6: Online Survey Questions**

**SURVEY MAIN QUESTIONS:** You can write as much or as little as you like for each of the following questions about being childfree but detailed answers are really useful for my research – the boxes will expand as you write. I use the term childfree, but please use whatever term you prefer.

1. HOW DID YOU COME TO THINK OF YOURSELF AS CHILDFREE (if you prefer another term or phrase to describe the fact that you don't have children, please indicate here)?
2. HAVE YOUR PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS PLAYED A ROLE IN THIS?
3. HAS THERE EVER BEEN A TIME WHEN YOU WANTED CHILDREN? Please explain your answer.
4. WHAT, IF ANYTHING, DO YOU EXPERIENCE AS THE BENEFITS/ADVANTAGES OF BEING CHILDFREE?
5. WHAT, IF ANYTHING, DO YOU EXPERIENCE AS THE COSTS/ DISADVANTAGES OF BEING CHILDFREE?
6. HAVE YOU EVER EXPERIENCED PRESSURE TO HAVE CHILDREN FROM OTHERS? Please explain your answer.
7. DO YOU THINK YOU ARE PERCEIVED NEGATIVELY BY OTHERS BECAUSE YOU ARE CHILDFREE? Please explain your answer.
8. HAVE YOU HAD OR WOULD YOU CONSIDER HAVING A VASECTOMY? Please explain your answer.
9. DO YOU THINK NOT HAVING CHILDREN WILL IMPACT ON YOUR OLD AGE IN ANY WAY (E.G. IF YOU NEED CARE)? Please explain your answer.
10. WHO DO YOU THINK OF AS YOUR FAMILY?
11. HAVE YOU EVER SPOKEN ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES OF BEING CHILDFREE TO A THERAPIST OR ENGAGED WITH SUPPORT GROUPS OR DISCUSSION FORUMS FOR CHILDFREE PEOPLE? If yes, please tell me about your experiences. If no, please explain why you haven't sought such support/contact.
12. IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU'D LIKE TO ADD ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCE OF BEING CHILDFREE?

If you would like to receive a brief summary of my research findings, please provide your email address below (NB the likely date for completion of the study is September 2019):

## **6.7. Appendix 7: Ethical Approval**

**(REMOVED DUE TO IDENTIFYING PERSONAL INFORMATION)**

## 6.8. Appendix 8: Journal Article

“Just trying to live my life as a normal bloke”: a Counselling Psychology perspective on gendered demands experienced by straight men who don’t have children

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**Jenny Droughton** is a trainee Counselling Psychologist in the final stage of completing a Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at the University of the West of England. She has several decades experience in the UK National Health Service (NHS) working with adult clients living with various mental health diagnoses predominantly psychotic or personality disorders. She has a special interest in how traditional and contemporary masculinities play out in psychotherapy delivery within statutory mental health care settings for service users, carers and the (predominantly female) workforce.

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**Declaration of Interests:**

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of this paper. This paper has not been published elsewhere and is not under consideration elsewhere.

**Informed Consent:**

All participants gave their informed consent and ethical approval was granted by the University of the West of England's Faculty Research Ethics Committee (UWE REC REF No: HAS.17.06.181)

**Word Count:** 5848 words

**Abstract (Research) - word count: 390**

*Background:* Increasing numbers of straight people in the west are choosing not to parent. The existing voluntary childlessness or childfree research evidence focuses almost exclusively on women in this marginalised population, with little consideration of the experiences of men.

*Aims:* The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the experiences of straight men who decide not to have children and how the men build and maintain their masculine identity.

*Methods:* A purposeful sample of men who self-identify as childfree were recruited via adverts posted on childfree forums and social media platforms by the researcher and shared by experts in reproductive, gender, or critical, psychology and related disciplines through their networks. Participants completed either a virtual qualitative interview (by telephone, Skype or Instant Messenger) or an anonymous online qualitative survey: both asked questions about their lives as men who choose not to parent. Nine men were interviewed and a further sixty men completed the online survey. The data were analysed using Thematic Analysis (TA) from a predominantly social constructionist perspective informed by critical theories of gender and masculinities.

*Findings:* Participants engaged in substantial identity work to present themselves as conforming to key expectations of traditional hetero-masculinity including independent-mindedness and rationality. This was captured in the overarching theme identified: 'Just trying to live my life as a normal bloke'. The data revealed some resistance to the 'childfree' label, an orientation to being perceived as selfish, irresponsible or deviant and experiences of stigmatisation as well as the interplay of various contextual and intersectional factors. Stories of resisting pronatalist and traditional masculine norms and re-working masculinity also permeated the men's accounts. Three themes nested beneath the over-riding discourse, and performance, of hetero-normativity and this paper considers the third theme: living as non-parents and responding to pronatalist stigma.

*Conclusion:* The stories portrayed by the men indicate their ongoing investment in identity work enabled them to maintain and negotiate their sense of masculinity despite stigmatisation and social exclusion in response to their non-normative life choice. Their accounts also reflected aspects of more contemporary masculinities including caring, compassionate and inclusive masculinities. Few participants reported any direct psychological disadvantages of not parenting though some indicated the wearisome nature of continually having to articulate their choice and socially navigate their non-normative life path. Limitations of the study, directions for further research and implications for counselling psychologists are presented.

**Keywords:** childfree voluntary childlessness gender masculinity/ies pronatalism heteronormativity

## **Background**

Voluntary childlessness - “an active and permanent decision not to parent” - is increasing in the UK, Europe and North America with more individuals and couples choosing *not* to become parents (Moller and Clarke, 2016:206; Basten, 2009). People who neither have nor desire to have children are termed “voluntarily childless”, “childless by choice” (Gold and Wilson, 2003), or “childfree by choice” (Healey, 2016), though the voluntary/involuntary dichotomy remains problematic as voluntary and involuntary factors may interact “when postponement forces the hand for example” (Basten, 2009: 4-5) in people’s decision not to have children. Additionally, feminist research rejects the term “childless” because this implies a deficit arguably reinforcing pronatalist notions having a child is ‘natural’ and fulfilment of normal femininity/adulthood (Kelly, 2009). Feminist researchers have tended to prefer terms such as “childfree” though that too can be criticised (e.g. for valorising non-motherhood, Moore, 2014). This paper uses “voluntarily childless”, “childfree” and ‘chosen non-parenthood’ interchangeably as those terms emphasise the intentional nature of these people’s decision not to have children, regardless of a physiological capacity to do so and reflects the use of both terms in the wider literature (Agrillo and Nelini, 2008). The term ‘non-parenthood’ is also used.

People choosing not to have children contravene dominant pronatalist norms for adult reproductive behaviour in western culture (Blackstone and Greenleaf, 2015). Evidence regarding the psychological impact of these norms on heterosexual women is accumulating but motives and experiences of other groups of childfree people - lesbian and bisexual women, same-sex couples and men remain under-researched (Clarke, Hayfield and Moller, in press; Moller and Clarke, 2016). Minimal evidence exists on psychological consequences of men's decisions to be childfree or any interface between pronatalism, masculinity and fatherhood (Agrillo and Nelini, 2008; Blackstone, 2014; Fisher and Hammarberg, 2012). Better understanding is needed of the experiences, pathways and lives of childfree straight men and how they build and if necessary adapt their masculine identity faced with discrimination and stigma rooted in dominant social ideologies regarding parenthood and fatherhood (Almeling and Waggoner, 2013 ;Blackstone, 2014).

## **Research aims**

The aims of the research were:

- To produce new knowledge and understanding of the ways childfree straight men build and maintain their identity
- To establish how childfree men develop, navigate and sustain their masculine identity in relation to personal, interpersonal, social, and societal influences and pressures.

## **Methods**

### *Design*

This is a qualitative study in which participants completed either a qualitative interview (via telephone or instant messaging) or a short online survey. As the research aimed to explore straight men's experiences of choosing not to parent and how they built and maintained their masculine identity in the face of their non-normative decision, a broadly social constructionist framework was adopted informed by critical theories of gender, sexuality and reproduction.

## *Participants*

Purposeful sampling was used and consisted of straight men who self-identified as childfree and whose decision not to parent was deemed by them to be permanent i.e. not just for the time being. Nine men were interviewed and sixty men fully completed the online survey (double that figure began the survey over half of whom left the survey uncompleted).

Participants' demographic information based on their own descriptions is presented in Table 1 below.

## *Procedure*

Information about the research study was shared with childfree and men's online forums, posted on social media platforms and circulated by email to academics and researchers with special interest or expertise in reproductive or gender psychology and related disciplines. Initially nine interview participants were recruited and were interviewed remotely (by telephone, Skype or Instant Messaging: IM) for up to 80 minutes. The interviews (excepting the IM interview) were audio recorded and transcribed orthogonally with identifying information removed (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Recruitment to the interviews was difficult and lengthy, not wholly unexpectedly given the potentially sensitive research topic and relative invisibility of this dispersed and marginalised group.

To address interview recruitment difficulties a twelve-question anonymous online survey (based on the original interview guide) was developed and circulated as previously described.

## *Data Analysis*

The nuances, variations and contradictions in the identity work the men engaged in the interviews and in crafting their survey responses are interrogated in this analysis. My main interest is in how the men explain their parenting choice and protect their masculine identity in ways that 'make sense' (Clarke and Smith, 2014) and can be heard as coherent and justifiable in relation to various pressures they face as a marginalised group. This analysis is therefore informed by research on the social construction of masculinity (Connell, 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) presented in the introduction and on the discursive negotiation of identity more broadly (Dickerson, 2000). This epistemological



perspective views people's construction of meaning and their sense of identity as fundamentally social (rather than psychological) practices and 'seeks to examine the broader sociocultural discourses that underpin individual accounts of identity' including 'the regulation of normative masculinity' (Gill, Henwood and McLean, 2005 ; Clarke and Smith, 2014: 5).

**Table 1: Demographic details**

Category	Subcategory	N = 69	Percentage
Age range	21 - 34	22	32%
	35 - 49	36	52%
	50 - 65	11	16%
Relationship status	Single	14	20%
	Married	42	61%
	Partnered / Has a girlfriend	13	19%
Ethnicity	White (including 'White British': N =7)	58	84%
	White Irish/ White Jewish/ White Other	4	16%
	White Latino/Hispanic	2	
	German	1	
	Persian	1	
	Philipino heritage	1	
	Inhabitant of Earth/Human Race	2	
Social Class	Working class/ Blue collar	7	10%
	Middle class (including lower- and upper-middle class: n = 4 and n = 5)	61	88%
	No class	1	2%
Employment	Employed	58	84%
	Self- employed	2	16%
	Unemployed	2	
	Full-time student	2	
	Not working (on disability benefits)	2	
	Retired	2	

	No occupation given	1	
Country of residence	UK	24	35%
	US	39	56%
	Canada	3	9%
	ROI	2	
	Europe	1	

## Results

Data analysis identified an overarching theme of ‘just trying to live my life as a normal bloke’ as capturing the core of the men’s accounts. The overarching story of the combined data set is therefore of ‘the pressures and concerns’ the men ‘attend[ed] to in discursively negotiating their’ (masculine) ‘identities’ (Clarke and Smith, 2014: 4). The effort invested in participants’ self-portrayals demonstrates that for straight men not having children is still perceived as a distinctly non-normative choice which transgresses a powerful gender norm within white western heteromascularity (Blackstone, forthcoming). Three themes nesting beneath the overarching theme were identified together with constituent sub-themes. The third theme will now be examined in detail.

### *Theme 3: Complexities of ‘chosen’ non-fatherhood and responding to pronatalist stigma*

This theme captures the myriad often paradoxical subjectivities expressed by participants regarding their day to day lived experience of being childfree straight men. While advantages of being childfree were often articulated by participants these were often small, still-to-be realised freedoms such more travel opportunities, less financial demands and lower stress levels. And though many denied there being any negatives to their decision not to have children there was a clear thread throughout the men’s stories of frequent encounters with implicit and sometimes explicit stigmatising reactions from other people to their chosen non-parenthood. The encounters participants described could be one-off comments from (usually random) others but more often occurred in the context of significant and/or ongoing relationships including their extended family or their workplace colleagues. Though most participants conveyed these experiences in a stoical, matter of fact manner their accounts gave a strong sense of the perpetual social demands they encounter

to justify their life choice which is encapsulated by the first sub theme: *the emotional labour of not fathering/responding to pronatalist stigma*. The emotional labour or effort here is therefore not due to their actual lack of children but to other people's reactions to their life choice.

The second sub theme: *'family doesn't disappear because I don't have kids'* focuses on the participants' stories regarding the continued importance of family to them and the diversity of family configurations they 'do' family within. The third sub theme: *Existential considerations: who am I without children?* captures the some participants' fleeting accounts of their sense-making efforts regarding the lifelong implications of their decision not to parent, how and if that relates to the meaning they ascribe to their own existence, mortality and legacy.

The men's accounts built a picture of the *emotional labour of not fathering/responding to pronatalist stigma* that is how hard it can sometimes be due to the mainly social censure and exclusion they encountered to live out their life choice not to parent. Their stories also spoke of how they navigated this censure and marginalisation including strategies and subject positions they employed to manage or mitigate stigma.

Non-parenthood remains a minority life-choice for straight men so unsurprisingly some participants identified various negative social disadvantages of not having children. These ranged from blatant rejection and personal condemnation (sometimes of their partner/wife too) from various sources including their own parents/relatives; other parents; co-workers; religious communities for not having children to more subtle exclusion and criticism as the following excerpts attest:

I was attending church [...] and some elders pulled me aside privately after the service and [...] said I must either adopt kids or I must divorce my wife [...] [and] said it would be sinful for us to remain married without ever having kids (P43, 45, US, married)

The overt stigmatisation P43 experienced at the hands of his presumably male church elders illustrates the immense pressure men (and women) who contravene the moral imperative for heterosexuals to parent can be subjected to (Blackstone, 2014). When that mandate is compounded by certain inherently conservative and rigid religious dictates around

procreation, gender roles, and how families should be constituted, the pressure on non-parents to conform and the risk of exclusion or alienation from their faith community increases further. P43 is nonetheless signalling his resistance to the dominant narrative of his church (and in doing so is reworking masculinity). Similarly, the following participant names the prejudicial 'selfish' and 'devil worshippers' accusations he and his wife are subjected to but conveys that he rejects those labels and resists this stigmatisation.

We [the man and his wife] are prejudiced for being childless, usually as "selfish" and sometimes far worse by Christians as "devil-worshippers". (P11, 46, US, married)

More subtle social exclusion is presented in P4's alongside the more commonly cited stereotypes:

There is a social stigma that sees people without kids as immature, selfish, less responsible, unwilling to truly Grow Up, etc. Also as close friends begin to have kids of their own, their primary experience of life becomes one I can't directly relate to (P4, 31, US, single).

The social disadvantages of not being a parent are encountered in settings beyond the men's immediate family and social circle with workplace marginalisation or discrimination described by many participants. Co-workers comments featured heavily in survey participants' responses regarding any disadvantages of non-parenthood or whether people pressured them to have children:

Some of my co-workers drill me. Say it's so sad we don't have kids. How my marriage won't last because there's no kids. Such a shame they say. (P32, 37, US, married)

Co-workers are often given preference for what shift they can work or leaving early or arriving late because 'children' is an acceptable excuse. There is inclusion-bias in the workplace against those who are childless. (P11, 46, US, married)

My manager in my last job asked (why I don't have children) and once I gave my answer they then said "you don't want a leadership role in this company do you?". No children equals unfit for leadership. I resigned and have been unemployed for 3 years since then (P16, 55, UK, partnered)

The references to stigmatisation of non-parenthood in the workplace are interesting as the survey did not specifically ask about workplace discrimination. So for the survey respondents who focused on this issue in their accounts, it may be that their stories honed in on the work place as a social environment that is more legitimate in terms of normative hetero-masculinity, as allusions to work colleagues reinforced the men's portrayal as economically productive 'bread winners'.

It is also possible that the men's sense of masculinity may be more, or most, vulnerable in certain work settings such as male-dominated industries which require a restricted performance of masculinity. A recent theoretical framework by Berdahl, Cooper, Glick et al. (2018: 422) has highlighted that in all work settings 'work remains the site of masculinity contests among men... and the workplace is a context in which men feel particular pressure to prove themselves as "real men" '. One survey respondent and one interviewee referenced indirect or direct verbal challenges work colleagues had made to their sense of masculinity and virility:

[Male colleagues say] 'you can't have kids you're not a proper man' or things like that I'm sure they do [...] they've said it to each other you know and have a snigger but that's life (Alistair, 60, UK, partnered)

There have been comments along the lines of my not being a real man because I can't father children. The people making these comments seem to assume that I want children but can't get anyone pregnant and if I claim otherwise (as in I don't want children) then I'm simply covering up my inabilities (P50, 51, UK, married)

Some men's stories also conveyed their resilience and humour in the face of such workplace assaults on their (masculine) identity. As one respondent eruditely put it:

Why is it ok to ask "why don't you have kids?" but not ok to ask "why DO you have kids?" (P20, 34, US, married)

Other ways in which the men described pre-empting, deflecting or challenging workplace stigmatisation or discrimination were illustrated by Jeff:

I purposely don't talk to my co-workers about it [being childfree] who all have kids [...] I already know the reaction I would get [...] probably get something along the lines of what people at the [Reddit's childfree forum] *Subred* call 'a *Bingo*' like 'oh you know you say that now but you will change your mind' or [...] 'what if you just give it a few more years?' [...] the people I work with they're awesome [...] I don't dislike a single co-worker I love my job but I'd probably get that typical *Bingo* response [...] so I don't bring it up and if discrimination at work due to not being a parent ever happened to me I would put my foot down (Jeff, 28, US, has long term-girlfriend)

'*Bingo*' is the term used in some childfree online forums (such as Reddit's *r/childfree*) or social networks for the cliched pronatalist comments and questions people frequently direct at childfree people, the idea being of completing an imaginary *Bingo* card of the most commonly heard phrases (Young, 2016 ; Reddit, 2018). Another survey participant (P38) also used this terminology which may represent another example of subtle linguistic resistance and communicating one's insider status used by some childfree men to manage stigma:

*Bingo* comments at work do get rather old fast. "Oh it's different when it's your own", "Raising a child was the best thing I ever did", "Who will look after you when you're old?" (P38, 29, UK, single)

Indirect resistance through a shared idiosyncratic use of language has been documented for other marginalised groups and by referencing '*Bingo* comments/responses' in their accounts both participants are asserting their in-group membership to the researcher (Mhurchú, 2016). Another way in which some participants conveyed their resistance to work colleagues (and relatives) relentless questioning or criticism of their childfreedom was through postulating that hostility parents directed towards their choice not to parent was driven by those parents' own dislike of parenthood (if not of their own children). For instance:

My family and co-workers harass me about it [being childfree] constantly. Most of them [...] seem to at least somewhat regret having children (or at least having had children when they did). I always assume that they're pressuring me [to have children] because misery loves company (P23, 33, US, single)

Collectively the men's stories of discrimination work to highlight the range of ongoing social difficulties that choosing not to parent can result in and the effort and determination they have to repeatedly muster to challenge such attempts to subordinate them. Participants' stories powerfully conveyed the continuous challenge of frequent interrogations or personal criticisms of not only their parenthood status/choice but also of themselves as adults. For instance:

I have experienced direct bigotry from people, more than I thought I would  
(P16, 55, UK, partnered)

It [being childfree] seems to alienate me from some people. That may not be a disadvantage, but it seems to be an impediment to finding common ground. People assume things about me, such as I'm more selfish than them or that I've missed out on something really important to being a person (P21, 61, US, married)

Parents being disrespectful, losing friends because they get children, people in their 40s view me as nothing but a child under ten years because I ain't got any (children) of my own. It's disheartening really. (P37, 24, Europe, married)

These specific accounts of others stigmatising and marginalising them due to their non-parenting bear many similarities to the reported experiences of childfree women begging the question of how significant or not gender is in this aspect of living as childfree (Rich, Taket, Graham, & Shelley, 2011; Rowlands & Lee, 2006; Park, 2002)

Setting aside the mostly constructionist reading of the data, it is notable that a few participants spoke of being 'worn down' to varying extents by frequent criticisms of their choice not to parent. A modest number of those voiced concerns, in response to unrelenting stigmatising of their life choice, that there may be something 'wrong' with them for not having children. Social and relational costs were also articulated by several participants : 'lack of dating opportunities' (P12) ; having 'lost lovers who wanted a relationship with a path to marriage and children' (P2) 'There's a vague inherent problem with the choice [of being childfree] as saying that you don't want children immediately excludes you from a lot of potential partners' (P17). One participant explained how these costs had recently manifest in his life yet he stoically framed that loss as the inevitable price of adhering to his intentions to remain childfree:

Choosing to be childfree ended my most recent relationship. I could have caved in and agreed to have children but I feel like it's important to stand by your beliefs and it wouldn't be fair on the child to have an upbringing where a parent resents having them (P38, 29, UK, single)

Some participants also alluded to the potential social isolation childfree couples as a unit can experience due to difficulty finding 'other people/couples of similar age without children'(P41).

Accounts of some relational and emotional disadvantages participants in the present study conveyed collectively build a picture of how hard it can be to live out this non-normative life choice despite twelve of the sixty survey participants categorically confirming there were no disadvantages to not having children (Q5) and sixteen out of sixty responding that they were not perceived negatively by others because they are childfree (Q7). Likewise, nearly all the survey respondents (but very few interviewees) affirmed that they had experienced pressure from others to have children (Q6). The varied sources of this pressure included their own parents or grandparents wanting some or more grandchildren, work colleagues/co-workers, customers, clients and even random strangers. These apparent contradictions within the men's individual accounts indicate the co-existing complexities and paradoxes in the competing subjectivities the men have to navigate as straight men deciding not to have children.

These complexities were further multiplied for some participants whose accounts identified various intersectionalities at play in relation to their how their chosen non-parenthood was perceived and constantly scrutinised in their wider family and community:

I'm Irish and culturally a rural catholic- my entire extended family views our marriage as a mere receptacle for impending children and the enquiries at each and every social event are not going to stop anytime soon. I've fielded direct questioning about my timetable for impregnating my partner/wife for over a decade now from sources covering close relatives, co-workers (by far the group most likely to cross what I'd consider the lines of impropriety in terms of direct or repeated comment and friends [from] [...] very close, old friends to just-been-introduced (P13, 37, White, ROI)



The potential psychological impact of this pervasive, persistent and socially sanctioned intrusion, criticism or condemnation evident in this sub theme as well as certain social or interpersonal losses may be factors that contribute to depression in some men who decide not to parent (rather than their lack of children per se). There is no suggestion here though that voluntarily childless men have any higher prevalence of depression or other mental health problems than their parenting peers.

*‘Family doesn’t disappear because I don’t have kids’*

Family featured in nearly all participants responses over and beyond the specific question (in the interviews and the online survey) regarding ‘Who do you think of as your family?’ The ways in which ‘family’ was diversely constructed and framed by participants often included pets and close friends. Nearly every man in a partnered or married relationship defined their wife/partner as their ‘family’ with many of those men identifying their family unit as solely comprised of them and their wife/partner. For those participants citing their family as constituted by their wife/partner and other identified individuals the participant frequently reiterated the prime position of their female partner in their hierarchy of ‘family’ often emphasising that she represented their ‘immediate’ family.

This focus on the primacy of their intimate partnership portrays an important way in which participants meet the heteronormative expectation of straight men having a sexual relationship with someone of the opposite gender. It also emphasises the relational investment in and perceived value the men assign to their partnership/marriage. Several participants defining their family in terms of their partner/marital relationship also emphasised the advantages not having children conferred in terms of freeing up (extra) time to invest in this relationship:

Pouring more into my marriage, having more time to care for myself too (P1, 26, US, married)

Ability to focus on ourselves in our relationship (P13, 37, ROI, married)

These increased opportunities to work on their partnership reflect previous findings regarding benefits cited by couples who decide not to parent (Shapiro, 2014). The visibility of diverse and ‘complex’ (as defined by Oswald et al.’s 2009 Queer Theory) family

configurations in the data conveyed participants' familiarity with re-working and potentially deflecting criticism of the ways in which they conceptualise and do 'family'. The following excerpts illustrate this additional labour some of the men's stories articulated regarding family and the value many afforded to friends' participation in their family and day to day life:

[My family is] my close group of amazing friends (P38, 29, UK, single)

My family they didn't disappear because I don't have kids. I've got many close friends and haven't time enough to keep up with all of them as things stand (heh many of them can't meet up anyway, they have kids, lol) (P13, 37, ROI, married)

[My family is] People with whom I have a solid connection with, not necessarily by blood (P17, 32, US, single)

If we're considering "family" as immediate daily and not blood related heritage, most of my family is my close friends who I've known for years. People who I see multiple times a week or have lengthy conversations with about life. People who I've helped make their lives better through emotional support. People who've always been there for me in tough times. There's always blood family, you don't always get along with them, but my real family is the ones who are there for me and I'm there for them. Blood has nothing to do with that. (P24, 31, US, married)

P17 and P24 clearly demonstrate their orientation to the norm of traditional 'blood' i.e. biologically related family configurations and the contrast between that and their way of doing family. This position them and the other men who identified friends as part (or the sole constituent) of their family at odds with the traditional heteronormative 'nuclear' family expectation not just because they have no children but also because they embrace a more pluralist definition of 'family' akin to that well-established in LGBT families (McKee, 2017). Their emphasis on the positive quality and reciprocal nature of the relationships offered by those in their chosen family further refashions the traditional notion of family based solely on biological connections and socio-legal obligations.

This portrayal of chosen 'logical' and/or kinship-based families as at least equivalent to traditionally dominant heteronormative family structures and ties evidences a reworking of

‘family’ in more contemporary, fluid and flexible ways. Even amongst the few participants who offered a very traditional and/or consanguineous definition of their ‘family’ many qualified their description by also identifying friends as additional key members of their family as the following excerpts illustrate:

Me and my wife are my nuclear family. My extended family includes my sister, grandmother, mother, aunts/uncles, cousins, nieces/nephews. Also we have some friends we consider “family” (P42, 40, US, married)

[My family is] My wife, my family of blood and my wife’s family. I extend the term to specific friends too (P46, 34, UK, married)

The diversity and hybridisation of family configurations evident in the men’s account (for instance of extended family members being considered family alongside wives/partners, friends and often pets) indicates participants oscillate between re-working, defying and conforming to heteronormative dictates regarding family.

In addition to participants often describing friends as their family many of the men also included their pets as family members. For example, P19 stated unequivocally ‘My wife and my dogs are my immediate family’ while P39 defined his family as ‘my wife, pets, extended family, friends’. As both these extracts show, where pets were identified as family members by non-single participants they were nearly always mentioned just after the man’s wife/partner indicating their relatively significant positioning in the man’s familial hierarchy. This may merely reflect the practical reality that most of the actors live apart from their friends, siblings and other extended family members while their pets co-habitate with the couple. Alternatively it may indicate some form of symbolic substitution of pets for the children they as heterosexuals are expected to have but don’t. Many participants identifying pets as part of their family conveyed in their accounts that they were cognisant of such commonplace assumptions of ‘substitution’ and worked to refute that interpretation while simultaneously expressing their positive affect for their pets. This at times contradictory identity work is evident in the following excerpts and demonstrates the competing pressures on the men regarding conforming to traditional heteromasculine norms or aligning to a more compassionate, inclusive masculinity:

[My family is] my wife, my parents and siblings. I'd also add my pet cats to that list. I don't consider them child substitutes but they are dependant on me and I feel a great deal of love for them. (P50, 51, UK, married)

I suppose we have a surrogate child in the fact that we have a dog [...] We both gave that dog lots of love as you would a child and it seems [...] there's obviously a bond between us and the dog I know it's not the same as a child obviously but I've never had a child so but we loved her as much as a child I think and we made sure that she was always well looked after (Sam, 49, UK, married)

Both P50 and Sam in common with most participants who mentioned their pets oscillated between conveying a loving, enduring relationship with their animals/non-human family members and emphasising that they 'know it's not the same as a child'. This ambivalence may work to distance them from those mainly female childfree and non-childfree individuals who consider their pets as substitute children or 'fur babies' (Irvine and Cilia, 2016). In contrast, Eric, in the next excerpt portrayed a sense of being comfortable referring to the couple's pets as 'our little babies' though he framed his closeness to his pets as both nurturing 'something' and displaying his responsible nature.

We've got three cats and a rabbit [...] they're part of the family [...] and we do probably do treat them like a kid [...] when we go away we miss them [...] as soon as we come home we don't because they're a pain ((laughs)) but they're our little babies as we say [...] I've always enjoyed having pets [...] round the house [...] there's that kind of something that I do like the responsibility of looking after something (Eric, 56, UK, married)

The importance several participants placed on (their relationship/s with) their pets reflects previous research findings that many people without children consider pets as family members (Laurent-Simpson, 2017). Though this identification of pets as family members is not exclusive to non-parents nor to straight people, in the present study the men's allusion to the significant role their pets play in their family can be considered another strategy for mollifying the stigma of not having children. Having pets which they are involved with and care for presents the men as capable of loving and caring for dependent beings (analogous to bringing up children) and perhaps positions them as more rounded individuals. The

commitment, time and effort they expend on their pets works up a sense of the men as connected and relationally engaged with other beings rather than isolated and lonely. Given the financial demands pet owning requires, their focus on their pets also confirms their ability to provide economically. This all acts to confirm the men's normalcy in terms of their family identity and therefore bolster their similarity to rather than difference from most other straight men and parents generally.

*Existential considerations: who am I without children?*

The men participating in the study including those who articulated some interplay of circumstantial factors in their decision (as detailed in Theme 1 sub-theme '*we kind of stumbled into this life*') all ostensibly portrayed themselves as content with their non-parenthood despite the myriad associated social disadvantages. Yet beyond this apparent contentment and prosaic acceptance of their decision some accounts occasionally intimated more in-depth introspection as to how or if their decision enhanced, undermined or otherwise altered their sense of purpose and meaning in relation to their own existence. Given the traditional masculine requirements of stoicism and knowing one's own mind combined with possible concerns of appearing vulnerable in the research situation, these moments of reflection tended to be conveyed by the men as transient lapses in their conventional masculine subjectivity, a brief dropping of their guard. As such the individual actors sharing these reflections often rapidly rescinded, minimised or contradicted them soon after. Nonetheless these brief insights shone a light on 'the ever changing flux of experiencing' and existential and intersubjective complexities of 'Being-In-The-World' as a straight childfree/voluntarily childless man and person including considerations of the meaning of their own life, mortality and death (Mearns & Cooper, 2017; Heidegger, 1962)

For some participants their non-parenthood made sense to them personally because it enabled the man to focus more singularly on his 'dreams/personal projects' (P8, 42, UK, married). This storying of non-parenthood enabling self-fulfilment through activities like creative projects is also portrayed by Marco in the following excerpt:

for me [...] my work [...] has kinda been my little baby my whole life so some people I think turn to children as a focus for their life [...] maybe they're doing a mundane job that doesn't inspire them whereas my kinda journey is about being a successful

designer artist [...] and you know when I come up with a design it's not obviously the same as giving birth to a child but that's my buzz that's my excitement that's the thing that drives me forward and my focus in life my main focus (Marco, 48, UK, partnered)

Marco conveys that his choosing not to have children represents not a loss but a lifelong opportunity to immerse himself in creating and giving life to something unique: his artistic designs. His counter-narrative to pronatalist imperatives and common criticisms directed towards non-parents works on several levels. For instance, his use of child- and reproductive-related metaphors such as 'my little baby' reinforces an alternative framing of his non-parenthood as something at least equivalent to siring or parenting an actual child. This account positions Marco as potentially more fulfilled in his life than some parents who fall into parenthood merely to escape unfulfilling lives and so works to counter criticisms of childfree people as leading empty lives. His account additionally presents him as someone who has grappled with the existential consequences of choosing not to parent. Other instances of participants' deeper reflections about the relative significance of not having children for them individually and personally include the following:

Occasionally in my quest for purpose I wonder if I missed something [by not having kids] (P52, 45, USA, married)

There's a certain "purposeless" life feeling that goes along with not having a child'. By that I mean I feel I am not contributing to the future of humanity in anyway. I believe this is more of an evolutionary behaviour all creatures have and is something we can overcome as humans as long as we understand it exists. There is much more to life and giving purpose to it than raising a child and by not raising our own child, we can improve the lives of others (P40, 29, US, married)

The ambivalence P52 admits to sets his account apart from the great majority of other participants whose storying worked to present predominantly positive portrayals of their non-parenting decision. This frankness indicates P52's courage in considering and articulating what may well be an existential dilemma for several other participants not least those whose autonomy in reaching the decision not to parent was evidently curtailed or limited by certain contextual factors (as captured in Theme 1: '*we kind of stumbled in to this life*') including deferring to their wife or partner's preference not to have children. In the

second excerpt P40 also courageously shares his deliberations regarding a potentially negative or unsettling existential framing of his not having children though he then reworks those concerns by drawing on biological essentialist and altruistic perspectives.

A minority of the men's stories conveyed a sense of wistfulness about their non-parenthood. This more pensive quality illustrated by the following extracts echoes similar accounts men shared in Lunneborg's (1999) compilation on the lives of childfree men:

I've got no one to like make laugh and no one to make me cry (Alistair, 60, UK, married)

I am deprived of the joy of the relationship that people have with their children (P2, 52, US, partnered)

There have been times when the idea of enjoying some of the rewards of raising a child was fantasized about. The idea that the daughter (for some reason never a son) would learn all that we had to teach her, accept the gifts we pass on, and do well as an adult. However, those moments are fantasy, like imagining what one would do if they won the lottery. It's not realistic (P11, 46, US, married)

Notably any glimpses of emotionality were quickly downplayed and often contradicted in the overall stories these men presented. For instance, P11's use of language (the third person phrase 'was fantasized about' and the use of the impersonal pronoun 'one') may serve to maintain some distance from the more expressive content. Framing his response in that way could, from a social constructionist perspective, be viewed as the man acting to reassert his typically masculine control over potentially emotional matters and in doing so re-confirm his conformity to gendered norms. In contrast a relational perspective might consider his framing a psychic defence strategy against repressed ambivalence and related emotions such as sadness, guilt or anger. Revealingly, this excerpt sits at odds with the rest of P11's responses which portrayed his decision not to have children as immutable. Such contradictions indicate the challenges of navigating contested identities for the men in the study regardless of the theoretical perspective enlisted to analyse their stories.

These brief moments of reverie may represent the only 'acceptable face' of emotional expression for the men involved as more overt emotionality could hinder their performance of hegemonic heteromascularity. Such portrayals are consistent with more contemporary

ways of 'doing' masculinity such as the 'new man' or other versions of inclusive masculinities, where 'real men' are strong enough to show their feelings (Anderson and Magrath, 2019). The fact however that these emotional insights were rare and often very abruptly ended by the men changing the subject indicates the pressure participants experienced to story their non-parenthood and subsequent life course as predominantly rational, matter of fact, rather than emotional matters.

A small number of participants spontaneously raised the issue of legacy in some form or other. Most of these men limited their discussion to practical matters such as explaining how they had already organised their wills either individually or as a couple to benefit for instance the next generation of their wider family such as nephews and nieces or bequeath money to causes or organisations they have a strong affinity with. Some accounts of legacy planning or consideration were linked to the notional responsibilities assigned to men in most Western nations of continuing blood lines and/or continuing the family name. Consideration of these intergenerational dilemmas was far more evident amongst the interview participants than the survey participants and among participants who were the only male offspring of their parents. Marco illustrates some of these dilemmas and how they can intersect with cultural and ethnic factors:

Some people have this urge to keep the family line going the blood line the name of the family and I think that's something that's just ego and that's what [...] society tells us we have to so I don't think I buy into a lot of that stuff [...] that society tells us we have to do whether guided by religious bodies (or) [...] the mass media.. but I guess I come from a Jewish background so there is a little pressure to you know keep the Jewish blood line going (Marco, 48, UK, partnered)

With regards aspects of legacy in general, a few of the men framed one disadvantage of being childfree is 'not leaving a legacy behind' (P16) while one participant asserted 'I don't care about "legacy" or whatever' (P60) though none defined what exactly the term meant to them. In response to my final mop-up interview question as to whether he had any thoughts of his experience of living as childfree that we hadn't already covered, John pensively articulated:

Um (...) not as such but I remember a couple of times when I've had conversations with people about the choice [not to parent] some people have sort of said to me



you know “Don’t you want to sort of be remembered as it were?” and “a bit of you to sort of live on as it were?” and I say “well it doesn’t really work like that because the child we create is not you it’s a new different individual [and] it may have elements of your personality and appearance and things like that because of course there’s going to be the issue of genetics isn’t there but (...) it’s not you it’s still a different person. (John, 47, UK, single)

## **Discussion**

The analysis of the full data set demonstrated the extent of the ongoing identity work that the men engaged in to defend and sustain a coherent masculine identity in the face of their choice not to parent. The overarching theme (‘Just trying to live my life as a normal bloke’) captured participants’ efforts to manage this pressure by (mostly) portraying themselves in the stories they tell about their non-parenthood as conforming to several key norms of traditional hetero-masculinity especially having/ valuing sexual relationships with women and having (degrees of) economic power and occupational status. Though many participants also articulated resistance to pronatalist expectations through narratives including asserting the primacy of individual choice, their apparent independent mindedness and by focusing on qualities of responsibility and rationality those narratives paradoxically served to strengthen the signal of their conformity to hegemonic masculinity norms.

The stories told by the men participating in the present study did not however paint an overall pessimistic picture: many identified various advantages of being non-parents and few reported seeking any mental health support. There were also many instances of the men resisting and reworking the stigma they experienced, the ways in which they ‘do’ family and their masculinity often in ways that involved altruism and compassion.

### *Limitations of the study and directions for future research*

In common with existing voluntary childlessness research the sample recruited for this study were predominantly white, middle-class and employed (Somers, 1993; Bulcroft and Teachman, 2004; Mollen, 2006). Though a range of recruitment strategies and avenues were used only limited success was achieved in accessing men from more diverse backgrounds. This difficulty may also been exacerbated by the use of the term ‘childfree’ in promotional material and the pervasive influence of strongly pronatalist cultures (such as

experienced within the African diaspora) on men's inclination to come forward (Dennis, 2019). Certainly, the use of anonymous online surveys appears a promising way forward to increase the demographic diversity of future studies.

Further research should examine how straight men's experiences of chosen non-parenthood are influenced by factors including age group, ethnicity, social class and income, religion and (non)disability. Explorations are also needed of how the stigmatising of non-fathers by choice in strongly pronatalist cultures/communities and the differential pressure to reproduce or parent (or to abstain from doing so) varies dependent on those demographic factors and shapes men's experiences of choosing not to have children and living out that choice (Clarke et al., 2018). Given so many of the men were partnered or married, and most framed themselves within wider family structures studies focusing more on the relational context of their non-parenting identities rather than solely on individuals, are crucial for furthering understanding of how choosing not to have children is negotiated within and changes intimate and family relationships (Hayfield et al., 2019).

### *Implications for Counselling Psychology*

The study findings reiterate the importance of practitioners of the 'psy disciplines' not exacerbating any stigma by formulating straight men's decisions not to parent as indicative of any psychiatric pathology, personality defects, nor a desire to oppress women (Parker, Georgaca, Harper et al., 1995; Parker, 2005). Practitioners including counselling psychologists do though need to recognise the substantial and ongoing emotional labour that the men in this study were compelled to engage in to negotiate and manage often stigmatising or marginalising social responses to their non-normative choice.

It is also important that mental health practitioners are vigilant when working with straight men who decide not to parent regarding any countertransference including outrage or pity that their choice may evoke in us as individuals. This may be particularly pertinent if for example one is already a parent or one's own parenting aspirations or experiences have not played out as originally envisaged. Practitioners who do encounter non-parenting men in therapy settings should also engage with their subjective experience by being aware of the possibility of their (hidden) social exclusion including the social and relational costs articulated by some participants : 'lack of dating opportunities' (P12) ; having 'lost lovers

who wanted a relationship with a path to marriage and children' (P2) and difficulty finding 'other people/ couples of similar age without children '(P41). Likewise psychologists should recognise that while virtual spaces and communities for people who don't parent exist and can be beneficial they are not for every non-parenting man and have downsides including the risk that men's voices are less present or (maybe) less heard than female voices.

Finally, practitioners need to recognise and advocate that a life without children can be and often is a rich and rewarding life for many men (and women) enhancing rather than diminishing intimate partnerships, opening up diverse opportunities for 'doing' family (Blackstone, 2014) beyond conventional nuclear heteronormative family structures and freeing up time, energy and resources for other life interests such as creative and community-facing endeavours including ironically working with children and other forms of social reproduction.

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