TITLE: Women who choose not to have children: A preliminary study.

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Abstract

Women who choose not to have children have been largely overlooked in both mainstream and feminist literature, where the focus is more typically on childbirth and motherhood or reproduction and infertility. Using data obtained through semi-structured interviews with four women aged 45 and over, this paper presents the initial findings of an on-going constructivist grounded theory study with women who have chosen not to have children.

Findings from category one suggest that participants had no desire to replicate motherhood. The reasons included their negative experiences and memories of family life. Access to education and introduction to feminist ideas helped develop a strong sense of agency. Ongoing reflection on their lives illustrated how adult relationships were prioritised over motherhood. Findings from the other three categories (briefly discussed) challenge some of the dominant ideologies and assumptions about women who choose not to have children.

Key words: Women, Choice, Childless, Grounded theory

Introduction

Despite many years of social and cultural changes, the gendered expectations of women are that they will bear children. Indeed most women do have children. Nevertheless, a growing number are now electing not to have children, a choice which Letherby (1999) argues places them as the 'other' and in direct opposition to 'mother'. The sparse research literature on this topic poignantly illustrates the negative ways in which voluntary childless women are positioned (Meyers, 2001). These women are seen to have denied themselves their real purpose in life by ignoring their maternal instincts.   Gillespie, (2001, p142) states, they *"are perceived*

as maladjusted, selfish and immature and their choice is problematic". She found that there are no positive words to describe women without children. Terms used such as 'childless' or 'without children' tend to denote loss or absence. "*The problem for childless women, then, is that as 'real women' something is missing; there is a flaw in our identity and lifestyle"* Wager, (2000, p3)*.*

A possible reason for these (mis)perceptions is that voluntary childlessness challenges the 'normal' trajectory marked by transitions and life events, where marriage and parenthood are seen as normative steps in adult lives (Elder, 2008; Giddens and Sutton, 2013). Rich (1977, p261) notes that both *"historically and cross-culturally, a woman's status as a child bearer has been the test of her womanhood".* These expectations are supported by international studies. For examples see: Veevers, 1980 (North America); Cannold, 2000, (Australia); Kopper and Smith, 2001; La Mastro, 2001; Park, 2002, (US); Kohler Reissman 2000 (South India); Carmichael and Whittaker, 2007 (Australia); Hara, 2008 (Japan and Germany); Tanturri and Mencarini, 2008 (Italy); Sonia, 2009 (Upper Zambezi); Van Bavel and Kok, 2010 (Netherlands); Yang, 2012 (Korea); and van der Gest and Nahar, 2013 (Ghana and Bangladesh).

Women are expected to conform to the particular norms of the societies into which they are born (Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1974; Rich, 1977). Institutions such as the family, the education system, the church, religions and welfare states all have distinct discourses that construct women in particular ways and control aspects of their lives (Pateman, 1988). These discourses construct explicit roles for women, such as 'mothers', 'daughters' and 'wives' (Oakley, 1984; Finch, 1989; Mason & Jensen, 1995). These roles reinforce gendered identities within societies and strengthen the expectations that all women will become or want to be mothers.

In Britain following the Second World War it was estimated ten per cent of women were childless (ONS,2011). During this period, childlessness was seen as the result of absence of opportunity for marriage. Men had been away at war, times were hard, and many were reluctant to commit to marriage and children (Rowlands, 2007). Current predictions are that by 2020, twenty two per cent of all women who reach the age of 45 will be childless (ONS, 2011). The major difference between the post war

period and now is that childlessness is occuring among women who are healthy, sexually active, in employment, married or cohabiting (Coleman, 1996).

UK studies confirm this trend that an increasing number of women are choosing not to have children. Kiernan's (1989) study explored childlessness among women (and men) born in 1946. Her results suggest that childless adults were making a lifestyle choice, valuing careers and leisure activities over family life. Portani and Whitworth (2009) conducted a quantitative study of childless women born between the years 1956 and 1960 in England and Wales. A distinct profile emerged of educated, white women who owned their own homes. The majority resided in London and the South east, and were employed in professional, managerial, or technical occupations. In a UK study with childless women, Hakim (2000) identified a similar demographic profile. Her findings suggested participants prioritised their work and remained childless by choice. She defines this as 'preference theory', a feature of an individualised 21st century lifestyle.

Feminist writers continue to challenge the gendered nature of women's lives (de Beauvoir, 1953; Millett 1977; Oakley, 1984; Mitchell, 1984; Bradley, 2013). Up to now, most feminist researchers have tended to focus their attention on issues of reproduction, motherhood, infertility, childbirth, employment, and childcare. In recent times, there has been increased interest in childlessness by choice from researchers in a number of disciplines (Kiernan, 1989; Letherby, 1999, 2002; Letherby & Williams 1999; Gillespie, 2000, 2001; Hakim, 2000; Portani and Whitworth, 2009 and Shaw, 2011). These are important contributions to a neglected area of feminist research. However, as the short citation list reveals, this is presently an understudied area.

Given the increasing numbers of women who are choosing not to have children this is an area of research that can no longer be ignored. The voices of these women are largely silent or marginalised within feminist discourse. We need to hear more from women who have made this choice. Why have they elected for childlessness and resisted the dominant expectations to be mothers? What have been their experiences? And what are the consequences of these choices on their lives?

This paper presents the findings from the initial stages of an on-going constructivist grounded theory study, which seeks to explore with women why they chose not to

have children, how they made that choice, their experiences arising from that choice and the perceived impact on their lives.

Methodology

Design
The research was designed and analysed based on the principles of constructivist grounded theory developed by the American sociologist, Kathy Charmaz (2014). We designed a semi–structured interview schedule to guide the discussions with participants.   It comprised three main areas of questioning: To start with an introductory question, which enabled participants to share their life histories, family background, childhood experiences, education, careers and relationships.   This was followed by questions exploring their experiences of marriage/relationships and their choices not to have children. The final questions explored possible impact on their lives as a result of their choices.

Sample
The inclusion criteria were women aged 45 and over, who had chosen not to have children. The age criteria was selected since childbearing years are conventionally perceived to be between the ages of 15 and 45. A requirement of the ethical approval was that women who had undergone unsuccessful Invitro fertilisation (IVF) treatment and women who had chosen not to have children because of a genetic disorder were excluded.

Ethics
Ethical Approval was granted from the university ethics committee. In keeping with the ethics of trust explicit in our method, we have endeavoured to apply principles of care and responsibility (Edwards & Maunthers, 2002) throughout the process. Many of the topics discussed were highly personal, so to further ensure confidentiality and protect anonymity only generic details relating to relationship status, age and employment history are revealed about the participants. The following pseudonyms were used (Kate, Elin, Maggie, and Julie) to introduce and report the women's narratives.

Participants
Four women, whose ages ranged between 47 and 52 years, took part. Three of the participants are in long term relationships. One participant previously married is now

divorced and not in a relationship. Although all had elected not to have children themselves, one self-identified as a stepmother, and another as a step grandmother. All are in full time employment. Two participants who are acquaintances of the first author expressed an interest in the research topic and were opportunistically sampled. They offered details of two further potential participants, who agreed to be interviewed.

Interviews

Once participants agreed to be interviewed, a copy of the participant information sheet and the consent form was emailed to them. Participants chose the date, time, and location for interviews. The length of the interviews varied from 35 minutes to one hour and 17 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed. Participants were asked if they wished to have a copy of their transcripts. Two participants requested their transcripts and were sent copies.

Method of Analysis

Charmaz (2010, p.130) explains that the researcher '*constructs theory'* from the collected data and defines the constructivist approach as placing,

> …*priority on the phenomena of study and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data.*

The analysis was mainly conducted by the first author. Once each interview had been conducted, the process of memo writing began. Memo writing is a central tenet of grounded theory. As Charmaz (2014, p163) states, "*it is the pivotal intermediate step between data collection and writing of drafts"*. Memos were written following each interview and as part of an ongoing process of analysis. Initial memos reflected the first authors impressions of what participants were saying and why. These initial memos were free flowing or what Orana (1997) refers to as '*flights of fancy'*.

The transcribed data was read and line by line coding was undertaken. On second and subsequent reading and memoing new codes emerged. Finally, the emerging codes from this process were grouped together into coherent units, which form the basis for categorisation (Charmaz, 2010; Rennie, Phillips & Quartaro, 1988; Dunne, 2012).   Further interrogation of the codes and memos helped to generate the

categories (Charmaz, 2006). Throughout this process, the emerging categories were discussed regularly with the second author. In the process of selecting codes for the data and constructing the categories, we endeavoured to give precedence to the words of the participants.
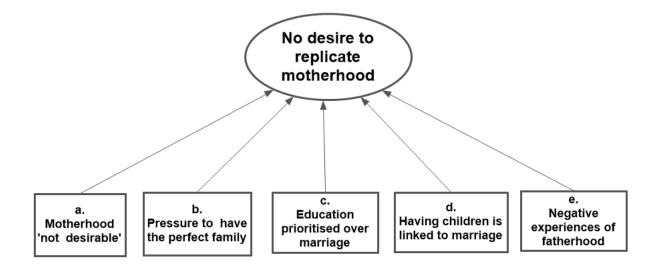
Findings
Four main categories emerged from analysis of the data. These are:

1. No desire to replicate motherhood;

2. Participants prioritised relationships over motherhood;

3. Having no children suggests you do not like children;

4. Loss and regret as normal elements of everyday life.

The purpose of this section is to explain how we arrived at category 1: No desire to replicate motherhood. To do this we will present how each of the codes (a - e) informed its construction (see Figure 1). Following this, and due to the constraints of the word count for this paper summaries of the other three categories are briefly presented.

Figure 1: Codes to Category 1. :- No desire to replicate motherhood

a. Motherhood – 'not desirable'

Three of the four participants recall that motherhood was neither desired nor an enjoyable experience for their own mothers. Kate recalls that her mother, *"did not want any children, she never wanted children"*. Her mother also, "*thought her father felt the same"*. However when they were married her husband wanted a family and as Kate tells us, "*my Dad sandbagged her* [my mother] *into it".* "*He* [her father] *was from a working class family and in working class families, communities, family was a given"*.

Julie recollects that, "*pregnancy, for my mother was not an enjoyable experience."* Her mother was physically ill during each pregnancy. Julie learned from her mother "*that pregnancy and having babies was not everything she thought it would be"*. In fact, she wonders whether she was actually wanted by her mother,

> *"Her pregnancy with me and the physical illness with me precipitated one of the worst periods for her in terms of her depression…I was probably pretty unwelcome, unconsciously unwelcome"*.

Elin remembers that her mother did not have an easy time with parenting. As she recollects, *"Motherhood wasn't a bed of roses for her to raise children"*. Elin's childhood memories are ones filled with tension, with her mother constantly being a peacemaker in the home, trying to ensure family life was not disrupted. Her father had a very bad temper and she remembers family life as one where, "*her mother spent a lot of time and energy diffusing tense family situations."* On reflection, she tells us that her mother had not set up, *"parenthood, and marriage as being an absolutely fabulous experience and one to replicate"*.

b. Pressure to have the perfect family

The pressure to produce the idealised child is evident in Maggie's memories. These messages come from her maternal grandmothers, both of whom were living with her family at this time. The family home, in Eastern Europe, was situated in an area where there was a school for children with learning disabilities. Based on what Maggie heard from her grandmother, she recalls that, "*my first thought was, oh good grief I would never have the courage to have kids in case they turned out like that"*. This message appears to be reinforced when she is regularly told by her grandmothers that, "*there is nothing worse than having a child with a learning*

disability". As a child, she was very conscious of the fact that if she were to have a child, it would need to be perfect. She recalls, "*a non-perfect child means you become an outcast in the community*".

Julie remembers that her mother over exaggerated femininity in her daughters and she constantly sought conformity to notions of the idealised child. As she says, "*I now look at photographs and see the frills of the perfect family, beautiful children, beautifully dressed*". Julie also recalls her mother's struggle to create this expectation. She states, "*My mother was a very disciplinarian mother trying to create the ideal family setting*".

c. Education prioritised over marriage.

For Kate, her mother's primary wish for her was to have an education. As she recalls, "*a woman's education was something that was very important*"…..."*She was very keen to ensure that her daughter got a good education*". Kate was also aware that her mother wanted her to have an alternative life. Kate stated that her mother,

> "*Did not have that option open to her. She had left school at 15, and worked as a legal secretary, remaining there until she got married. So, kind of having a husband and children weren't particularly important as far as she was concerned*".

Likewise, Elin recalls that when she attended her ten-year class reunion (in Canada), at the age of 28, she and her classmates remarked, "*How unusual it was that Sarah* [a classmate] *had two children by now at 28*". She goes on to say, "*The vast majority of us weren't even married*". Elin tells us that most of her peers were more interested in careers and home ownership, than marriage and having a family since,

> "*It was definitely a pool of upwardly mobile well-educated, independent.[young women]..the ideas of that socio economic group- the career is the thing, the academic or business life is the thing*".

For Kate, her secondary school also prioritised education over marriage and having a family. As she tells us, "*none of the teachers talked about having a family or anything like that, their focus was on education*". She remembered that her school teachers,

> *"Must have been quite feminist because there was no sense in which there were women's jobs and men's jobs. And in fact when I was 16, I went and got a job as part of a traineeship for [A company] as a trainee quarry engineer. So clearly, there was no suggestion that there were men's jobs and women's jobs".*

In Julie's interview the school she attended also prioritised education. Julie realised early on that the best way out of what was for her a chaotic family life *"was to get an education"*. The female teachers in her secondary school, who were all single women without children, were also influential in her life. As she recalls,

> *"Miss W, Miss E and Miss T who were all very calm, very very proper and they all wore lots of makeup, lipstick and dyed their hair interesting colours" . I liked them very much and I remember thinking I'd like to be like Miss W when I'm older, who was the most glamorous of all of them and had no children".*

d. Having children is linked to marriage

Kate recalls that the model of the 'nuclear family' was how family life was structured in the working class community in which she was brought up. In her community, marriage and children were seen as a regular, assumed part of a woman's life. As she tells us, *"In the 1970's, settling down and having children is a given, but having children was linked to marriage"*. It would not be desirable to have a child outside a marriage. She recalls that,

> *"There was a young woman in a neighbouring school who was pregnant and she was forced to stand in front of the class and "confess her terrible crime; being pregnant….And she was made to have the baby".*

For Kate and her peers the notion of having an unplanned pregnancy and a baby was seen, "as *the worst thing that could happen to you, your life is over…that would be completely and utterly dreadful".* Nobody thought of getting married. Teachers were not promoting marriage or motherhood and her family were not pressurising her to marry. Kate remembers that for her and her peers the, *"focus was on pregnancy avoidance, rather than who would have babies".* In Maggie's interview, she too recalls that children are linked to marriage. As she remembers, having children was not something that was talked about "*since I was not married".* Having children outside of marriage was also frowned upon*. As* she tells us, "*if you are not married and have a child, it is worse than not having them at all".*

e. Negative experiences of fatherhood.

Three of the four participants had negative experiences of fatherhood. From Kate we hear that it was her father, not her mother who wanted children, since her mother tells her, "*that she never wanted children and …my Dad sandbagged her* [my mother] *into it".* We hear that Elin's father has a temper, which needed to be managed. As she reminds us, " *lots of…my mother having to justify my Dad's rages"".* In Julie's interview, we hear of a father who is ill [alcoholic] and unable to parent when required,

> *"As I was growing up and from the moment I lost my Mum, I felt very conscious of the fact our family was not liked, there was no mother and my father was drinking. The family falls apart and disintegrates when Mum dies".*

These codes informed the category. No desire to replicate motherhood. In summary, most participants recall that marriage and having children were neither a desired nor an enjoyable experience for their mothers. They reveal that their mothers struggled to uphold and represent the idealised model of children, motherhood, and family life. The emphasis on education and a career was promoted both internally by family (mainly mothers) and externally by some teachers. Subsequently, whilst growing up education and a career were considered more important than marriage and motherhood. Participants' experiences of fatherhood are recalled as either 'demanding', or 'inept'. All participants acknowledge the impact these experiences had on their lives. Becoming a mother was not something they desired for themselves.

Having presented the codes which informed the first category, we now turn to briefly summarise the three remaining categories which emerged from our analysis.

2. Participants prioritised adult relationships over motherhood

As part of ongoing reflection on their adult lives, participants prioritised their adult relationships over their decisions to have a child. All had discussed the possibility of parenthood at some stage in their lives. Maggie shares that one of the conditions of marriage agreed with her husband was not to have children. Kate and Julie decided not to pursue motherhood for a variety of reasons; "it *would not bring anything extra to their relationships, the timing was not right, there were other things to do".* Early

on in her marriage, Elin was interested in having a baby. Having talked about this with her husband, they both felt "*that to bring a child into their relationship would not be good financially or emotionally*".

3. Having no children suggests you do not like children.

Three of the four participants state that some people assume because they have no children, they do not like children. They recall that once people become aware they have no children, conversations seem to come to an abrupt end. Kate and Elin feel that this sometimes denies them the opportunity to talk about children or talk with children. Kate tells us "*I quite like to find out about what people's children are doing*". For Elin, *"I quite like talking to teenagers, really enjoy listening to how they use language".* These three participants have a very direct role in the lives of children - Julie (niece), Kate (step children), Elin (step grandchildren).They feel these experiences are enjoyable and rewarding for both themselves and the children. Julie tells us her colleagues often remark, *"She* [her niece] *may as well be your child, the way you look after her".*

4. Loss and regret as normal elements of everyday life

When asked, participants were willing to share their feelings on loss and regret. Maggie does not feel any sense of either loss or regret at her choice not to have children. She views her choice as a positive one. Neither Kate nor Julie had any desire to have their own children. At the same time, they acknowledge loss and regret associated with their choice. Kate shares that having a child would have been an interesting experience, but "*it was only one experience in life, there were also other as important things to do … politics, environment ...*" She acknowledges," *that the desire to have a child could not have been that strong, otherwise I would have pursued it".* For Julie, the sense of loss and regret is also about the experience of not being a mother, not having reared a child, seen them grow into adults. At the same time, she does not feel it as an overwhelming loss. She tells us,

"*Yes, I think there is loss and regret but very much loss and regret felt in the same way as I feel about not doing other things in my life, normal loss, and regret as an element of everyday life*".

Elin does express significant loss and regret. She says, *"It feels like bereavement at 48…It's probably something in me that I feel a sense of failure to take up the challenge, was weak, was some sort of reject, it's these sort of niggling monster in the bedroom kinda thing".* When asked about her perceived sense of personal failure she responds by saying, *"because people keep reminding me that a full acceptable complete life involves raising a family".*

Discussion

Having presented the initial findings, we will now go on to discuss how these inform our research question. In exploring why participants choose not to have children, insights from the data reveal that their choices may have been influenced by a combination of two key factors. Firstly, we found that participants had no desire to replicate motherhood, due to their negative experiences and memories of traditional family life. This finding is consistent with Salecl, (2011, p111) who argued that women's *"decision to have (or not to have) children has been influenced by how they have interpreted their own mother's desire to have them".*

Secondly, participants had the opportunity for non-gendered education from women teachers who offered exposure to feminist ideas. These ideas may have enabled participants to develop their own sense of agency and exercise choice. This raises the question as to the possible impact of agency and feminist ideas on the choices women make and the opportunities presented for alternative lives.   As Wager stated, (2000, p10) "*every woman is a potential mother, biologically or socially, but it is not our only potential; there are many more*".

In addressing how participants made their choices, they prioritised their adult relationships over motherhood.   For all participants, the process involved in making their choices was both considered and considerate. It was considered in that this choice was part of an ongoing process of reflection on how they wanted to live their adult lives.   It was considerate in that they felt to bring a child into the world and into their relationships would not have benefitted either the child or the parent(s).

Ireland (1993) categorised such women as 'transformative' in that they know they are challenging gendered expectations of women to become mothers, but they want something more than motherhood. None of them viewed their careers as being a central element in making their choices. This insight is in contrast to Hakim's 'preference theory' in which women who choose not to have children prioritised their careers over motherhood. Participants in our study saw their careers as one important element of their lives but it was not the key factor which influenced their choices.

These narratives reveal the complexity of the choice making process and raise the need for further exploration.

One of the important findings to emerge is around the negative assumptions some people make about women who do not have children. Participants revealed that people often assume that they do not like children further reinforcing this negative positioning. This may also deny children the opportunity to interact with those who have chosen alternatives to motherhood. This finding raises the question as to whether women who choose not to have children are seen as negative rather than positive role models.

Finally, another important issue to emerge was in relation to loss and regret in later life. A common assumption is that women who choose not to have children will experience significant loss and regret because of this decision (Letherby, (1999); Wager, 2000; Gillespie, 2001). However, three out of the four participants did not have this experience. The sense of loss and regret, which they experienced, was no greater than that felt as part of everyday life. Only one of the participants, Elin, expressed feelings of significant loss and regret. This experience was reinforced by the expectations of some others who saw her choice as that of a weak woman who did not take up the challenge of motherhood. This raises the question as to what extent perceived notions of loss and regret can be socially constructed within particular contexts and requires further exploration.

Conclusion

Women who choose not to have children are still perceived as somehow in deficit, and are positioned negatively within society. Their voices have been largely silent

and marginalised within feminist discourse. Our research seeks to enable these women to speak for themselves about why they chose not to have children, how they made that choice and the impact on their lives.

These initial findings offer some insights into the lives of women who elect not to have children. Overall, making a choice not to have a child is a complex process. Participants' choices appear to have been made after much thought and consideration. Their choices were influenced by negative experiences and memories of traditional family life. The opportunity to pursue education introduced them to feminist ideas and alternative life choices. This may have informed a greater sense of agency and the confidence to challenge some of the oppressive gendered structures in their own lives.

The findings also suggest that women without children are often perceived as not liking children. As a result, they are often excluded from discussions with and about children. This exclusion may deny others the opportunity to engage with alternative views on motherhood, thus reinforcing gendered norms and societal expectations. Findings challenge the perception that women who choose not to have children experience loss and regret as a result of their decision.

We acknowledge that further research is required to explore our research questions in greater depth. We also urge caution in drawing any firm conclusions from what are the preliminary stages of a larger ongoing study. At present, the sample size is small. However, our study has gone some way towards enhancing our understanding of this neglected area of women's lives. The women's narratives discussed here both resonate with the literature to date as well as challenging some of the dominant ideologies and assumptions about women who choose not to have children.

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