Lived experiences of childfree lesbians in the UK: A qualitative exploration

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Abstract

Evidence suggests that most lesbians remain childless, but little is known about the childfree lesbian experience. The current study qualitatively explores the experiences of five childfree lesbians. The results show that even for a group for which childlessness is arguably still presumed, it remains socially difficult to articulate a desire to remain childfree. The women presented their childfreedom as both essential, and politically and biographically motivated. Being lesbian and childfree was framed as different from being heterosexual and childfree – discourses and practices of 'families of choice' and 'co-independence' in intimate partnerships provided a way of 'doing' family outside of dominant, heteronormative expectations. Concurrently, the greater visibility of lesbian parenting had resulted in the unwelcome imposition of heteronormative expectations. The results raise questions about the normalising effects of the legal recognition of same-sex marriage and queer parenthood on the lives of lesbian women, and other queers, who choose to remain childfree.

Keywords: Family; feminist research; interpretative phenomenological analysis; LGBT family studies; queer; voluntary childlessness

Introduction

Evidence from the US suggests that most lesbians (in Western contexts) remain childless (Mezey, 2012) – even in the midst of what has been dubbed a 'baby boom' in lesbian communities – but little is known about the experiences of childfree[1] lesbians (Pelton & Hertlein, 2011). Childfree lesbians have rarely been a focus for research in either the voluntary childlessness or LGBT family studies literature.

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25 Voluntary childlessness researchers have focused on categorising and defining
26 different types of childlessness. They have distinguished the involuntary from the voluntary
27 childless, and different types of the voluntary childless, including 'early articulators,' women
28 who express an intention to remain childless early in life, and 'perpetual postponers,' women
29 who become childless through a series of postponements (e.g. Houseknecht, 1987). At the
30 same time, researchers have often assumed that certain groups of women, such as single
31 women and lesbians, are childless by default, rather than through choice (Park, 2002).
32 Furthermore, a focus on marriage was evident in early voluntary childlessness research and
33 definitions often reflected an assumption that single women and same-sex couples cannot and
34 do not make reproductive choices; they are 'socially infertile' (Houseknecht, 1987). This
35 heteronormative sensibility has begun to shift, and single heterosexual women are
36 increasingly likely to be included in studies of childfree women (e.g. Addie & Brownlow,
37 2014; Peterson & Engwall, 2013). However, lesbians remain largely overlooked in voluntary
38 childlessness research, and when they and other queer (e.g. bisexual and other non-
39 heterosexual) women are rarely included in, typically feminist, research, it has often been
40 only in small numbers (e.g. two non-heterosexual women in Gillespie, 2003). Furthermore,
41 their experiences are rarely examined *as* lesbian women, and differences in the experiences of
42 heterosexual and lesbian women acknowledged and explored (e.g. Bartlett, 1994; Gillespie,
43 1999, 2000, 2003; Mollen, 2006). Thus, both mainstream and feminist voluntary
44 childlessness research mostly reflects the heteronormativity of wider culture and expectations
45 that lesbians remain childfree.

46 There have, however, recently been calls for the inclusion of queer women
47 (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012) and same-sex couples (Blackstone, 2014) in voluntary
48 childlessness research, and discussion of any differences between heterosexual and non-
49 heterosexual experiences (Blackstone, 2014). Furthermore, US research on queer

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50 reproductive decision making clearly evidences that queers *do* make reproductive choices,
51 even those remaining childless (e.g. Mezey, 2012; Riskind & Patterson, 2010; Robinson &
52 Brewster, 2014). Therefore, it cannot be assumed that queers are childless by default or that
53 their childlessness is not *meaningful* – that it has consequences for their everyday lives and
54 identities. In addition, the consequences of choosing to be childfree for queer individuals and
55 same-sex couples could potentially shed light on the meaning of voluntary childlessness more
56 broadly.

57 Turning to LGBT family studies research, the focus here has been on predominantly
58 same-sex, and particularly lesbian, parenting, motivated at least initially by providing
59 evidence to support child custody claims (e.g. Bos & Hakvoort, 2007; Brewaeys et al., 1997).
60 However, even research on 'families of choice' in queer communities, kin-like networks of
61 relationships based on friendship and commitments 'beyond blood', that are emblematic of
62 new ways of 'doing family' (Morgan, 2011), has focused on *parenting* rather than
63 childlessness. Two landmark texts – *Families we choose* and *Families of choice* – both
64 dedicated an entire chapter to parenting, but did not have even a single index entry for
65 childlessness (Weeks, Heaphy & Donovan, 2001; Weston, 1991). Furthermore, research on
66 queer reproductive decision making is oriented to what motivates people to choose to parent,
67 rather than what motivates them to remain childfree (e.g. Mezey, 2008). In some research
68 focused on queer reproductive decision making, the definition of childlessness is so inclusive
69 that it does not allow for a meaningful exploration of the experiences of queer couples and
70 individuals who choose to be childfree (e.g. Bergstrom-Lynch, 2015; Mezey, 2008). In
71 addition, some research on same-sex relationships has addressed childlessness in queer
72 communities indirectly and rather negatively; childless same-sex couples have been portrayed
73 as pathological (Kaufman et al., 1984), inferior to same-sex couples with children (Koepke et
74 al., 1992), and at risk of loneliness and social isolation in old age (e.g. Wilkens, 2015).

