‘I WAS LOOKING FOR SOMETHING DIFFERENT AND I FOUND IT’

A constructivist grounded theory study with women who choose not to have children

A thesis submitted to Cardiff Metropolitan University in partial fulfilment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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November 2016

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Declaration

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed  Rate Ó’Grísaíl  (candidate)

Date .............26.11.2016..........................................................

STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote(s).

Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

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STATEMENT 2

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Abstract

Increasing numbers of women are defying societal expectations and choosing not to have children. At the same time, their choices remain shrouded in disapproval and silence. Despite significant cultural changes and the influences of the feminist movement, the idea that womanhood equates with motherhood endures.

The aims of this study were to critically understand why women choose not to have children and to consider the consequences of their choices on their lives. Twenty-two women aged between 40 and 75, from across England, Scotland, and Wales participated in this constructivist grounded theory study. All women were educated to degree level or higher and came from a range of social class backgrounds. Drawing from interviews with participants, this study presents three key findings to inform a sociological understanding of this topic.

First, the findings reveal that participants’ choices not to have children are best understood as part of a complex interplay between restraining and liberating experiences in their lives. Social class also had a significant influence on their life experiences and subsequently on their choices. Their choices not to have children were formed within a specific social context and from the complex interplay of their personal and social experiences within an unequal world. Second, participants feel they are perceived as women of ‘lesser value’. This positioning is expressed through negative language, stereotyping, and reinforced in families, communities, and workplaces. This finding reveals the dominant societal gendered expectations that womanhood and motherhood are synonymous. It exposes a culture of silence, motherarchal ideas, and the societal practices that sustain it. Third, participants do not regret their choices. This finding challenges the myth that women who make this choice will experience regret and that motherhood and family is the only haven for fulfilment. This finding submits that a choice for non-motherhood is a choice for a different life that offers multiple possibilities.

Taken together, the findings support previous and current research. They also raise important issues and questions for further study. More research and work is needed to ensure that women’s choices for non-motherhood are understood, respected, and supported. Moreover, it will be necessary to understand and challenge the dominant pronatalist ideas that denigrate alternative choices.
Acknowledgements

Much of this work would not have been possible without the help and support I received from a wide range of people. Firstly, to my participants, without whom none of this would be possible. Thank you for your generous stories, your time, the cups of tea, and your humanity. I hope I have done your stories justice.

Secondly to my supervisors, Dr. Jenny Mercer and Dr. Dan Heggs. Thank you Jenny for your sharp and insightful comments that made me laugh and cry in equal measure. Also, for your time and your patience with my queries and anxieties and for knowing when enough was enough. Thank you Dan, for your support and guidance throughout the past five years. It has been a pleasure to work with you both.

Thirdly, to my colleagues and friends, Heulwen Davies, Jessica Davies, Ela Tarnowska, Elaine Earle, Dave Lock, Shirley Hobbis, Chris Martin, Cath Boswell, Liz Hayes, Gwenda Roberts, Dr. Kate Attfield and Nic Burchett. Thank you all for staying interested and asking questions, even when at times I really did not want to talk about it.

To the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh for reminding me where I came from. Finally, to you Martin, for the tea, sympathy and searching questions. With any luck, we can now look forward to having an ‘ordinary’ conversation in West Cork.
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Chapter 1: Introduction, Context and Literature Review

Introduction

The focus of this study is on women who choose not to have children. The overall aims of the study were to critically understand why women choose not to have children and to consider the consequences of their choices on their lives. My starting point was my own personal experience and interest as a woman who made the choice. I was brought up in an Irish Catholic farming family in Southern Ireland. At that time (1960s), politically and economically, the family was the basic unit of the rural economy. For the Catholic Church, it was the foundation of society (Mahon, 1994). Eamon de Valera, the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) enshrined the role of the family in the 1937 Constitution,

The state recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law (Article, 41.1.1 cited in Beale, 1986, p.6).

The role of women was clearly defined by this doctrine. Women were wives and mothers. Church and state worked hand in hand to protect and promote Catholic morality and institutionalise family life. At that time, in farming communities, it was common for both women and men to share farm work. However, irrespective of these demands, a woman’s primary role was to bear, rear and care for children. In addition, in most households women had the responsibility to care for older members of their husband’s family.

Married women without children were rare in my community. I can only recall two couples who did not have children. I also recall that these were often the subject of both pity and speculation. Pity, since they were childless and speculation about why that might be the case. This speculation was generally centred on the woman rather than the man. I had an aunt who did not have children. She was married and lived in the UK but holidayed in Ireland twice a year. She worked full time. She was very glamorous, wore beautiful clothes, and was funny, kind, and generous with her time and money. I admired her very much. I
was also aware that people viewed her as a ‘bit odd and sad’, or to reflect the oft-used Irish phrase, ‘she was not blessed with children’.

I grew up thinking that the worth and value of women’s lives depended very much on their reproductive capacities. As a young woman in this community, there was an unambiguous expectation that I would get married and have children. However, from an early age, I realised I did not want to follow this path in life. There were other things I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to travel. I wanted to work, earn my own money, and not be dependent on a man.

This view that all women will be wives and mothers was further reinforced when I went to a convent secondary school. All the teaching staff, except our physical education teacher, were Catholic nuns. The focus of their teaching at that time was to prepare us for marriage and motherhood. We were also prepared for employment but such roles were always seen as a diversion from our real vocation in life - marriage and motherhood. If we expressed a wish to attend university, we were guided towards degree programmes, which would ultimately benefit our gendered lives. For example, it was deemed appropriate to choose a degree course in domestic science or home economics. Such a degree would help us to become good cooks, wives, and mothers. We would also acquire the etiquette to host the perfect dinner party, which was deemed essential to support our husband’s career. Thus, the call to marriage and motherhood was ever present.

Having left secondary school, I was keen to begin to earn my own money and to be independent. I was also excited about the opportunity to move to a city. My first formal paid job was as a clerical officer in the Irish Civil Service. The workforce was made up of young women who had left secondary school and who shared similar backgrounds to my own. Most of these hoped for marriage and children. Our supervisors were all ‘older’ women. ‘Older’ was the term we (at that time in our late teens and early twenties), applied to women in their late thirties or early forties. I realised that I was not going to remain in that job for any longer than was necessary. I enrolled on an evening course at university to pursue a diploma in social sciences. Once I graduated, I made a decision to leave my job. This was a difficult decision and one, which at that time, made my parents unhappy. A job
in the Civil Service meant financial security and a pension at the end of your working life. To give this up was not seen as a sensible thing to do and in rural Ireland, being sensible was one of the most important virtues to hold.

I took a job as a support worker with L’Arche in Southern Ireland. L’Arche employs people to work and live in community with people with intellectual disabilities. I joined a community of women and men who came from Ireland, other European countries and Canada. Whilst working there, I became aware that my co-workers were doing what they wanted with their own lives. They had all chosen to be there. They were content with their choices and made an enormous contribution to the lives of people with intellectual disabilities. I was also very happy in this world. I really enjoyed the work. Everyone, women and men were expected to be able to cook, clean, garden, feed, and look after the cattle and sheep, exercise horses and do other essential repair jobs. No one talked about marriage, motherhood and ‘settling down’. This was in direct contrast to the world I left behind in the civil service. By now, my peers and ex-colleagues were rapidly pursuing marriage and motherhood. Therefore, when the opportunity arose to work outside Ireland, I chose to leave.

Whilst I had some awareness at that time that there were other ways to frame our understandings of the world, the opportunity to explore these did not present itself until much later in my life. I returned to University in my early 30s as a mature student. I read for a degree in Sociology and Social policy. While at university, I had the opportunity to study sociological and feminist thinkers. For example, the work of Harriet Martineau (1802-1876), Dorothy Smith (1926- ), Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) and others. Through engaging with these ideas, I became aware of the powerful ideological ideas that had framed my own life and the lives of other women. I learned that despite significant advances for women in the twentieth century, powerful gendered expectations remain that women will bear children. De Beauvoir’s equation that ‘woman=mother=womb’ remains a dominant idea in contemporary societies (Shapiro, 2014, p.10). The traditional family, educational and welfare institutions, faith organisations, politicians and the media all seek to construct women in particular ways (Pateman, 1988; Kirchgaessner, 2015). Explicit roles are constructed for women, such as ‘mothers’, ‘daughters’ and ‘wives’ (Oakley, 1984; Finch,
These roles reinforce gendered identities within societies and sustain expectations that all women will become or want to be mothers. At the same time, I learned that these expectations are open to critique. Crucially, that some women had successfully rejected gendered expectations and had shaped lives of their own. They defied the norms within a context of deeply embedded gendered expectations and made alternative choices (Rosaldo & Lamphere 1974; Rich, 1977; 1986; Daum, 2015).

My professional working life was spent mainly in a variety of posts in the field of health and social care. Most of this work was with people who were marginalised and excluded from society. I worked with people with learning disabilities, people with mental health issues, homeless women, people who had experienced domestic violence and with younger and older people in care. Alongside this, I worked as an associate lecturer in the social science faculty of the Open University. I was fortunate that these roles complemented each other as I could draw on both practice experience and theoretical knowledge.

During my time working in the Third Sector, I was very aware of the absence of service user voices informing our day-to-day practice, policy and research (Lister, 2003; Beresford, 2016). I learned that many of the social policies that shaped our work, while well meaning and designed to improve the lives of excluded people, did not always help and sometimes made things worse. For example, when a young homeless woman had a baby, she was categorised as in ‘priority need’ for housing. I found that for many of these young mothers the move to independent living was often too much too soon. They wanted and needed more focused support, which was often not available. As a result, it was common for such tenancies to break down. The result was that they were once again homeless, and their children taken into care. This often led to pathologising and their further marginalisation. They were seen in negative and degrading ways for their failure to conform to the ‘ideal type’ mother (Meyers, 2001; Bradley, 2013).

No one had taken the time to ask these women about themselves and what would improve their lives. From these practice experiences, I found that there was a significant gap between the understandings and objectives of policy makers and the lived experience of people’s lives. This pattern was evident time and time again with other groups of people I
worked with across the Third Sector. For me, such practice insights revealed the importance and value of working with the lived experience of people. Similarly as an educator, I found that students learn when they have opportunities to explore their own worlds. When they listen and share with other students and when their experiences are validated in positive ways. These experiences shaped my own philosophy of education and approach to research. As an educator, I am not ‘neutral’ but actively involved and learning with students. For instance, I do not see teaching as something we deliver and expect students to ‘bank’ the knowledge we present (Freire, 1993). I see people’s personal and collective lived experiences as the starting point for understanding and analysing their own realities. I believe knowledge is constructed from individual and shared experiences and the critical exploration of ideas. My approach to research is also underpinned by this philosophy.

The mother question

Throughout my adult life and career, I was consistently asked (mainly by women), ‘do you have children?’ I usually responded by saying, ‘no, I don’t’. At that point, I hoped there would be no follow-up questions. Some quickly broke the awkward silence that ensued with something like, ‘oh you are lucky, I have two, and they are a nightmare’. Others might respond with a comment on a piece of jewellery or an item of clothing, I was wearing. For example, ‘oh, I like your earrings or I like your shoes’.

Many of the women I know in my personal life and most of my work colleagues have children. Some also have grandchildren. I have four sisters and two brothers. They all have children. Up to ten years ago, I had not met any woman who disclosed to me that her childlessness was a life choice. I had also been silent about my own choice. I made my choice and never felt the need or the desire to change my mind. Nevertheless, many times, I wondered why I felt I had to remain silent. In recent years, a small number of women confidentially revealed that they too had chosen not to have children. We shared a common experience of silence. As time went on, I became more aware that I was part of a childless minority of women who while part of society were at the same time enveloped in silence. This ignited questions for me as to why we were silent about our choices. Were there other
women out there with similar experiences? Who are they and where are they? When the opportunity arose to conduct research as part of a PhD, I saw this as a means to explore such questions.

**Aims, objectives and research questions**

The overall aims of the study were to critically understand why women choose not to have children and to consider the consequences of their choices on their lives. The objectives were to explore why and how they made their choices, to identify their experiences arising from their choices and to reveal the impact, if any, on their lives. These objectives are addressed through the following research questions:

1. Why and how participants choose not to have children?
2. What were their experiences arising from their choices?
3. What was the perceived impact, if any, on their lives?

From the outset, I wanted to conduct a qualitative study and initially I was drawn towards three methodologies. These were interpretative phenomenological analysis, discourse analysis, and grounded theory. Having evaluated each one, I opted for grounded theory and more specifically the ‘constructivist grounded theory’ approach developed by the eminent American sociologist Kathy Charmaz (1939- ) (See Chapter 2, Methodology, Design and Fieldwork). From my own personal biography and my learning as a practitioner, I wanted to hear from women themselves, their narratives, and experiences. I wanted to ensure that any understandings constructed were ‘grounded’ in the lives and experiences of participants (Charmaz, 2014).

**The Context**

Having shared my early background and rationale, it is important also to place the study in a wider context (Creswell, 2007). In particular, to present some statistics on childlessness, reveal some of the negative public discourse surrounding the topic and consider increasing signs of resistance from women themselves.
Childless women have always been a feature of every society. They comprise a significant portion of the global population. In the United Kingdom (UK), the census data on childlessness is based on women who have not borne children by the end of their reproductive life. This is, *conventionally considered to be between 15 and 45 years old*, (Portani & Whitworth, 2009, p.11). Around 20% of women in the UK are childless (ONS, 2011a; 2013a). This compares with some European countries: Austria (21%), Finland (19%), The Netherlands (18%), and Ireland (18%). Higher rates are recorded for Italy (24%). Lower rates of between 12% and 14% are recorded for Spain, Norway, and Sweden. Iceland and several eastern European countries have rates between seven and eleven per cent (OECD, 2015; Appendix 1A; 1B;1D). Childlessness rates in the United States (US) are on a par with the UK (Livingston & Cohn, D’Vera, 2012).

Childlessness is also on the rise. The proportion of childless women in England and Wales has increased year on year up until 2012 (Coleman, 1996; ONS, 2013). Following the second World War, it was estimated that around ten per cent of women in the UK were childless (ONS, 2011b). The UK 2011 census predicted that by 2020, around 22 per cent of all women who reach the age of 45 will be childless (ONS, 2011b; 2013b). This upward trend is also occurring throughout many European countries and in the US (OECD, 2015; Shah, 2015; Appendix 1A; 1B; 1D). This increase has provoked media debates over declining fertility rates in the US and across Europe. There are also anxieties around declining workforces and the capacity to provide care for older people (Childfree by Choice, 2015). Higher rates of childlessness are also linked to debates around immigration, as recently witnessed in Germany (Self, 2015; Garaev, 2015).

There is no precise information on the numbers of women who actively choose not to have children. However, in the light of other empirical research on childlessness, it is reasonable to assume that women who choose not to have children comprise a significant and increasing element of this category (Shapiro, 2014; See later in this chapter).
A negative public discourse

Childless women remain shrouded in disapproval and silence. This positioning is revealed in political and religious discourse and played out in recent controversies surrounding ‘childless women’. It can be seen as a form of discourse that is constructed in areas of public life such as the media and politics. By ‘discourse’, I mean the dominant systems of knowledge and language used to structure social life (Layder, 1994; Tonkiss, 1998). This discourse tends to portray ‘childless’ women as ‘lacking’ and ‘selfish’. It is increasingly evident in relation to women in political life. In the British Labour Party leadership contest in 2015, Helen Goodman, a Labour MP for Bishop Auckland, stated that she supported Yvette Cooper for the leadership. She felt that, ‘as a hard working mum she can understand the pressures on modern life. We need a leader who knows what challenges ordinary people face day to day’ (Goodman, 2015). This comment could be interpreted as an appeal to the ‘mums net’ fraternity and to imply that Liz Kendall (the other female ‘childless’ candidate in the contest) was somewhat ‘lacking’ in these attributes.

Another recent example is when Nicola Sturgeon, the current First Minister for Scotland and leader of the Scottish Nationalist party publicly questioned why some BBC journalists always feel a need to refer to and question her childless status. She pointed out that Alex Salmond, her predecessor as First minister also does not have children. She recalled that she has neither read nor seen an interview with Salmond when he was questioned on his ‘childless’ status (Lewis, 2015). Sturgeon also challenged another incident when the political magazine, The New Statesman published a cover picture of Sturgeon, Liz Kendall, Angela Merkel, and Theresa May. All four are shown standing around a cot, which contained a ballot box (Figure 1:1; Mason, 2015) (See next page).
The inference from this media portrayal is that these female politicians put their political careers before maternity.

Similarly, in the British Conservative leadership contest in 2016, Andrea Leadsom, a mother, and a candidate for leader of the UK Conservative party and prime minister stated that she was a better choice than the leading candidate Theresa May, who does not have children. She stated that,

*being a mum means you have a very real stake in the future of our country, a tangible stake. She [Theresa May] possibly has nieces, nephews, lots of people, but I have children who are going to have children who will directly be a part of what happens next* (ITV News, 2016).

This negative positioning of childless women in political life is also evident outside the UK. An example from Australia can be helpful here. The ex-Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, equated his predecessor, Julia Gillard’s inability to control Parliament to her ‘childless’ status. She did not have the, ‘experience of raising children’. The conservative member, Bill Heffernan, also referred to Gillard as ‘deliberately barren’ (Donald, 2007). Such comments
from members of the Australian political elite, suggested that unless a woman is also a mother, she is somehow unfit to carry out the job of prime minister. Gillard herself recalling a conversation with Barack Obama referred to how difficult this negative positioning can be, ‘I tell him, and ‘you think it’s tough being African-American? Try being me. Try being an atheist, childless, single woman as prime minister’ (Day, 2012).

This negative portrayal is generally played out within a media climate that gives prominence to mothers and motherhood. The announcement by the BBC of the gold medal win at the World Championship Athletics in Beijing, for the British athlete, Jessica Ennis-Hill included the fact that she had become a mother (BBC 1 News, 2015). Ennis-Hill also stressed the significance of her motherhood status on her performance. She told us, ‘now that I am a mother ... I hope I am an inspiration for other mums that you can do it and go out and do both really well’ (Gibson, 2015). The message here is that motherhood is not an obstacle. You can be a world-class athlete and a mother. Interviews with and about women in the media refer to their motherhood or indeed their grandmother status. For example, it is quite common for a woman to be introduced as, ‘mother and a …’ and for women to self-define as, ‘always a mother first’ (Desert Island Discs, 2011). Even in death, it would appear that women are defined by their reproductive status. For instance, it is not unusual to read that, ‘a mother of two children died in…, ‘a grandmother of four was one of those who died…’. Thus, a woman’s value in life and in death is defined by whether or not she has produced a child.

This negative discourse also emanated from organised religion and particularly from within the Roman Catholic Church and Judaism. Pope Francis recently denounced couples who choose not to have children. He stated that the, ‘the choice to not have children is selfish’. It is the choice of a, ‘greedy generation who does not want to surround itself with children that considers them above all worrisome, a weight, a risk’. He goes on to say that a ‘childless’ marriage, ‘comes to old age in solitude, with the bitterness of loneliness’ (Hinsliff, 2015; Kirchgassner, 2015). Pope Francis made his pronouncement in Rome, Italy where birth rates are falling (See Appendix 1B; 1D). However, it is interesting to note that this Catholic message is generally only heard within the northern hemisphere. Thus, Pope Francis appeared to be somewhat selective in where he delivered and promoted this
message. For instance, he made no mention of this on a recent visit to the Catholic Philippines. In addition to having a high birth rate, the Philippines have significant problems associated with poverty. This is directly correlated with large families, high infant mortality and maternal death rates (McInnes & Lee, 2012; Jaggar, 2014).

This negative discourse is also evident within Judaism. In an interview on the BBC Radio 4 series Beyond Belief, the Rabbi Dovid Lewis told listeners that it is a married couple’s duty to have children to fulfil the commandment, ‘go forth and multiply’. There is no ideal number, but it is desirable to have at least one male and one female child. You are ‘called’ to have as many children as you can. Lewis referred to a relative who has 17 children and he saw this as a positive sign of fulfilling one’s duty and faith. Lewis expressed disbelief at the idea of ‘voluntary childlessness’. He argued that, ‘your whole purpose in life is to populate, it is sinful not to have children, otherwise why are you here...and since if there is no medical reason, this this is absolutely selfish, me, me, me’ (Beyond Belief, 2015).

In contrast to that and in the same interview, we heard that Islam offered a different understanding of ‘childlessness’. The Islamic scholar, Khola Hassan, said that in Islam, married couples are encouraged to have children, but are not obligated to do so, ‘children are hoped for, but not obsessed about’. Having children is seen as a by-product of marriage, not the reason for marriage. The Qur’an, ‘warns that wealth and children can be a trial’. In the Qur’an, the wives of the Prophets were ‘childless’ (‘barren’). For this reason, there is no stigma attached to ‘childlessness’. It is not seen as selfish. Likewise, the Qur’an teaches that one should only have children, ‘if they are desired, if you are prepared to be good parents and if you can afford to look after them’. Hassan went on to say that if a woman is infertile, and the couple want and desire children, the elders will discourage divorce, but encourage the man to take another wife.

**Resistance**

Despite negative messages from powerful sources, there is growing evidence that women are beginning to resist this portrayal. Recently, the American actress Jennifer Aniston reminded people who asked her why she did not have children by stating that she was, ‘more than her ovaries’. In an article in *The Guardian*, the British actress, Kim Cattrall, (now
living in the US) also spoke about her choice. She objected to the labelling of women who choose not to have children. She admitted that she was angry when she was described as ‘childless’. She considered herself a mother, despite not having her own children,

*I am not a biological parent, but I am a parent. I have young actors and actresses that I mentor. I have nieces and nephews that I am very close to. ‘Child-less’, it’s the ‘-less’ that is offensive, it sounds like you’re less because you haven’t had a child* (Siddique, 2015).

There has also been a growth in online websites for ‘childless’ women. These have emerged mainly in the US, but also more recently in the UK and Ireland (Childfree women in UK and Ireland, 2016). Thus, there are increasing opportunities to engage in a virtual world of non-motherhood. For example, in the UK, the website Gateway Women, advertises and promotes its service, *‘as the global friendship and support group for childless women (friendly to the childfree too!)’* (Day, 2012). Similarly, the website, Childfree in Ireland, defines itself, *‘as a web-based resource for people who are without children and living in Ireland’* (Reilly, 2015).

Allowing women to share their experiences in a virtual world appears to have a positive impact on counteracting some of the negative stereotypes and in creating strong supportive online communities. Electronic social networks enable alternative voices to be heard. Drawing on Habermas’s concern with the demise of the ‘public sphere’ as a site for debate, Mackay (2000) argued for the progressive possibility of the internet, *‘as a space free from state control where alternative voices can be heard and debated’* (p.55). This is particularly important and central to democracy at a time when governments and large corporations are increasingly controlling the media. Therefore, the development of websites for women who choose not to have children offer valuable spaces where new networks can emerge to challenge dominant pronatalist and exclusive discourses.

**Literature review**

Traditionally, the literature review is seen as the ‘essential foundation’ to social research (Dunne, 2012; p.113). The researcher is expected to commence social research by conducting a review of the existing body of knowledge on the subject (Hart, 1998; Creswell,
In grounded theory research, the decision whether or not to conduct a literature review at an early stage is very much contested (McCallin, 2003; Dunne, 2012; See Chapter 2, Methodology, Design and Fieldwork). Much of this debate tends to focus around timing. However, despite a lack of consensus, many grounded theory researchers agree on the benefits of undertaking a review of at least some of the extant literature (Cutcliffe, 2000; Charmaz, 2005; McGhee & Marland & Atkinson, 2007; see Chapter 2, Methodology, Design and Fieldwork). I would argue that it is important to acknowledge and have some understanding of prior research. At the same time, it is necessary to be open to exploring new theories and the extant literature as they become relevant to the study (Dick, 2000; Giles & King & DeLacey, 2013). To address the above dilemma I chose to conduct an early brief review of the relevant literature.

The challenges of terminology

Before the review, I would briefly like to state some of the conceptual challenges. When I set out on my PhD journey, one of the first challenges I faced was the difficulty in describing childless women. When I conducted initial searches I found the most common terms used were ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary childlessness’. ‘Voluntary childlessness’ tends to be defined as making a choice not to have children and ‘involuntary childlessness’ as not able to have children. Kelly (2009) stated that, voluntarily childless women are,

women of childbearing age who are fertile and state that they do not intend to have children, women of childbearing age who have chosen sterilization, or women past childbearing age who were fertile but chose not to have children. People who are voluntarily childless are categorized in opposition to those who ...state they want (or wanted) children but are (were) unable to have them because of fertility problems (‘involuntarily childless’) (p.157).

The terms ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ within the overarching concept of ‘childlessness’ adds to the complexity. Furthermore, previous research has focused enquiry around the concept of childlessness and often includes both childless men and women as participants. To further complicate matters, a plethora of terms, often employed interchangeably, are used to describe ‘voluntary childlessness’. Shapiro (2014) identified some as, ‘voluntary childless’, ‘intentionally childless’, ‘childless by choice’, ‘unchilded’, ‘non-mother’, ‘non-father’, ‘without child’ and ‘childfree’.
The range of concepts and the absence of any clear terminology presents a challenge as there can be different interpretations, meanings, underpinnings and sensitivities. For the purposes of clarity and to reflect my own concern with the centrality of women’s voices in any exploration of this topic (See Chapter 2, Methodology, Design and Fieldwork), I have chosen to use the phrase, ‘women who choose not to have children’. Throughout the thesis, when reporting on the work of others, or when terms may be ambiguous or contentious, I will place them within single quotation marks.

**Childlessness**

The literature revealed that there is increasing interest in ‘childlessness’. The main bulk of the research focused on ‘involuntary childless women’ (I cannot have). As noted above, involuntary childlessness is when women want to have children with their partners, but are unable to do so. In 2012, a Google scholar search for ‘involuntary childlessness’ identified 416,000 results. A search of voluntary childlessness (I will not have or I choose not to have) revealed a mere 17,300 hits. Most of the studies on the former were located within medical or psychological paradigms (McLanahan & Adams, 1989; Cain 2002; Dykstra & Hagested, 2007). Studies of ‘voluntary childlessness’ tend to be situated within a number of disciplines across the social sciences. In the UK, (Morell, 1994; Mc Allister & Clarke, 1998, Letherby, 1999; Letherby & Williams, 1999; Hakim, 2000, 2003; Gillespie, 2000; Shaw, 2011). In the US and Canada (Veevers, 1973, 1980; Houseknecht, 1982; 1987; Bartlett, 1994: Park, 2002; 2005). There have also been a number of studies across Europe. For instance, Tanturri and Mencarini’s (2008) study in Italy, Van Bavel and Kok’s (2010) Dutch study and Hara’s (2008) work in Germany and Japan. Further afield, Sonia (2009) conducted a study in Africa and Cannold (2000; 2005) in Australia.

We have also seen a number of personal biographies published by women who choose not to have children. In the UK, (Black & Scull, 2005; deFago, 2005; Day, 2016) and in the US, (Rich, 1977; 1986; Ireland 1993; Safer, 1996; Tobin & Aria, 1998; Ratner 2001; Almond, 2010; Daum, 2015).
Research studies

The relevant studies for my research has emanated from the UK, Canada, the US, Europe and other countries. I will review these studies in relation to both aspects of my research question. These are:

1. The reasons why women choose not to have children
2. The consequences of their choices.

For the first aspect, I will present these studies under the countries where the research was conducted. I present these studies in this way to show the reader that all research studies are conducted and located within specific social, cultural, economic, and political contexts (Collins, 1994; Kelly, 2000). Such forces can exert significant influences and constraints on women’s choices. Charmaz (2006) argued that all research is analysed within a context of ‘time, place, culture, and situation’ (p. 131). Knowledge of the cultural context also helps the reader assess the generalisability of the findings. In addition, it is important to show that most of the key studies have emanated mainly from within liberal capitalist democracies where fertility rates are lowest. For the second aspect, I draw on a range of international sources.

1. The reasons why women choose not to have children

UK studies

Mc Allister and Clarke (1998) conducted one of the first qualitative studies on this topic in the UK. Their aim was to investigate why some women and their partners had decided not to have children. The study reviewed the demographic trends in childlessness and carried out in-depth, qualitative work with 34 women. The findings concluded that ‘voluntary childless’ women and men value their quality of life, which includes economic security, owning their own homes, and positive adult relationships over having children. While they rejected parenthood for themselves, they were not child averse. The researchers found that
couples had a positive attitude towards children and were happy to pay more taxes for children’s services.

Kiernan (1989) conducted research with a sample of 36-year-old women who (in 1982) had high levels of childlessness. She found that participants valued their careers and their lifestyles over parenthood. In addition, she concluded that there were no strong associations between childlessness and educational or occupational status. Writing from the position of ‘insider’ (See also Chapter 2, Methodology, Design and Fieldwork), Morell (1994) interviewed 34 middle-aged, married and ‘childless’ women. Morell discovered that they created alternative lives for themselves outside of motherhood and were happy with the choices they made.

Hakim (2000) argued that in modern UK society all women have a choice between paid work in the market place and non-paid work such as staying home to rear a family. She revealed that participants in her sample had clear motives for not having children. They prioritised their work and remained ‘childless’ by choice. Hakim defined this as ‘preference theory’. This theory is concerned with the choice women make, ‘between family work and market work- a genuine choice in affluent modern society’ (p.2). She argued that this is a feature of an individualised 21st century life. Since the 1960s, social, cultural, and economic changes have enabled women to make distinct lifestyle choices. Such changes include access to the contraceptive pill, equal opportunities legislation, and expansion of white-collar jobs for women. These led to greater freedoms to choose working hours and enabled women to prioritise other interests over work. Hakim classified women into three distinct categories. Women who were ‘home centred’, women who were ‘adaptive’ and women who were ‘work centred’ (p.4). She placed ‘childless’ women in the ‘work centred’ category and argued that, ‘their main priority in life is employment or equivalent activities in the public arena; politics, sport, art... [they also have a] ‘large investment in qualifications/training for employment’ (p.4).

Gillespie (2001) conducted research with 25 ‘voluntarily childless’ women. Using semi-structured interviews, she found that participants cited the value of personal freedom and interpersonal relationships as key reasons for not having children. In addition, they did not
wish to experience the loss of self associated with motherhood, and they had no desire to undertake mothering activities.

A quantitative study by Portani and Whitworth (2009) explored ‘childlessness’ as a standalone issue. Based on data from the Office of National Statistics longitudinal study they selected a sample of 12,578 women born between the years 1956 and 1960, living in England and Wales. Their findings identified a distinct demographic profile for women without children. They were, ‘white, educated, homeowners, in ‘professional ‘or ‘managerial/technical’ employment’ (p.13) and the majority resided in London and the southeast.

Shaw’s (2011) study explored three women’s experiential journeys toward ‘voluntary childlessness’. Using semi-structured interviews her findings revealed three main themes. Firstly, the legacy of feminism. Secondly, models of mothering and thirdly, owning the choice to be ‘childless’. One of the participants, having lived through the feminist period, based her choice not to have children on concepts of equality and freedom to pursue a career and a life of her choosing. Thus, she rejected gendered and societal expectations that women would take full responsibility for the rearing of children. Another participant was concerned that by not becoming a mother, she could in some ways be, ‘defeminised’ (p. 9). This participant was constantly aware of the ‘othering’ process that persists around ‘childless’ women (See also later in this chapter). This participant saw herself as a ‘freak’ because she felt she did not ‘fit in’. For her, choosing a career over motherhood was never going to be good enough. Shaw’s participants also referred to their own mothering experiences as being influential in their choices. Having a poor experience and having to care for their own mothers affected their choices. Furthermore, these participants did not easily own their own choices. They were aware that their choices were contingent on many things such as their personal histories, their experiences of their parents, their current social situations and whether or not they were in relationships.

Kanazawa (2014) set out to explore why it is that, ‘some individuals choose not to have children, despite their biological design’ (p.157). Using statistical data from the National Child development Study (NCDS), he tracked a sample over a 25-year period. Personal
interviews and questionnaires were used with mothers, doctors, teachers, spouses, and children as adults. The first set of data was collected in 1965 and the final set between 2004 and 2005. Kanazawa’s main finding was that, 

*more intelligent men and women express preference to remain childless early in their reproductive careers, but only more intelligent women (not more intelligent men) are more likely to remain childless by the end of their reproductive careers* (p.167).

**Canadian and US studies**

Veevers (1973) influential paper, Voluntary Childlessness: A Neglected Area of Family Study was a pioneering work. Houseknecht (1981) stated that her, ‘*exploratory study of voluntary childlessness laid the foundation for most of the research that has been done on this topic to date*’ (p.761). Veevers identified common socio demographic variables amongst participants. These suggested that certain patterns predisposed them towards ‘voluntary childlessness’. These included family size, place within a family, mother’s employment, and perceptions of parents’ happiness within marriage. Veevers (1980) undertook a subsequent study in which she conducted interviews with 156 Canadian participants. Her findings revealed that participants cited experiences of marital happiness as the main motive for their decision not to parent, ‘*childless persons tended to define parenthood as martyrdom and to construe it as a choice between personal sacrifice or self-actualization*’ (p.50).

Houseknecht (1982) undertook a review of the literature of 29 studies on ‘voluntary childlessness’. These studies were undertaken between 1971 and 1981. Her aim was to identify a ‘statement of motive’ for ‘childlessness’. Houseknecht identified nine reasons for remaining ‘childless’. These were: (1) freedom from responsibility, (2) marriage satisfaction, (3) career, (4) money, (5) population growth concerns, (6) dislike towards children, (7) assuming to be a bad parent, (8) childbirth concerns, and (9) impact on the world. She concluded that the most common statement of motive was the, ‘*freedom from childcare responsibility and greater opportunity for self-fulfilment and spontaneous mobility*’ (p.350).

A later review of literature by Blackstone and Dyer Stewart (2012) mirrored many of Houseknecht’s findings. However, they also observed that the focus of these studies was on
‘why’ women and men make choices with very limited attention given to ‘how’ these choices were made.

Park (2005) conducted interviews and a focus group with 23 ‘childless’ men and women. Using Weber’s typology of social action, she aimed to analyse participants actions and motives for choosing not to parent. These were identified as, parenting models, personality and skills, career goals, an adult oriented lifestyle, feelings about children and finally population growth concerns. Her findings closely mirrored Houseknecht’s results above. However, Park found that men and women had different motives. Women most commonly recalled parenting models and career goals as being significant in their choices. They also recalled their own parenting experiences and those of their friends as being important in framing their choices. With regard to career goals, women saw motherhood as a compromise that would deny them the opportunity to work. Men mainly rejected parenthood because of the perceived sacrifices including financial considerations. Interestingly, Park also noted that ‘childlessness’ gave women freedom to work and men freedom from work and from the responsibility to be a sole family provider.

**European studies**

Van Bavel and Kok’s (2010) explored historical ