"Never Say Never?": Heterosexual, Bisexual, and Lesbian Women's Accounts of Being

Childfree

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Abstract

Feminist scholars have identified a "motherhood imperative" in Western cultures, where heterosexual women are understood to both want, and have, children. However, social shifts have resulted in a decrease in pronatalism as well as an increase in social recognition of the parenting desires of same-sex parents. Despite a resurgence of interest in childfree identities, research to date has predominantly focused on heterosexual women's explanations for being childfree and their experiences of marginalisation. Our aim in the current study was to explore how childfree heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, and queer women negotiate their childfree lives and identities in the context of their personal and social relationships within changing cultural contexts. Data from 23 interviews with women in the United Kingdom, who responded to a call for childfree participants, were thematically analysed. We constructed two themes: 1) *Never say never? Negotiating being childfree as ever precarious,* shows how women constructed being childfree as requiring constant revisiting and renegotiating to maintain; 2) *An ordinary life: Constructing being childfree as rational and reasonable,* in which we identify the rhetorical efforts of participants to establish their being childfree as an ordinary, reasonable, and rational position. We conclude that for these women, childfreedom was constantly in flux and that maintaining a positive childfree identity required considerable identity work in order to manage intimate personal relationships and wider friendships.

Keywords: gender roles, LGB issues, parenting, sexuality, stigma, thematic analysis

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Childfree

Childlessness has been of interest to feminist researchers since the late 1960s and

early 1970s (Moore, 2014), but in recent years research has gathered new momentum (for

reviews, see Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Shapiro, 2014). Since the so-called "second wave"

of feminism, feminists have discussed how traditional gender roles position motherhood as

inevitable (Morell, 2000; Peterson & Engwall, 2013). Feminist scholars in particular have

highlighted how religious, social, scientific, medical, and political institutions have

established and embedded motherhood as an expression of ideal femininity within Western

cultures (Gillespie, 1999; Shapiro, 2014; Shaw, 2011). Often, the overall milieu has been

described as somewhat monolithically reflecting a "motherhood imperative" (e.g., Gillespie,

2000) or "motherhood mandate" (Russo, 1976). Within this framing, motherhood is

constructed as "natural" and conflated with what constitutes "normal femininity" and being a

"normal woman" (Gillespie, 1999, 2000; Peterson & Engwall, 2013). Consequently, women

have traditionally been expected both to want and to have children (Basten, 2009; Moore,

2014; Veevers, 1980). Researchers have sometimes taken a pronatalist view that requires

heterosexual women to explain, and effectively justify, their reasons for not wanting children.

There is a risk that this has resulted in an oversimplified and individualistic focus on

accounting for why particular groups of women remain childfree (Gillespie, 2000; Park

2005), rather than on how they negotiate their childfree position within the context of their

relationships and the wider culture.

Terminology has been much debated in the feminist literature where terms such as

"childless" and "non-mother" have been criticized for implying that something is "absent,"

"missing," or "lacking" in women's lives without motherhood. "Childless" women and their

lives are therefore positioned as deficient (Doyle, Pooley, & Breen, 2012; Gillespie, 1999;

Kelly, 2009), which does not resonate with many childfree women's experiences (Kelly, 2009). Many childfree (to use the term preferred by many feminist researchers) women have reported spending time with friends' and families' children, sometimes playing a significant part in their lives (e.g., Basten, 2009; Gillespie, 2003). More recently, scholars have noted that childfree is a contested term which some individuals find liberating, but which others find problematic and choose to use selectively, if at all. Indeed, some women do not use any particular term to identify either their parental or non-parental status, instead simply stating that they do not want to have children (Moore, 2014). In this paper, we mirror previous authors when referring to their research (hence sometimes we use the term childlessness). However, wherever possible we use the term "childfree" to refer specifically to a voluntary status. This is based on research, online sources, and in response to conference papers we have presented, that childfree is the most commonly used and least disliked term among women (see, Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Jackson, 2018; Hayfield, Clarke, Ellis & Terry, 2016; Peterson, 2014).

Historically, dominant discourses such as the motherhood mandate and pronatalism, intersect with a wide number of often heteronormative assumptions, such as traditional gender roles in relationships and parenting. Further, the motherhood mandate sits alongside neoliberal discourses of socially dislocated individuality and the valorisation of personal choice, made at the risk of disregarding the wider cultural context (see Gill, 2008). In addition, the notion of biopolitics, which assumes reproduction (and other biological matters) can be understood as highly regulated, are also relevant (Foucault, 1997). At the intersection of these ideas, some women are positioned as being worthier of motherhood than others. Whilst "desirable" women—White, heterosexual, married, non-disabled, socially privileged––are encouraged to have children, "undesirable" women—women of colour, lesbian, single, younger, older, disabled, and less socially privileged women—have often been actively

discouraged from doing so (Heitlinger, 1991; Morison, Macleod, Lynch, Mijas, &

Shivakumar, 2016; Peterson & Engwall, 2013). Such discouragement is expressed through

rhetoric that certain groups of women have "too many" children, and that other groups of

women should not have children at all (e.g., Downing, LaVeist, & Bullock, 2007; Ledger,

Earle, Tilley, & Walmsley, 2016). To date, this rhetoric has shaped the research agenda,

where "desirable" groups of women are included by default, held to account, and required to

justify not having children (Gillespie, 2003; Morison et al., 2016; see Clarke, Hayfield,

Moller, & Braun, 2019 on how researchers have tended to overlook voluntarily childfree

lesbians). Existing research has little to offer on lesbian, bisexual, or queer women's

accounting for being childfree; lesbians are assumed to be childless by default, rather than

choice (Clarke, Hayfield, Ellis, & Terry, 2018).