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There is, therefore, a degree of pronatalism or a ‘parental imperative’ (Wilson, 2013) underlying the LGBT family studies literature, arguably reflecting a growth of pronatalism in queer communities (Morrell, 2000). Nancy Polikoff in 1987 asked “Who is talking about the women who don’t ever want to be mothers?” Her answer was “No one,” and 30 years later this by-and-large still appears to be the case. Thus, we know virtually nothing about the meaning and experience of being childfree for a population of which the majority remains childless and where many may, somewhat invisibly, identify as childfree (Mezey, 2012). Furthermore, the legal recognition of same-sex relationships and parents in the last decade or so in many Western countries raises interesting questions about the impact of relational and familial equality on the meaning of being childfree for non-heterosexuals that warrant exploration (Shaw, 2011).

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Research on Childfree Lesbians

There is only a small body of literature that directly addresses the childfree lesbian experience. Rowlands and Lee (2006) examined perceptions of women choosing to have children and choosing to be childfree among psychology students and the public. They found that lesbians not wanting children were perceived more negatively than any other group in the study – both heterosexual women not wanting children and lesbians planning to have children. Two US studies of queer reproductive decision making have examined reasons for remaining childless. Bergstrom-Lynch’s (2015) study included broadly defined ‘childfree’ same-sex couples and found that reasons for remaining childfree, at that moment, encompassed: focusing on the partner relationship and a fear that children would disrupt their relational dynamic; fear of loss of ‘independent-togetherness’ (a queer relational practice that combines both a long-term commitment to a partner and a greater sense of independence and [geographic, sexual, emotional] distance [e.g. living apart, engaging in consensual non-monogamy] than is typical in heteronormative relationships, see Weeks et al., 2001), which

suggests being childfree affords the freedom to live apart; concerns about their compatibility as parents, and how childcare labour would be divided, with neither partner wanting to be the primary parent; lack of momentum/desire from one or both partners (e.g. choosing to stay with a partner who does not want children); and what can be categorised as ‘perpetual postponement.’ Furthermore, some participants who described themselves as happy to be childfree, experienced fleeting urges to have a child (‘temporary baby fever’), and relationships with nieces and nephews and children of friends providing a ‘kid fix.’

Mezey (2008) focused specifically on *lesbians’* mothering decisions and desires, and of the, again broadly defined, ‘childfree’ women included in the study, many developed a strong desire early in their lives to remain childfree. Mezey argued that early childfree desires are more salient for lesbian women than heterosexual women, because lesbians have more control over, and are thus more intentional in, their reproductive choices because of their greater control over becoming pregnant, and their rejection of dominant gender norms, allowing them to actively pursue their reproductive desires (see also Carlisle, 1982). Mezey found that reasons for remaining childfree, at that moment, centred on: a negative understanding of motherhood, including the participants’ accounts of their mothers’ experiences of parenting – centring on self-sacrifice and oppression; a desire for personal and economic freedom (the latter was especially important for working class lesbians); early experiences with childcare and an understanding of childrearing as a burden; internalised homophobia; racial discrimination (for black lesbians); a critique of lesbian motherhood – some childfree participants echoed lesbian feminist arguments in the 1970s and 1980s that lesbians enter into motherhood to gain heterosexual privilege without fully considering the consequences and responsibilities, and a view that lesbian mothers are no different from heterosexual mothers; a belief that the world is too harsh for children; the influence of intimate partnership (although for some, their partner was not an influence); and the

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125 constraints and rewards of work. Mezey found that some women felt there was respect for
126 women's varied reproductive choices in lesbian communities, but others experienced
127 pressure to have children or to remain childfree.

128 Feminist studies of women's experiences of being childfree that have included small
129 numbers of lesbian and bisexual participants also provide some minor insights into the
130 childfree lesbian experience. For example, Mollen (2006) found that childfree lesbians and
131 bisexual women who can conceal their sexuality by 'passing' as straight are potentially
132 subject to the same pressures toward parenthood as heterosexual women (see also Gillespie,
133 2000). Bartlett (1994) reported that the lesbian and bisexual participants in her study
134 appreciated having lots of childfree queer friends, and they experienced no shortage of
135 childfree lesbian role models. Furthermore, Bartlett argued that a lack of parenting desire
136 enabled women to take a more flexible approach to sexuality and move more freely between
137 sexual partners. The lesbian participants in Gillespie's study reported that their parents and
138 family members assumed their childlessness was related to their sexuality and they did not
139 perceive their relationships with nieces and nephews as substitutes for mothering (Gillespie,
140 1999).

141 **Aims of the Current Study**

142 The current study is one of the first, if not the first, to focus solely and specifically on
143 the *experiences* of lesbian women who self-identify as having made an active choice to
144 remain childfree. The aim of the study is to explore how lesbian women make meaning of
145 their pathways to childfreedom, and how they experience and make sense of 'living out' the
146 childfree choice *as* lesbians. More broadly, the research aims to contribute to feminist
147 phenomenological research on the lived experience of being childfree (e.g. Doyle et al., 2012;
148 Shaw, 2011).

149 **Method**

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150 The data for this analysis were drawn from a wider qualitative study of the
151 experiences of childfree women living in the UK (see Authors, 2017). The research received
152 ethical approval from the first and second authors' Faculty Research Ethics Committee. The
153 focus here is on the five women in the study who identified as lesbian or queer. Because this
154 research aimed to identify common themes across the experiences of a small group of
155 relatively homogenous women, while also capture and 'give voice' to the unique aspects of
156 their individual experience, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was identified as
157 an appropriate methodology (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is a phenomenologically oriented
158 approach to qualitative research with a focus on 'persons-in-context' and 'being in the world'
159 (Larkin et al., 2006); it was developed by the psychologist Jonathan Smith in the 1990s (e.g.
160 Smith, 1994) and has subsequently become widely used in the UK and elsewhere (including
161 most recently North America, e.g. Chmielewski & Yost, 2013). IPA assumes a self-reflective,
162 self-interpretive mode of being, while also acknowledging that a researcher cannot access a
163 participant's world directly. Thus, IPA involves a 'double hermeneutic' (Smith et al., 2009);
164 the researcher attempts to make sense of how the participant makes sense of their world
165 (Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA combines both thematic (cross-case) and idiographic
166 (individual and specific) analysis and thus (smaller) samples of 3-6 (relatively homogenous)
167 participants are common (e.g. Shaw's [2011] IPA study of women's journeys toward
168 childlessness included 3 women). IPA is distinct from other phenomenological approaches in
169 its combination of the 'double hermeneutic,' and inductive and idiographic interpretation
170 (Gill, 2014); indeed "IPA's idiographic nature separates it from most other phenomenological
171 methodologies" (Gill, 2014: 126). IPA has been used previously in voluntary childlessness
172 research (Shaw, 2011) and identity and sexuality are important intersecting themes in IPA
173 work to-date (Smith et al., 2009).

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174 The use of IPA in this study is broadly experiential in the sense that language is
175 treated as a tool for communicating thoughts, feelings and experiences (Braun & Clarke,
176 2013) and underpinned by a critical realist ontology (Madill et al., 2000). This critical realist
177 ontology allows for the exploration of the meanings, experiences, and material implications
178 of childfree lesbian lives, while locating these within particular cultural contexts (e.g.
179 pronatalist, heteronormative) (Ussher, 1999). Thus, the current approach to IPA is
180 underpinned by a more socially contextualised account of experience than is perhaps typical
181 of much published IPA research. It is also explicitly informed by feminist and queer
182 perspectives on the family (e.g. Allen, 2016; Wilson, 2013), and the sociological
183 conceptualisation of family as something that we 'do' (Morgan, 2011) and a corresponding
184 concern with the ways families are created, made, and remade through everyday practices of
185 sharing resources, care and intimacy (Gabb & Fink, 2015).

186 **Participants and Recruitment**

187 Participants were recruited in various ways, including posting calls for participants on
188 childfree online forums, and advertising the study on online and local LGBT groups, in the
189 comments section of a newspaper article on childfree women, and via social media (e.g.
190 *Facebook*). Inclusion criteria included self-identifying as having made an active choice to be
191 childfree and being aged 35 years or older. The participants were aged 43-65 (mean 51
192 years), and were privileged in multiple ways– they were all white, middle class, and educated
193 to at least degree level. Three were single or separated and two were cohabiting with a
194 partner (none of the participants were in a relationship with another participant). The
195 participants were asked to select five words to describe their social, political and religious
196 affiliations. The words they chose indicated broadly left-leaning political affiliations – left,
197 feminist, socialist, atheist, pagan, green.

198 **Interviews**

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The women participated in semi-structured interviews, each lasting for around an hour and conducted by the second, third and fourth authors in the spring and summer of 2015. Interviews are regarded as an ideal method for IPA because of the in-depth focus on individual accounts of experience (Gill, 2014; Smith et al., 2009). A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on a review of the literature and the aims of the research. The guide began with broad questions about participants' childfree backgrounds before moving to more specific questions. Topics included the women's relationships with others, social marginalisation, experiences of children, and the impact of being childfree. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed orthographically for the purposes of analysis by the fourth author (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Participants were invited to select a pseudonym to be included in research reports.

Data analysis

The analytic process – conducted by the first author, and reviewed and discussed with the other authors – followed the procedures detailed by Smith et al. (2009) and first involved close attention to each individual interview, identifying portions of the interview that were particularly pertinent to the childfree *lesbian* experience. The transcripts were read and re-read and reflective notes made about the meaning of relevant data excerpts. Analysis then progressed to more formalised coding and theme development for each individual participant, before, finally, producing synthesised themes for the whole participant group. The initial – inductive – analytic focus was on 'staying close' to the women's sense-making, but as the analysis progressed and became more interpretive, the theoretical lenses of feminism and queer theory, and sociological conceptions of family practices, previously noted, more explicitly informed the interpretation of the women's accounts, and the development of the final 3 superordinate themes.

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This research is 'Big Q' qualitative, that is, located within a qualitative paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Kidder & Fine, 1987), and as such strategies for ensuring quality centre on – often challenging to evidence – practices such as sensitivity to context, reflexivity, depth of engagement, rigor and theoretical coherence (Yardley, 2015), rather than positivist conceptions of coding reliability. Although the reader is the ultimate judge of the quality and transferability to other contexts of qualitative findings, the researcher is responsible for presenting their research in a way that facilitates such judgements – including providing appropriate contextualisation of the study and direct quotations from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This paper has been prepared accordingly.

Three superordinate themes capture the specific experiences of childfree lesbian/queer women: 1) Essentially childfree? (But I like children of course!); 2) Being childfree is (or was) different for lesbians; and 3) Doing family differently. Each of these themes is now discussed in turn. The data excerpts have been edited to aid readability and comprehension (i.e. removing some of the disfluencies of the spoken word, including hesitation, false starts, and repetition of words, and adding punctuation). Transcription notation includes underlining to indicate emphasis on a particular word and inverted commas to indicate reported speech or thoughts.

Results

Essentially Childfree? (But I Like Children Of Course!)

This theme demonstrates the continuing social difficulty of articulating a choice to remain childfree, even for a group of women that is arguably still expected to be childless. It captures the complex and often contradictory ways the women made sense of their childlessness, both as something not chosen, *and* as something biographically and politically motivated. They described their childlessness as both essential and innate (signalled by expressions of a lack of maternal or parental desire), *and* the result of a rejection of

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248 motherhood and being a wife (rather than a rejection of children). They often related their
249 rejection of motherhood to early experiences of ‘forced’ parental responsibilities for younger
250 siblings. The following quotations illustrate some of these tensions:

251 “it’s not an identity for me, it’s just something I never ever wanted… I’ve never had a
252 maternal urge to have a child at all… I don’t dislike children at all, I’ve got nephews
253 and nieces, friends have got children” (Debbie).

254 “I don’t know if I could say it was a really active decision, it was just something that I
255 didn’t really want… realising that I was gay, and it was like, ‘oh I’m probably not
256 going to have kids and I’m probably not going to get married’… I don’t dislike kids at
257 all” (Rosa Marvin).

258 All of the women could be classified as ‘early articulators,’ as making a decision early
259 in life to remain childfree. However, this was often framed as something that was not chosen
260 or decided, but simply articulated, they were essentially or innately childfree, they did not
261 have any maternal or parental desire (Mezey, 2008). In our wider study, the theme of freedom
262 (from parental responsibilities) was predominant, but for Rosa Marvin, a sense of freedom
263 was equated with making an active choice not to parent: “it didn’t feel so much an active
264 choice that I could really appreciate I’ve not done this thing.” Such a framing underscored the
265 lack of choice in her childlessness; it just was. For some, their acknowledgement of their
266 essential childfreedom (at a young age) was related to or was an expression of their non-
267 heterosexuality – being queer equated to being childfree, although they later discovered that
268 lesbians can and do have children, but this did not necessarily impact on their non-choice to
269 remain childfree. Others did not see any link between their sexuality and being childfree.

270 At the same time as discussing their lack of parental desire, the women took pains to
271 emphasise that they liked children, and often did so without any prompting from the
272 interviewer, and often within a few lines of articulating their essential childfreedom. A couple

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of the women positioned themselves as “selfish and childish and irresponsible” as Debbie put it, but even when they did this, it was always with humour and self-parody. The women, even those who presented themselves as selfish, evidenced their liking of children by talking about their relationships with nieces and nephews and friends’ children, and about working with children in their professional lives.

How is it possible to make sense of this emphasis on liking children, and the fact that the women clearly felt they could not express a lack of desire for children without following this with reassuring statements about liking or loving children? Arguably, this speaks to the social difficulty, even for lesbians (a group who might still arguably be expected to be childfree, although this may be changing), of articulating the choice to be childfree. It appears not to be socially acceptable, even stigmatised, to express dislike for children; this can only be done through comedy, self-parody and exaggeration, and through taking ownership of the label ‘selfish’ (see also Terry & Braun, 2012). This tension in the women’s accounts also perhaps reflects that fact that the lesbian women, like many of the heterosexual women in the wider study (Authors, 2017), viewed themselves as rejecting motherhood in a patriarchal society, and dominant notions of womanhood and femininity, rather than rejecting children, and often framed this in terms of a feminist critique of patriarchy. The lesbian women also saw themselves as rejecting the idea of being a (man’s) wife: “I never wanted to be a wife for obvious reasons” (Debbie). In the view of the participants, although mothers generally have a higher status than childfree women in the wider society, the costs of being a mother are great – responsibility for childcare, selflessness, being blamed when things go wrong, being subservient, restricted, and having to bask in others’ achievements rather than your own.

Relatedly, and in contradiction to their self-presentation as essentially childfree, the women discussed biographical and psychological justifications for their lack of parental desire, related to their own experiences of being poorly parented. This included having

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298 parents who “weren’t a great model” (Joanne), and having parental responsibilities for
299 siblings early in life, and not having a choice in this. As the oldest child in her family, Debbie
300 “had to go to the role of being the other adult.” The women feared parenting like their parents
301 did or like *they* themselves did – resentfully – when compelled to parent their siblings
302 (Mollen, 2006; Mezey, 2008). Debbie watched her mother struggle as a single parent: “the
303 woman just had no life… I seem to remember her miserable all the time… do that you really
304 get something out of this, because you’re just constantly stressed and short of money…
305 pulled one way and another.” She felt her mother was not able to “emotionally engage” with
306 her and her siblings. The women also spoke of ‘losing’ siblings in ways that were traumatic –
307 through death or care orders, and in their professional lives working with “really fucked up
308 families” (Rosa Marvin).

309 To summarise, for these women their childfreedom was framed both as something
310 innate and essential and as part and parcel of a political rejection of motherhood and
311 dominant notions of womanhood in a patriarchal society, and their first-hand experiences of
312 poor parenting and the struggles of motherhood.

313 **Being Childfree Is (Or Was) Different For Lesbians**

314 This theme captures the way in which the women framed being childfree as in many
315 ways inextricably linked to being lesbian, and as both in some ways easier and in others more
316 difficult for lesbians, while at the same time also acknowledging that the context for being a
317 childfree lesbian was changing. These changes included the greater recognition and visibility
318 of same-sex marriage and lesbian parenting in the larger socio-cultural context, which could
319 lead to the unwelcome imposition of heteronormative expectations such as that being in a
320 relationship would inevitably point to desire to have children.

321 All of the women viewed being childfree as to a greater or lesser extent different for
322 lesbians than for heterosexual women. As noted in relation to the previous theme, some of the

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323 women spoke about the fact that they associated being lesbian with childlessness when
324 younger: "I came out at such an early age, it was a time when it wasn't considered even an
325 option that people were even aware that you could go and make a baby" (Debbie). And, for
326 some, this association remained: "it intersects I think in the nature of the community" (Jane).

327 The women reflected on the fact that even they conform to wider assumptions that
328 equate lesbianism and childlessness. Debbie spoke of a female friend – heterosexual and
329 married – and the fact that she had always wondered why this friend (Judy) does not have
330 children:

331 "and yet [my friend Laura] is a lesbian and is married to [Jenny] and has been with
332 her twenty-five years, and they've no children, and it doesn't even cross my mind to
333 think why they've not got children… I'd not even thought about it 'til I read the
334 information sheet [for the study] and I thought 'oh yeah maybe it's because they're
335 lesbians,' I didn't even question it, whereas with [my heterosexual friend Judy] it does
336 strike me as unusual."

337 For these women, being childfree was 'normal' among their lesbian friends, they were
338 in the majority – "most of them don't have children" (Joanne). This sometimes meant they do
339 not have much contact with children – a source of feelings of loss for Joanne. For Louise, one
340 of the freedoms of childlessness was the opportunity to spend time with other lesbians (the
341 women felt they would have spent more time with heterosexual women if they themselves
342 had had children (see also Bartlett, 1994).

343 Rosa Marvin felt that the same pressures and expectations that straight women
344 experience in everyday life can also be experienced by queer women, especially if they do
345 not look obviously queer or are not 'out': "there's something about kind of being my age and
346 you know 'well you've got long hair so you're probably straight'" (see also Gillespie, 2000;

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347 Mollen, 2006). However, pressures and expectations (from family members) can stop when
348 you come out – "when I came out then I think my parents probably would have thought 'oh
349 that's it then, Rosa's not going to have any children'" (see also Gillespie, 1999).

350 There was also an acknowledgement that things had changed (or were changing) in
351 lesbian communities, that having children was "the next fashionable thing to do" (Jane).
352 Debbie also reflected on the changes in lesbian communities:

353 "something that I never thought would be expected once I came out as lesbian, [it's]
354 very different now, lots of younger couples you know choosing to have children,
355 whereas when I came out I was sort of sixteen…lesbian women I had contact with
356 that had children had been in relationships with men before, so it wasn't even
357 something that I felt any kind of social pressure, having come out so very early on,
358 there was never any expectation from family or friends that you would have a child."

359 The women thought that the lesbian 'baby boom' reflected or resulted from a
360 softening of the more political and more policed norms in lesbian communities in the 1970s
361 and 1980s; as Jane wryly observed, lesbians in the 1970s and 1980s had cats not children.

362 Even though the women thought things had changed, and lesbian parenting was more
363 socially recognised and visible, on the whole they felt there was still less pressure on lesbians
364 to have children, and it was often still assumed that lesbians are childfree: "I definitely think
365 it's more usual for people who aren't straight to not have kids, so I think often that's kind of
366 what people will assume, yeah almost like it goes hand in hand" (Rosa Marvin). The women
367 certainly felt it was easier to be childfree among other lesbians (but perhaps more difficult
368 with [heterosexual] acquaintances; see below): "because of the overlap between feminism
369 and lesbianism there's quite a lot of respect for women making decisions like that [to be
370 childfree] partly because it's a fairly common position to be in" (Louise). Consequentially,
371 lesbians having children did not necessarily create pressure on childfree lesbians to consider

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372 parenting, because lesbian communities respected women's choices: "I was in several kind of
373 feminist lesbian type groups, because a lot of lesbians were mothers, you know, and still are,
374 but it wasn't like an issue about, you know, the rest of us thinking 'now are we going to have
375 children or are we not'" (Joanne).

376 Whereas many of the women in relationships with men in the wider study spoke about
377 experiencing a sense of pressure to at least contemplate having children when their
378 (heterosexual) friends started to have children, for the lesbian women the same pressures did
379 not arise. For Jane, lots of her lesbian friends having children encouraged her to reflect on
380 what she wanted and take stock (but there was no pressure): "I was quite clear that I didn't
381 want children."

382 Although the women felt that on balance there was still less pressure on (out/visible)
383 lesbians, social change meant questions were sometimes asked. Debbie recounted an
384 experience of a male colleague asking her:

385 "'oh when you and [partner] have got married will you have children?', and I just
386 looked at him and thought 'what you think civil partnership's only just come in in the
387 last sort of eighteen months, we're sort of hanging around waiting for it to become
388 legal just so that we could have children, you know, within the nuclear legal nuclear
389 family'… I was really shocked he asked if we would have children, because why
390 would we do that."

391 This question was not experienced by Debbie as pronatalist pressure but as
392 heteronormativity; the imposition of a heterosexual life narrative onto lesbians. The women
393 also felt that being a lesbian and childfree was a 'double whammy' of difference, that made it
394 harder to relate to (heterosexual) others, or for (heterosexual) others to relate to them, in
395 everyday life. From being unintelligible to others on overseas holidays because of not having
396 a husband or children to creating dilemmas in social interaction (how to connect with new

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397 people). At the same time, Rosa Marvin would come out about her partner's legal
398 guardianship of a child in order to "shatter people's stereotypes" and challenge heterosexist
399 assumptions, "that if you're gay you can't have children."

400 **Doing Family Differently**

401 This final theme captures the ways in which the women made meaning of family,
402 drawing on conceptualisations of family and intimate relationships that departed from
403 traditional, heteronormative values and rhetoric. The women often had close relationships
404 with adults and children for which they felt there was no language to describe the nature of
405 the relationship, especially to heterosexual others. The women viewed their childfreedom as
406 part and parcel of 'doing family differently,' but at the same time, most of them were not
407 lacking relationships with children. Furthermore, an ethic of 'co-independence' (a queer
408 relational ethic centred on independence and equality, rather the 'interdependence,' and
409 prioritisation of 'the couple' as the exclusive focus of sexual and emotional intimacy,
410 associated with heteronormative relationships, see Heaphy, 2015; Weeks et al., 2001) in
411 lesbian relationships appeared to underpin the women's, and their current and former
412 partners', reproductive decision making.

413 Blackstone (2014) argued that non-human animals such as pets play a significant role
414 in the relationships and families of the childfree (and pets may fill the role of dependants) and
415 urged voluntary childlessness researchers to consider the role pets play in the lives of the
416 childfree. Recent British research on long term couples – that included both non-heterosexual
417 and childless couples – found that pets are important to childless couples (and couples
418 without children living at home) (Gabb & Fink, 2015). For this reason, we asked the women
419 in the wider study about pet ownership and most were reluctant to subscribe to the notion that
420 pets are child substitutes in anything other than a 'humorous' way: "I'll talk to the cats and
421 I'll kind of do a cat voice back how strange is that? So, gosh are they being a substitute child,

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422 god knows, or am I just insane?" (Jane). For lesbian participants, making sense of their
423 relationship with pets had also been shaped by the "mad lesbian cat lady" (Debbie) "classic
424 lesbian stereotype" (Jane), and indeed the notion that lesbians have 'cats not kids.' Indeed,
425 three participants had one or more cats (one had a cat not out of choice – the cat was left by a
426 former partner), one co-owned a dog and one wanted a dog. Pets were seen as 'sort of' child
427 substitutes but our participants were as reluctant as the heterosexual women in the wider
428 study to fully embrace that concept: If they did not completely dismiss it, they engaged with
429 it in a humorous way as Jane did above. Rosa Marvin was very dismissive of the notion that
430 pets are child substitutes and contrasted her desire for a dog with her lack of desire for a
431 child; she wanted a dog precisely because it is a dog and not a child, and therefore not a child
432 substitute. In general, pets were seen as easier than children (financially, emotionally,
433 practically): "some responsibility but not nearly as much" (Jane).

434 Louise shared a dog, and was very clear it was not *her* dog, it was shared. We argue
435 that Louise's dog sharing was indicative of a different way of thinking about and doing
436 family and intimate relationships. For some participants, this approximated queer notions of
437 'families of choice,' kin-like networks of relationships based on friendship and commitments
438 'beyond blood' (Weeks et al., 2001) and a relational ethic of 'co-independence,' combining
439 individual autonomy with strong reciprocity (egalitarian and democratic relationships)
440 (Weeks et al., 2001). Their childfreedom was understood as part of this broader 'doing family
441 differently' ethos. As Louise commented:

442 "I have a slightly unusual family in that my brother's gay as well, so my sisters are
443 both heterosexual and have children, and my brother and his partner don't have
444 children, so we've got a normal family, but not one where everybody has children
445 anyway, but I've experienced quite a lot of different forms of family during my life."

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446 Rosa Marvin also rejected the (traditional) concept of family: "I think family is a
447 really unknown concept for me in some ways… I don't really get it…family's always been a
448 little bit suspect." For some, their familial relationships were so different from the norm,
449 "there isn't a language" (Louise) to easily describe the nature of the relationships, especially
450 to heterosexual others. Louise had a former partner who wanted to get pregnant; their
451 relationship ended and the partner got pregnant with another woman, Louise was there for the
452 birth of the child, and went to live overseas for a year to spend time with them when they
453 moved. She came back to the UK because she used to share a house with a friend who
454 adopted a child as a single parent (Louise was the "mad auntie in the attic") and promised the
455 child to come back: "so I consider them my family as well… [family is] slightly different I
456 guess in lesbian relationships." Louise described these children as her "semi-children," for
457 want of a better expression.

458 The women could also be drawn into relationships with children through their female
459 partners – either because the partner has or wanted children or because their partner wanted
460 some kind of relationship with other people's children. Jane's partner wanted a relationship
461 with a friend's child – they were both present for the birth, the child (now an adult) stays with
462 them. Joanne considered fostering with a female partner at one stage, and spoke about the
463 fact that had she been with a female partner who really wanted children, it might have
464 happened. Thus, like childfree heterosexual women, the decision to be childfree for lesbians
465 is not cast in stone, and reproductive decisions are made in particular relational contexts
466 (Gillespie, 2003; Lee & Zvonkovic, 2014). Even for these 'early articulators,' their choice to
467 remain childfree was not fixed, when a female partner expressed a desire for children or
468 developing some kind of relationship with a child, this could prompt reconsideration of the
469 (non)choice to be childfree (Rosa Marvin).

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470 At the same time, the relational ethic of 'co-independence' seemed to underpin
471 women's reproductive decision making, and relationships with children, in (same-sex)
472 relationships. There was less pressure or expectation to see a partner's children as part of
473 *their* family. Debbie was in a relationship with a woman who had children (the woman was
474 older than she was), one of the children lived with them for a year, but there was no pressure
475 or expectation for her to develop a relationship with the child or see this child as part of her
476 family. Likewise, Louise's current partner had adult children and she was reluctant (and did
477 not experience pressure) to get involved: "if you take on some responsibility for a child at any
478 point… that's potentially open ended for the rest of your life." Her partner also spent regular
479 time with a friend's child and "I'm very much back-up on that one."

480 Furthermore, although these women saw themselves as 'essentially childfree' their
481 lives were not (generally) free of relationships with children. They engaged in social
482 reproduction (Blackstone, 2014; Blackstone & Greenleaf, 2015) through relationships with
483 nieces and nephews and friends' children and through working with children.

484 When the women reflected on the absence of their 'own' children from their familial
485 and social networks and looked to the future, they spoke of the importance of having lots of
486 (younger and older) friends and of sharing in other people's children. They also discussed
487 'compensating' for the absence of traditional support networks – "what are we going to do to
488 compensate for that? Well there are other ways of living" (Jane) – by creating their own
489 networks, or families of choice. They also imagined different ways of living - "reimagining
490 how we can live" (Rosa Marvin) – in terms of communities for older adults, and ways of
491 doing family and caring beyond the nuclear family.

492

General discussion and conclusions

493 It is clear from the complex and often contradictory ways our participants made sense
494 of the childfreedom that even for a group for whom childlessness is arguably still expected

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495 and normative (although this is changing), it remains socially difficult to articulate a desire to
496 remain childfree. They framed their childfreedom both as essential and innate and as
497 politically and biographically motivated – a rejection of motherhood and traditional
498 womanhood (being a wife) in a patriarchal society, informed by their own experiences of
499 being parented and parenting early in life (Mollen, 2006; Mezey, 2008). Houseknecht (1987)
500 argued that women and men rationalise their decision to be childfree by drawing on "an
501 acceptable vocabulary of motives previously established by the historical epoch and the
502 social structure in which one lives" (p. 316). The notion that one is 'essentially childfree'
503 appears to be a currently acceptable framing of being childfree. For example, Morison et al.
504 (2016) analysed posts to researcher generated online forums and email interviews with 98
505 childfree women and men. They argued that the fact that some women (and men) position
506 themselves as 'naturally childfree' – through describing their childlessness as innate and
507 immutable, fixed at birth ('born that way') – can be understood as a strategy for managing the
508 stigma of voluntary childlessness. Through disavowing choice and minimising their
509 responsibility for their childlessness, it just *is*. Thus, arguably the stigma of being childfree is
510 such that it shapes even how people explain their 'decision' to remain childfree.

511 Being lesbian and childfree is in many ways different from being heterosexual and
512 childfree – childfreedom afforded the women the *freedom* to spend time and form
513 relationships with other lesbians (similarly to Bartlett, 1994). Furthermore, from our
514 perspective as researchers, overall, the impression we developed of our lesbian participants is
515 that they were far less isolated in their childfreedom than the heterosexual woman in the
516 wider study (Authors, 2017). Friends (especially lesbian friends) having children did not
517 prompt questioning of their decision and feelings of loss (of the friendship) in the same way
518 that it did for the heterosexual women in the wider study. There was support for women's
519 choices both to parent and to remain childfree in lesbian communities, and the women did not

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520 feel pressure to consider parenting when women in their lesbian communities chose to
521 become parents. Other people (friends and family) did not expect them to have children (once
522 they came out) (Gillespie, 1999) and they themselves did not question the childlessness of
523 their lesbian friends. At the same time, there was recognition that the lesbian 'baby boom'
524 had resulted in greater visibility and recognition of lesbian parenting, and some participants
525 had encountered the unwelcome imposition of heteronormative expectations onto their life
526 narratives. The women also spoke of being lesbian and childfree as a 'double whammy,' two
527 forms of difference that could make it difficult to connect with (heterosexual) people in
528 mundane situations.

529 Discourses and practices of 'families of choice' and 'co-independence' in intimate
530 partnerships (Weeks et al., 2001; Weston, 1991) provided the lesbian women with a way of
531 'doing' family and childfreedom outside of dominant, heteronormative expectations. This of
532 course raises questions about the normalising effects of marriage and parenting rights on the
533 lives of queer people – including childfree lesbians – who live outside of dominant
534 heteronormative institutions and practices of family (Mitchell et al., 2009). For example,
535 research on queer youth in the last decade, what might be dubbed a 'post-equality' era in
536 some Western nations, has found strong expectations of parenthood (e.g. D'Augelli, Redina,
537 Grossman, Sinclair & Grossman, 2008). It may get even more (socially) difficult to be
538 childfree and lesbian in the future. For this reason, both voluntary childlessness and LGBT
539 family researchers should put childfree queer lives on the research agenda.

540 **Limitations of the Study**

541 This study provided an in-depth exploration of the experiences of being childfree for a
542 small group of white, middle class lesbians in midlife. The relative privilege of the
543 participants should be considered when assessing the applicability of these findings to other
544 groups of childfree lesbians, and to non-heterosexual populations more broadly. Further

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545 research is needed to develop our understanding of the lived experience of being childfree for
546 lesbians and for other members of queer communities. Research on childfree bisexual and
547 trans people is particularly limited (research on trans childfree lives is limited to a study of
548 the reproductive desires of the cis women partners of trans men, Pfeffer, 2012). Bisexual
549 participants have often been amalgamated with lesbian/gay participants in the limited
550 literature that includes childless/childfree non-heterosexuals (e.g. Robinson & Brewster,
551 2014), when wider evidence points to important differences in bisexual and gay/lesbian
552 experience, and the importance of disaggregating bisexual and lesbian/gay experiences to
553 fully understand the former (Barker et al., 2012). Future research should examine how the
554 experiences of childfree lesbians, and other childfree queers, are shaped by factors such as
555 race and ethnicity, religion, social class and ability, and how both the stigmatisations of
556 childlessness in strongly pronatalist cultures and communities and coercive pronatalism (the
557 stratification of pressures to reproduce, and the active discouragement of reproduction, based
558 on factors such as class, race, ability etc, Morison et al., 2016) shape queer experiences of
559 choosing and living out childfreedom.

560 Conclusions

561 LGBT family research has begun to examine queer reproductive decision making (e.g.
562 Riskind & Patterson, 2010), but to-date this has been predominantly oriented to the choice to
563 parent, rather than the choice to remain childfree. In understanding queer family lives, it is
564 equally important to consider pathways to childlessness/childfreedom as well as to
565 parenthood, and to decentre pronatalist definitions of the family in LGBT family studies. The
566 voluntary childlessness literature has begun to move away from its early preoccupation with
567 pathways to childlessness to explore the texture and substance of childfree lives. Most
568 recently, researchers have engaged with notions of the childfree family and sought to
569 challenge assumptions, underpinned by pronatalist definitions of family, that childfree people

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570 do not ‘do’ family (e.g. Blackstone, 2014; Blackstone & Greenleaf, 2015). Indeed, the choice
571 not to have children has been described as “one of the most remarkable changes in the
572 modern family during the last few decades” (Agrillo & Nelini, 2008, p. 347). However, even
573 though increased childlessness is often cited as evidence of family change, it has until
574 recently been rarely addressed in the family studies literature. Blackstone (2014) argues that
575 (heterosexual) childfree couples fulfil many of the functions of family, including
576 companionship, intimacy and social reproduction (the work needed to help children develop
577 into productive adults). To avoid reproducing the heteronormativity of earlier voluntary
578 childlessness research and to fully understand what it means to ‘do’ family without being a
579 parent, it is important that same-sex couples are included in future research on childfree
580 families.
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[1] This nomenclature is not without debate. Feminist literature on voluntary childlessness has criticised deficit orientated language (e.g. child*less* or *non*-mother) (e.g. Gillespie, 1999). Adding complexity, some scholars have argued that the term 'childfree' risks glorifying non-motherhood, and note some women prefer to simply state that they do not want to have children (Moore, 2014). In this paper, we use both childless and childfree to reflect the context of the research under discussion. However, wherever appropriate we use the term 'childfree' as a *voluntary* status based on the comments of women in our own and other recent research (e.g. Peterson, 2015) which suggest that this is the least disliked term.

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