Childfree Decisions and Others' Responses to Women Who are Childfree

The majority of existing research has focused on heterosexual childfree women's

explanations of not having children. Some women have reported that their decision to be

childfree was informed by circumstances, including busy social and professional lives,

partners not wanting children, or never having found a suitable partner (Dever & Saugeres,

2004; Gillespie, 1999; Graham, Hill, Shelly, & Taket, 2013; Kelly, 2009). Other women have

found it difficult to provide specific reasons, because they have simply never wanted children

(Graham et al., 2013; Peterson & Engwall, 2013). Indeed, some childfree participants have

reported that they have had no maternal desire, instinct, or urge (Carmichael & Whittaker,

2007; Peterson & Engwall, 2013). Childfree women in Sweden positioned their lack of desire

for children as a "natural" result of their physical and biological "silent bodies." Such

biological attributions are not uncommon for people who hold stigmatized identities, because

biological explanations position identity as internal, inherent, and therefore beyond reproach

(Peterson & Engwall, 2013, p. 381; also see Morison et al., 2016). Further, research has

largely focused on identifying women's reasons for being childfree within an individualistic context, rather than considering how women understand their partners' role, and partner relationships, in relation to their childfreedom (for exceptions, see Gillespie, 2003; Lee & Zvonkovic, 2014).

Another focus within the extant research, has been on other people's responses to women's decision to be childfree. Childfree women have discussed how others perceive their status as a deviation from traditional social norms (Doyle et al., 2012; Gillespie, 2000; Shaw, 2011). Australian researchers identified how cultural discourses that obligate women to marry and have children also left single, heterosexual, childfree women feeling their lives were centred on a "problem narrative" (Addie & Brownlow, 2014, p. 432). Indeed, childfree women have reported that they have faced disbelief at their decision, experienced pressure to have children, and received unwelcome advice from friends, family, and others on how to alleviate the "problem" (Addie & Brownlow, 2014; Doyle et al., 2012; Gillespie, 2000, 2003). Participants have also highlighted gender inequalities and emphasized how, within the context of different-sex relationships, parental responsibilities fall mainly on women (Peterson, 2014; Shaw, 2011). Childfree women's resistance to pronatalism and associated traditional gender roles has meant that some women have reportedly been perceived by others as cold, materialistic, selfish, or immature (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007; Dever & Saugeres, 2004; Gillespie, 2000; Shaw, 2011). Further, childfree women have received disapproval for not fitting in, and been considered "freaks" or "oddballs" (Doyle et al., 2012; Gillespie, 2003; Shaw, 2011). This has understandably left some childfree women feeling misunderstood and socially excluded (Doyle et al., 2012). Perhaps due to the centrality of the motherhood mandate (Russo, 1976), which has been an interpretative lens for researchers, much of the research emphasis has been on reasons, stigma, marginalisation, and difficulty, rather than on the complexities of managing fluid,

flexible, multiple identities within the context of dominant discourses within the wider culture.

Childfreedom Within Changing Cultural Contexts

There are indications of changes within the cultural landscape, with some media and academic writing capturing nuanced understandings of childfreedom. Whilst an analysis of U.K. newspaper articles noted that childfree women were sometimes portrayed as problematically resisting and defying social norms (e.g., in fitting with the motherhood mandate and problem narratives [Addie & Brownlow, 2014, p. 432]), there were also more positive readings of the data where childfree women were defended (Giles, Shaw, & Morgan, 2009). Of note, a prominent pattern in U.K. and U.S. newspaper reports and online sources shows how women are defending their right to be childfree, without having to justify themselves (e.g., Berube, 2014; Freeman, 2015; Moss, 2015). These accounts arguably represent a form of justification in themselves; however, they also portray intentionally childfree women making sense, and crafting their own versions, of their intentionally childfree identities, in ways which resist the motherhood mandate. In a study that explored the rhetorical tools used by childfree women, Morison and colleagues identified how a rhetoric of choice was more dominant as an interpretative lens than the motherhood mandate. This choice rhetoric served as a master framework, which was performed differently in different contexts (e.g., actively deployed or actively resisted; Morison et al., 2016). And over the last decade or so, some sociologists have signalled the re-emergence of a "childfree movement" (Park, 2002, p. 39). In online spaces, some women have explicitly embraced childfree as a social identity. Doing so enabled these women to name and claim their decision to be childfree, specifically in resistance to pronatalist discourses of reproduction, perhaps resulting in part from feminists' rejection of taken-for-granted motherhood (Moore, 2014; Morison et al., 2016). Framing childfreedom in terms of a simplistic relation to the

motherhood mandate or pronatalism no longer seems to capture the complexities of the ways in which women are answerable to multiple simultaneous discourses.

Lesbian, bisexual, and queer women may also be open to a range of particularly complex and competing discourses around parenthood, yet only a handful of studies have included them, typically with only one or two participants (see Clarke et al., 2018). Consequently, there is minimal empirical knowledge of childfree lesbian, bisexual, or queer women's experiences of identifying as childfree. Historically, there was some necessity for researchers to focus on lesbian and gay parenting rather than non-parenting. For example, during the 1970s, women in same-sex relationships often lost custody of their children from previous different-sex relationships (Clarke, Ellis, Peel, & Riggs, 2010). Furthermore, since the 1980s, there have been dramatic increases in the number of lesbian and gay people fostering, adopting, and conceiving children, a social phenomenon that has been termed the "gay baby" or "gayby" boom (Dunne, 2000; Robinson & Brewster, 2014). The focus has therefore largely been on exploring the experiences of same-sex parents and the wellbeing of children raised by them (see Robinson & Brewster, 2014), rather than on childfreedom.

In the few studies which have included childfree lesbians, some participants reported that their lack of children was attributable to their sexuality, or was assumed by their families to relate to their sexuality; hence it would seem that their childlessness did not need to be explained (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007; Gillespie, 1999, 2003). However, this too may now be changing (Dunne, 2000; Peterson & Engwall, 2013). In one U.S. study, childfree lesbians were less likely than heterosexual women to want children, but many lesbians did want to be parents (Riskind & Patterson, 2010); and, in another, young lesbians expected that they would have children (D'Augelli, Rendina, Sinclair, & Grossman, 2007). The "gayby boom" may mean that lesbian women are now likely to experience the expectations of the motherhood mandate, albeit the mandate may be shifting. However, the experiences of

currently childfree lesbian, bisexual, and queer women, and how they negotiate this decision within their partner relationships and the wider cultural context, are currently underexplored. Our research question was: How do heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, and queer women in the U.K. negotiate their childfree lives and identities in the context of their personal and social relationships and the wider contemporary culture?

Methods

Design and Participants

In the current paper, we report on a critical thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 23 women who did not want children. Ethical approval was granted, and we invited childfree women over the age of 35 to participate. Given the dominance of pronatalism, by their mid-30s women are likely to be able to reflect on their identities and reproductive lives. This is particularly the case given that the average age of first time mothers in the U.K. is 28 years, and that women are encouraged to have children before they reach the age of 35 years, at which point they become defined as "older mothers" by medical practitioners (Budds, Locke, & Burr, 2016). Due to the contentious nature of childfree terminology, recruitment materials invited participation from women who "identified as choosing to be childfree/childless (whichever term you prefer)." We posted calls for participants on childfree online forums; online and local lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) groups; the comments section of a newspaper article on childfree women; and social media (e.g., Facebook). We used snowball and quota sampling (Robinson, 2014), with the aim of meaningfully including women of diverse sexualities by recruiting approximately ten heterosexual and ten lesbian, bisexual, or queer women.

On initial contact, participants were provided with an information sheet which included brief researcher biographies and disclosure that three of us self-define as childfree

by choice (NH, GT, and SE) and one of us is childfree through circumstance (VC). In sharing

this information, participants were informed that we were, at least to some extent, "insiders"

(Hayfield & Huxley, 2015). However, we were also different from our participants in various

ways. Elsewhere two of the authors (GT and NH) have reflected on how our identity

positions shaped data collection and analysis (Braun & Clarke, in preparation). A total of 23

participants (11 face-to-face, 6 video-feed Skype, and 6 over-the-phone) were interviewed.

On the demographic questionnaire, we gave participants a list of options to describe their

sexuality and included space for participants to add additional terms. Twelve participants

self-reported as heterosexual, four lesbian, four bisexual, one queer/non-heterosexual, one

asexual/biromantic, and one participant provided no information on their sexuality. Rosa

Marvin, the participant who wrote "queer/non-heterosexual", did not elaborate on these terms

during the interview. All the women were living in the U.K. at the time of their participation

and fifteen of them described their race or ethnicity as White British. Table 1 shows

aggregated demographic data.

<<Insert Table 1 about here>>

Procedures

We developed a semi-structured interview schedule based on our literature review,

our interest in the topic, and the aims of the research. The schedule began with broad

questions about participants' childfree backgrounds and moved to more specific topics. The

questions included: "How do you introduce the idea that you do not want children to

partners/other people?" "How do people respond to you being childfree?" "In what ways

does being childfree impact on your relationships/friendships/work life/life/plans for the

future?" Further details about the interview schedule can be requested by contacting the first

author.

Participants were offered the choice of a face-to-face ($n = 11$), Skype ($n = 6$), or

telephone interview ($n = 6$), which provided greater (telephone) or lesser (video-feed Skype)

felt anonymity. Researchers have argued that telephone and Skype interviews can give access

to the rich data of face-to-face interviews, alongside the convenience, decreased costs, and

geographic reach of virtual interviews (Hanna, 2012; Novick, 2008). Interviews took place in

participants' homes or university meeting rooms and lasted for approximately one hour;

telephone and Skype interviews tended to be slightly longer than face-to-face interviews by

approximately ten minutes. Participants were given opportunities to ask the interviewer

questions and completed written demographic and consent forms before Skype and telephone

interviews or during face-to-face interviews.

Data Analysis

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed orthographically by the second

author. We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, & Braun,

2017) to identify themes, with the aim of capturing patterns and complexities and

contradictions in participants' accounts. We undertook our analysis within a critical realist

ontology (Sims-Schouten, Riley, & Willig, 2007). Critical realism treats knowledge and

experience as mediated and constructed through language, while acknowledging material and

social structures that generate phenomena. This analytic lens enabled us to theorise realities

as existing beyond discourse, while simultaneously acknowledging the personal as

thoroughly embedded in the social context. Our analysis is also partly informed by discursive

analysis in our considerations of how participants' talk served particular functions and

represented them engaging in ongoing negotiation of their identities (see Wiggins, 2017). For

example, we examined the "identity work" that the 23 women engaged in, to implicitly and

explicitly "talk back" to notions that childfree women's lives are lacking. Our analysis sits

somewhere between thematic analysis and thematic discourse analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

All authors read and re-read transcripts and each generated separate analytical notes. After meeting to discuss our initial impressions, all authors engaged in inductive and deductive coding in a recursive manner; after our initial coding, we returned to our codes and revised them as the coding and analytic process proceeded. We clustered codes together to identify candidate themes, determine whether patterns were evident across most or all of the dataset, and check how well these candidate themes provided an overall account of the data (see Terry et al., 2017). We approached the data as a whole, rather than separating out responses according to participants' sexuality, because we did not seek to compare heterosexual participants' data with that of lesbian, bisexual, queer, and asexual (LBQA) participants. However, during our analytic processes we noted that some themes occurred across all the data, while other patterns were only evident in (and captured the nuance of) lesbian and queer women's accounts of their childfree identities. In this paper, we report the themes we identified as apparent across all the participants' data. Elsewhere, we reported the findings which stood out as being unique to only the four lesbian (pseudonyms Debbie, Jane, Joanne, Louise) and one queer participant (pseudonym Rosa Marvin), three of whom were single or separated, and two of whom were in a cohabiting relationship (Clarke et al., 2018). Theme construction was iterative and consultative, with all authors coding separately but meeting regularly throughout this process to consider our interpretations of the data and discuss the findings. All authors then discussed both of the two themes in detail and ensured that each theme cohered around a central organising concept, which is the key idea that underpins the thematic explanation of the data (Terry et al., 2017). Themes and theme names were reviewed and refined following conference presentations of preliminary analysis, during further discussion, and while writing this paper. Pseudonyms chosen by participants replace

names, and data extracts are tagged with participants' code, indicating age, and sexuality (the latter to ensure the visibility of the LBQA participants who participated). To aid readability and comprehension, verbal nods (guggles; Braun & Clarke, 2013) have been removed from the data. In terms of transcription notation, […] indicates omitted data, and underlined text represents participants' emphasis.

Results and Discussion

We constructed two overarching themes, which were evident across the accounts of heterosexual and LBQA participants. The first theme, *Never say never? Negotiating being childfree as ever precarious,* shows how participants constructed being childfree as requiring constant revisiting and renegotiation. The second theme, *An ordinary life: Constructing being childfree as rational and reasonable,* identified the rhetorical efforts of participants to establish their being childfree as an ordinary, reasonable, and rational position.

Never Say Never? Negotiating Being Childfree as Ever Precarious

It was clear that participants had not made a straightforward or single decision to not have children. Instead, being childfree was a precarious and constantly (re)negotiated position. Many participants spoke about how their current childfree position was not necessarily fixed or permanent, despite participants having responded to a call for women who had made "a decision to be childfree." Some even deployed the power of biology to help justify the impermanence of their decision:

> Millers: I feel whilst, I'm (pause), I'm fairly certain I don't want children, I probably wouldn't go to the stage of being sterilized because, uh, I would never say never, and I've had several friends who, it's been like a switch has flipped and they have suddenly had this boom of their biological clock, so whilst I'm fairly certain that it's

not the choice for me, I would never want to make a permanent decision until my time

of getting pregnant as a possibility has ended naturally. (P17, 35, heterosexual)

This response differs from that in previous research, in which it was reported that childfree

women positioned their decision as a permanent identity through essentialising their

childfreedom—locating their lack of interest in children either in biologically determined

"silent bodies" (Peterson & Engwell, 2013), as an individual choice (Taylor, 2003), or a

specific identity (Moore, 2014). Similarly, some of the lesbian women in the current study,

accounted for their childfreedom as at least partially based on an innate lack of maternal urge

(Clarke et al., 2018). The complexities of biological repertoires have also been identified in

research with lesbian parents, in which it was reported that they reflected on their parental

roles as non/birth mothers (Malmquist, 2015). Perhaps, reflecting the challenges of

accounting for childfreedom, most participants in the current research primarily spoke of

their childfree status as liminal, even when biology was invoked in the interview. Sarah's

friends drew on the notion of a biological clock when they suggested to her that she might

change her mind:

> Sarah: All my friends at hockey, all my friends at work, social friends outside of the
>
> workplace, they'd be all like "oh yeah you'll want them when you're older" and so
>
> far, that urge hasn't happened. It's now swapped, it's "you've not got long left, are
>
> you sure you don't want to change your mind" (laughs), which is quite interesting, as
>
> you age it changes how the pressure comes on "oh well you will want them at some
>
> point, it's not it's not kicked in yet, biological clock hasn't kicked in" […] there's this
>
> assumption that it that it will, and so far it hasn't. (P19, 39, bisexual)

Sarah does not assert her desire to be childfree within a "silent body" and, while she does

minimally resist biological narratives, the possibility of a biological urge arising is not

assertively or entirely dismissed. Miller's and Sarah's talk may also represent them situating

the decision as not (yet) final, as an ongoing strategy in anticipation of having to defend

against others' disbelief that a woman could make a permanent decision to be childfree

(Doyle et al., 2012; Gillespie, 2000; Kelly, 2009). These data reflect a reluctance to entirely

shut down the possibility of desiring children at some point, and capture the nuance,

complexity, and (potential) precariousness of accounting for and negotiating childfree

decisions.

Regardless of how women accounted for their childfreedom, their accounts were

almost always marked by women doing significant emotional labour, ensuring that not

having children was a valid option within couples, that they were not imposing their

ambivalence about having children on partners, and certainly never treating it as a default.

This was clearly apparent for lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual participants, which indicates

that the motherhood mandate remains relevant for women of various sexualities. This was

particularly evident in how they seemed to need to engage in ongoing negotiation of their

childfreedom, particularly within the context of their partner relationships. For Anna, a

bisexual woman in a long-term relationship, the fragility and precarity of her position became

strongly apparent when she discussed it with her male partner:

> I kinda said to him, (pause) "it [not having children] wouldn't have to be a deal
>
> breaker and if you really wanted children, we could discuss it". I was (laughs) very
>
> much hoping he wouldn't say yes, (laughs) but I felt it had to be out on the table just
>
> to say "look don't just say 'yes that's fine', because this relationship is a good
>
> relationship, and if it's not fine we need to talk about that". And we basically came to
>
> the agreement that we both […] didn't want children. (P22, 38, bisexual)

Anna's report of revisiting the decision with her partner suggests that her individual position of stability and certainty (she is "very much hoping" he doesn't want children) wavered in the context of risk to the dyadic relationship ("it wouldn't have to be a deal breaker"). Although the account ended with reaffirmation of her childfree status within their (re)negotiated childfree relationship, the decision itself was presented as potentially under threat. In Anna's narrative, this discussion was instigated after a friend's relationship ended because her partner did not want children; hence, as in previous research, revisiting the decision to remain childfree was triggered by particular incidents within wider contexts (Lee & Zvonkovic, 2014). This is in contrast with men's accounts (e.g., Terry & Braun, 2012), which have tended to be a lot more individualistic. What also underpins this account is that it is Anna's lack of interest in having children that holds the potential to cause trouble in her relationship. The threat posed by lack of interest in becoming a parent seemed similarly complicated within many types of relationships. Sarah identified as polyamorous and spoke of having to negotiate being childfree with multiple partners:

> My primary partner definitely does not want children and he's very adamant on that
> […] and my other partner […] he's not interested in them at the moment, but that's
> still a very a very new relationship […] if my partners wanted children that would
> make things more awkward, because then I'd have to decide if the pressure got too
> much, whether I stay with my partner or I change partner. (P19, 39, bisexual)

What was clear across these women's accounts was the way in which being childfree becomes positioned as a careful and ongoing negotiation between partners, rather than an individual decision. Mary constructed her decision as jointly made with her partner and identified how spending time with children prompted ongoing discussion:

Some days you might think "am I certain about this?" and other days you absolutely

are. We'd always said that we had to, you know, "if you ever change your mind you

have to say," we have to be really open and honest about it, and sometimes we even

use percentages, so "are you still sure" and he's like "yeah I'm 80% sure today"

(laughs). We might have a really nice interaction with a child and you're like "ooh

I'm 75% today" or "60% today" so, yeah, we do try and be really open and honest.

(P3, 36, heterosexual)

In Mary's account, a position of "openness" is valorised in terms of the individuals within

this couple's relationship, but also in relation to specific positive interactions with children.

The impact of these experiences highlighted for participants the precariousness of being

childfree. Although Mary uses the "measurable" benchmark of statistics, she deploys them to

explain the subjective experience of being "tempted." The extract shows how her

relationship and its childfree status are constructed as simultaneously reasonable and

emotional. Being childfree is based on ongoing and thoughtful dialogue between partners,

according to particular contexts, and positioned as not arising from a dislike for children or

due to emotional coldness (also see Clarke et al., 2018). Both heterosexual and LBQA

women seemed to implicitly resist stereotypes associated with childfree individuals,

particularly of being selfish, hating children, or as immature (Letherby, 2002; Morison et al.,

2016; Terry & Braun, 2012).

Two of the lesbian/queer women also explicitly discussed their willingness to

(re)negotiate the decision in order to selflessly support their partners' desire for children,

despite their own misgivings:

Louise: At one point, I was in a relationship with another woman who really wanted a

child, and so I was trying to help her get pregnant and I felt very very ambivalent

through that process because I knew she wanted me to co-parent and I wasn't that

comfortable with it […] we split up before she got pregnant in the end. (P11, 59,

lesbian)

Rosa Marvin: [I was] with a partner for 12 years until last year, and she, towards the

end of our relationship was really quite keen about having kids, having a baby herself,

so I really did kind of try it on for size a lot, you know, it was really, really kind of

like, you know, testing whether that was something that I wanted and I couldn't, I

couldn't really get to that place […] and that wasn't the only reason why we

separated, but that was certainly kind of part of it. (P23, 43, queer/non-heterosexual)

In both these narratives, the women positioned themselves as sacrificing their own interests

for their partner's sake, hence their childfree status had become potentially precarious within

these previous relationships. What became central in these narratives, was the recognition of

how meaningful wanting children was for their partners, alongside the reasonableness and

psychological maturity of their own position. Their response to their childfree status being

called into question was not to insist that they did not want children, but instead to

contemplate the possibility, before the breakdown of the relationship ultimately removed the

requirement to continue renegotiating. Demonstrable in these accounts is the rejection of the

idea that lesbian (or bisexual and queer) women are childfree by default (Park, 2002).

Instead, the women presented childfree decisions as actively negotiated alongside partners

who wanted children. Louise and Rosa Marvin both indicated their lack of interest in children

was not the only reason for breaking up with their partners. Other women were very clear that

not wanting children played a key part in previous relationships and that this was causative in

break-ups:

Jen: I was with him for a few years, and he was kind of "let's try let's see what happens" and in the end, it just put too much pressure on the relationship […] I was adamant it was something I'd been very clear about from the start, you know, I didn't want children. (P15, 47, heterosexual)

Louise, Rosa Marvin, and Jen's talk indicated that they occupied a precarious space, despite their childfree position ultimately remaining intact. Their accounts demonstrated a potential willingness to concede, and the emotional labour participants engaged in to protect their decision, whilst attempting to look after their partner's conflicting interest in having children. What seemed evident as a consequence, was the potential "weakness" of being childfree as a social position, in that there was the potential for the decision to waver—albeit temporarily— within the context of these women's relationships. This was especially evident when some women's accounts were already marked by ambivalence, which was also evident in how they spoke about their identities as childfree women.

Researchers have identified how some childfree women strongly identify with tightly defined childfree identities within online spaces (Moore, 2014; Morison et al., 2016). Participants in our study, rarely took up these sorts of positions in their sense-making, indicating again the possibility that their childfreedom was not understood as immutable. Debbie argued that, "it's not an identity for me, it's just something I never, ever wanted" (P10, 45, lesbian). Whereas Marilyn highlighted that what is based on a "lack" is not an identity:

I don't even actually call myself childfree particularly […] I've never really thought of being childless as kind of my identity, like I'm not, I don't go around thinking I'm carless, or I'm horseless, or I'm gardenless, which is lots of things that middle-class people have, right? So why childless? (P12, 41, heterosexual)

Marilyn and Debbie actively rejected the notion that their being childfree was an identity.

The notion that childfreedom was not a salient "master identity" or central to the personhood

of the women we interviewed, in contrast to the way that motherhood can become for many

women, reinforced earlier research, some of which has described childfreedom as a deficit

identity (Addie & Brownlow, 2014; Moore, 2014; Terry & Braun, 2012). However, these

participants seemed to be less invested in bolstering this lack, or providing counter-

positioning, than childfree participants in previous research (see for instance, Morison et al.,

2016, Terry & Braun, 2012). In some of these accounts the women's talk also indicated a

resistance to engaging in identity work around what they are not. Instead, women located

childfreedom within a fluctuating, continuous set of decisions, which might well change, and

did not rigidly define their sense of selves per se. Their accounts seemed to go beyond a

straightforward, unidirectional relationship to either the motherhood mandate or biological

determinism. Instead, they were indicative of relative, fragile positions within their

relationships and an assemblage of discourses. In the next section, we discuss the ways

participants worked to build on this framing, to normalise the decision to not have children,

and to locate that choice within a wider notion of liberal tolerance of all choices.

An Ordinary Life: Constructing Being Childfree as Rational and Reasonable

The second theme we identified captured accounts of the heterosexual and LBQA

participants, as they worked to present non-parenthood as ordinary rather than extraordinary,

often by asserting that it was a rational and reasonable decision. These participants often

framed the problem as other people making their "ordinary" decision seem extraordinary,

constructing parenthood as more extraordinary than non-parenthood. The notions of

"ordinary," "free," "mundane," and "extraordinary" came from participants themselves.

However, being childfree was presented as one valid choice among many—which included

parenthood—and few women presented being childfree as a "radical rejection of motherhood" (Kelly, 2009, p. 169).

Participants' responses to questions about the benefits of being childfree were often vague, but the main benefit, repeatedly identified, was "freedom." Freedom was presented predominantly, as freedom from the perceived responsibilities and constraints of parenting. For Annika, "having children would sort of tie me down a lot. I have a lot more freedom actually" (P13, 38, asexual). Freedom seemed to be constructed as an inherent good, reflecting Western ideals of personhood and choice. Participants described doing what they wanted, when they wanted. Sophie could "eat when I want to, get up when I want to" (P1, 56, heterosexual). Other participants frequently articulated freedom as a desirable benefit of remaining childfree:

> Jayne: I want my freedom. I want my time to do what I want to do, I want to sleep
>
> through the night every night […] I want to be able to drop everything and go off and
>
> climb a mountain somewhere, whenever I want. (P16, 35, heterosexual)

This use of an unfettered freedom within most accounts was almost always tied to the pleasure and importance of long and uninterrupted sleep: "I don't travel much or do anything particularly active or dangerous, but this is going to sound really trivial, but I <u>love</u> sleep (laughs). I <u>need</u> ideally nine hours a night" (P21, 39, bisexual). Many of these freedoms were positioned as trivial and based on what not having children theoretically enabled them to do on a practical level (sleep, travel, and so on). Despite the implication that freedom was a higher order and valued currency—what it "purchased" seemed to be particularly mundane or ordinary. Only two participants were insistent that the freedoms gained were extraordinary, one commented:

LaTormenta: As far as I can see, every aspect of my life is improved by not having

children. I have the peace and quiet I want. I have the privacy I want. I have the

disposable income. I have the freedom of choice in relation to everything, you know,

what I do, when I do it, where I do it, how I go about doing it. (P2, 53, heterosexual)

LaTormenta's extreme case formulation (see Pomerantz, 1986) of "every aspect," combined

with her multiple-part list, framed the positives of her childfree life as extensive. She

repeatedly spoke of her life as fulfilling in every way, including the opportunity to take an

early retirement; she emphasised that the absence of children was what facilitated this.

Some women also positioned being childfree as the rational and reasonable option

given their work lives. Many participants were highly educated professionals. However, they

emphasized opportunities for (long-term) flexibility in their working lives—again in

relatively ordinary ways—rather than framing their childfree decisions around educational

goals or career aspirations. Many participants downplayed careers to the extent that non-

parenthood was presented as a way in which they could work less, or with reduced pressure

to move up the promotional ladder:

Joanne: I gave up a job I had in [city], I worked part-time, and I couldn't have had

that freedom with children, because a part-time income was enough for me to live on,

but wouldn't have been, you know, if I'd had a family. I would have had to work

harder. (P8, 65, lesbian)

These women represented their life course as rational, not having to escalate their careers to

maintain a high quality of life for a family, which would inherently include children. Their

accounts indicated that the pressures of work were closely related to material care of children.

The women positioning themselves in this way may represent another example of how they

engaged in identity work to resist the dominant narratives of childfree women as selfishly and excessively invested in their careers (Dever & Saugeres, 2004).

Another way our participants positioned their decision not to have children as a reasonable and rational one, was that they highlighted the disruption that children caused relationships, even at very simple levels. For some, this was in reference to their romantic relationships:

> Millers: [Parents] don't have time for each other, they don't have patience for each other, they don't have that kind of quiet intimacy, you know, of just, you know, just sitting reading the papers in silence for three hours, you know, or, like, you know, just making each other a cup of tea, because life becomes so much more frantic. (P17, 35, heterosexual)

The simple intimacy and friendship that was important to these romantic relationships was framed as central to their "success." Others also spoke of their non-romantic relationships and presented parenthood as disrupting the ordinary status quo of their friendships. Among the younger women, narratives of losing friendships when friends became parents were common. In Mary's recounting, friends having children "definitely changes your relationship and it definitely changes your kind of social circle":

> Mary: I think what we learned from the first couple of times, is that you need to give yourself (pause) the opportunity to grieve a bit, to be happy for them, because it's what they want and they're so excited, but on the other hand just grieve (pause) for a relationship that's going to change. (P3, 36, heterosexual)

As with the previous theme, emotional labour was evident in these narratives, as was a sense of loss ("to grieve a bit"). In accounts like Mary's, participants emphasised that it was often those without children who were required to make adjustments to their (ordinary) lives in

order to accommodate the (extraordinary) changes that their friends faced in becoming parents. Parents, especially in the early phases of parenthood, were positioned as having entered an extraordinary phase of life that swept everything and everyone up with it. A number of participants spoke of having the capacity to "absorb" these changes and make adjustments, so that they could be supportive of their friends' and families' new lives—both emotionally and materially. For some, this meant establishing boundaries and focusing attention on other relationships:

> Clementine: It does feel like every single one of my friends are having kids, and I <u>do</u> feel like what I've been doing is putting more energy into friendships where (pause) there aren't children. It isn't because I don't like their kids, I do, but I realize that I socialise with those people at the level of their kids, and that's not really, it doesn't feel like I'm actually socialising with them, I'm sort of helping them babysit. (P20, 42, bisexual)

In emphasising that her concerns were unrelated to any dislike of children, Clementine has engaged in identity work. Her extreme case formulation, "every single one of my friends," worked to highlight the dramatic change in circumstances she was facing, and that the "ordinary" relational connection she expected had to come from the friends who remained childfree. Other participants also spoke to these changes. Sharon stated: "you lose friends when they have kids and there's no way around it because they're not interested in you anymore" (P5, 51, heterosexual). Anna reported that when friends "tell me they're going to have children" she thinks "oh please don't, now we won't be such good friends […] the more and more that friends are having children, the less and less I see my friends" (P22, 38, bisexual). Almost all of our participants told these stories, often with a slightly bewildered tone. They framed their own lives as stable and ordinary and needing protection from the extraordinary maelstrom of parents' lives. The lesbian and queer women not only engaged in

the sense-making that we report here—where their own lives were presented as ordinary relative to parents' extraordinary lives—but also represented their childfreedom as a way of "doing family" different from traditional heteronormative ideals (see Clarke et al., 2018). This demonstrated how the lesbian and queer women engaged in multiple forms of identity work at the intersections of their sexuality and their childfreedom.

Although all the women in this study worked to construct their lives as ordinary, they told a number of stories that indicated they had to go to some lengths to ensure their lives were not disrupted by others having children. Almost all of the women spoke about giving way, making room, adjusting, adapting for others with children. A number argued that this went as far as managing the discomfort of others when the topic of their being childfree arose. For instance, Sarah reported an incident when she managed someone who questioned her about being childfree, and assumed that she must want children, by telling them "I <u>can't</u> have children"' (P19, 39, bisexual, emphasis added). In doing so, she conceals that she is voluntarily childfree. Similarly, Annie and her partner had sometimes "just said we can't have children, we've left it at that […] and that just stops any kind of discussion" (P4, 58, heterosexual). This strategy of "passing" as women who "can't have" rather than "don't want" children operated to shut down unwelcome lines of enquiry that required participants to account for their childfree status (Kelly, 2009); it indicates that the motherhood mandate remains somewhat pertinent. Perhaps to position their atypical life course positively, we suggest that these women engaged in "identity work," in order to emphasise the ways non-parenthood was entirely ordinary, rational, and reasonable.

Summary and Further Discussion

We responded to calls to include lesbians (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012; Morison et al., 2016; Kelly, 2009), and extended this to bisexual, queer, and asexual women, within

childfree research. Our results contribute a number of novel findings to the childfree literature. We identified that participants reported decisions to have, or not have, children were neither straightforward, nor a one off, but instead, were precarious and constantly under potential renegotiation. The inclusion of heterosexual and LBQA participants offered new insight into how women of many diverse sexualities may be required to repeatedly revisit their childfree status jointly with their partners. This addresses a limitation within extant research, which has largely relied on individualistic frameworks to explore childfree identities (for exceptions see Gillespie 2003; Lee & Zvonkovic 2014). We also added new insights into understanding how childfreedom is negotiated within personal and social relationships. The women in the current study situated themselves as highly invested in care and emotional labour in order to manage and maintain their childfree identities within intimate relationships and friendships. Participants framed being childfree as a mixed experience, but with loss and grief marking most women's accounts, in particular regarding existing friendships. Given that childfree people are understood to be particularly reliant on friendships as support networks, especially later in life, the consequences of childfree decisions on friendship across the lifespan is of particular importance (Basten, 2009).

Despite increasing numbers of women choosing not to have children, heterosexual and LBQA women's accounts were also, to some extent, marked by features of pronatalism (Heitlinger, 1991), and the sorts of identity work associated with deficit identities (Addie & Brownlow, 2014; Terry & Braun, 2012). LBQA women cannot be assumed to be childfree by default. Our research added empirical evidence that both heterosexual and LBQA women were influenced by the motherhood mandate (Clarke et al., 2018; Dunne 2000; Peterson & Engwall 2013). A particularly novel finding was that these women positioned themselves as unwilling to "impose" their childfree position on others. We added to understandings of how childfree women of diverse sexualities engaged in particular forms of nuanced identity work.

Women managed and challenged pronatalism and the stigmatisation of childfree identities by orientating toward how ordinary, reasonable, and rational their own childfree lives and identities were, strategies which have not previously been identified.

In light of the emergence of a childfree movement (Moore, 2014; Park, 2002) and newspaper articles in defence of choosing to be childfree (e.g., Giles et al., 2009), we were interested in exploring childfree lives and identities within the context of changing cultural contexts. It was evident in our analysis, that childfreedom remains somewhat of a stigmatised status or "problem narrative" (Addie & Brownlow, 2014, p. 432), not only for heterosexual women, but also for LBQA women. These women did not tightly claim childfree identities, as some have in online spaces (e.g., Moore, 2014; Morison et al., 2016). Rather, they negotiated ongoing precarious childfree decisions, which were not located as central to their identity, but instead were positioned within the contexts of their day-to-day lives. The "choice" to be childfree can neither be understood as a "master identity," nor purely as an expression of personal preference, dislocated from partner relationships or the wider cultural context.

Practice Implications

Whilst heterosexual women have often been assumed to want children, it seems that LBQA (lesbian, bisexual, queer, and asexual) women encounter somewhat similar pronatalist assumptions. The motherhood mandate may continue to underpin much of the identity work that childfree women engage in. Sex and relationship education (SRE) in schools often reflects cultural norms that the heteronormative (nuclear) family is the ideal (e.g., McNeill, 2013), which uncritically reproduces pronatalist assumptions. To challenge this, SRE programmes could be developed to not only meaningfully include diverse sexualities, but also acknowledge varying forms of what constitutes family. Researchers who explore

sexuality, reproduction, and family are also encouraged to raise their awareness of pronatalism and associated assumptions.

Previous research has identified that general practitioners (GPs) are dismissive of women who report that they do not want children (e.g., Kelly, 2009; Park, 2002) and some women in this study also reported that their GPs had suggested that they ought to have children. GPs and other health care professionals should receive training to raise awareness of the impacts of pronatalist ideology and be taught to recognize and validate the possibility of women being childfree. Health professionals and counsellors could benefit from being aware of the processes involved in being childfree, and the emotional labour that childfree women of varied sexualities engage in, to maintain their childfreedom within pronatalist cultures. Our analysis sheds light on the importance of childfree decisions within the context of friendships and partner relationships; the need to avoid oversimplified and individualistic explanations for childfree decisions is also of relevance in personal and relationship therapy. Finally, workplace and wider social policies inform institutional and cultural practices, and need to incorporate reproductive and relationship diversity.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Drawing on our social and professional networks was a successful strategy in our aim of recruiting heterosexual and LBQA participants. Nonetheless, despite efforts to alter our recruitment strategies to include a more widely diverse range of participants, the women were mainly White, middle class, non-disabled, well-educated, and employed; this is an acknowledged limitation of snowballing sampling (Braun & Clarke, 2013). These characteristics may have influenced participants' orientations towards a discourse of liberal tolerance, and their awareness of wider cultural debates about women being childfree. Previous research with similar participants, who also often identified as feminist, atheist, and

left-wing, has found that women who identified as feminist, non-religious, and who rejected

traditional family values, were most likely to be childfree (Bulcroft & Teachman, 2004;

Kelly, 2009). Childfree women may have particular demographic characteristics that make

researching diverse populations challenging. We recommend that researchers use innovative

and purposive recruitment techniques to explore the complexities and intersections of

occupying marginalised and multiple identities. We addressed one gap in the literature by

meaningfully including women from a range of sexualities, but other groups of women who

fall outside the motherhood mandate continue to be under-researched. For example, disabled

women are often discouraged from having children because of "medical concerns" and

assumptions that women with disabilities may not be "good enough" mothers (Morell, 2000,

p. 315). Women with disabilities have also been stigmatised as selfish and incompetent—and

some medical staff have suggested they should abort their babies, or have them adopted

(Wołowicz-Ruszkowska, 2016). Little is known about disabled women who choose to remain

childfree. There has also been a lack of research on how the experiences of women of colour

who are childfree may differ from those of White women (Kelly, 2009; Lundquist, Budig, &

Curtis, 2009). Research indicates that experiences of motherhood differ between White

women and women of colour. For example, Black women have fears about their children will

face institutional racism and, as a result, their experience of motherhood may be particularly

stressful; Black women also may be subjected to stereotypical assumptions about being a

"superstrong Black mother" (e.g., Elliott & Reid, 2016, p. 50). There also remain other gaps

in our knowledge. Men (in particular gay and bisexual men), and trans people have rarely

been included in research on non-parenthood.

The ways in which childfree women account for (re)negotiating their choice is likely

to be similar to, and somewhat different from, negotiating the decision to become a parent.

Whilst parenting has arguably become, to some extent, construed as a choice, little research

has focused on heterosexual women's choice to become mothers, perhaps because they are seldom held to account for their decision in the ways that childfree women are (see Sevón, 2005). Heterosexual women's decisions on when to become mothers has been explored (e.g., Budds et al., 2016; Perrier, 2013; Sevón, 2005). Women's accounts of "delayed" parenthood have also been marked by ambivalence and they may encounter discourses similar to childfree women, although in particular and nuanced ways. For example, delaying parenthood may be construed as selfish—because of the perceived health risks of delayed motherhood—and defiant of pronatalist ideals of when to become a parent (e.g., Budds et al., 2016; Sevón, 2005). Only a handful of studies have explored lesbian women and gay men's desires and decisions to become parents and their experiences of parenting (e.g., Murphy, 2013; Titlestad & Robinson, 2018; Touroni & Coyle, 2002). These topics, in particular explorations of people's decisions to become parents, are worthy of further attention.

Our research draws attention to how important it is that researchers consider women's childfree identities within the context of their friendships and relationships. Yet, studies overwhelmingly focus on individuals and do not explore childfree decisions within relationship frameworks (for exceptions, see Gillespie 2003; Lee & Zvonkovic 2014). Research that includes significant others (partners, friends, and families) is critical for a better understanding of how being childfree is negotiated within, and alters, relationships with partners, friends, and perhaps family. It may be particularly important for researchers to include diverse relationship types and sexualities; people who are in same-sex and different-sex and in monogamous and polyamorous relationships (as evidenced in our data) may experience their childfree identities in a variety of ways.

Conclusions

Our research demonstrates the ongoing identity work in which women of diverse sexualities engaged, to protect their own childfree identities, to maintain their friendships and relationships, and to resist stigmatised notions of childfree lives. The women's accounts of childfreedom went beyond a straightforward, simplistic, unidirectional relation to the motherhood mandate or biological determinism. Instead they were indicative of relative, fragile positions within the context of their relationships and in the face of an assemblage of discourses. These discourses included the centrality of individual choice—with the potential for this to conflict with a partner's individual choice—the motherhood mandate, existing rhetoric about childfree people, liberal tolerance, contemporary (re)constructions of "traditional" relationship trajectories, and the normative life course. Rather than being answerable to a single, powerful discourse (such as the motherhood mandate), the women in the current study, seemed to attend to a number of often conflicting ideas. This may reflect how, within Western neoliberal cultures, expectations which are more traditionally associated with heterosexual relationships and parenting may also now be placed on LBQA women. However, it is important not to overlook diversity. While there were commonalities across these data, we also identified particular nuances across lesbian and queer women's accounts of their close partnerships and families of choice. It continues to be important to sensitively explore these topics in more depth and consider the importance of women's (marginalised) identities and identity work on their lives.

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Table 1

*Summary of Participant Demographics (*N = *Twenty-Three).*

Demographic information	
Age	Range: 35-65 years. Mean: 45 years. Mode: 38 years.
Sexuality and relationship status	Heterosexual (12): – married: 5 – cohabiting: 4 – relationship: 1 – casual relationship: 1 – single: 1 Lesbian (4) – cohabiting: 2 – separated: 1 – single: 1 Bisexual (4) – cohabiting: 2 – polyamorous: 1 – single: 1 Queer/non-heterosexual (1) - separated: 1 Asexual/biromantic (1) – single: 1

	No sexuality data provided (1) – married: 1
Race/ethnicity	White British: 15 White British Jewish: 1 Jewish: 1 New Zealand Pakeha: 1 Polish born - White British Dual Nationality: 1 White British mixed: 1 White European: 1 White South African: 1 No race/ethnicity data provided: 1
Employment	Employed: 20 Unemployed: 1 Retired: 2
Education	Highest qualification postgraduate degree: 14 Highest qualification undergraduate degree: 7 High School Diploma: 1 HND/ Professional Qualification: 1
Class	Middle or middle/lower class: 16 Working class: 4 While New Zealand is not a classless society, it doesn't feel similar to UK class: 1 Petit Bourgeois: 1 No data: 1

Disabilities	Disabled (mental health): 2 Non-disabled: 21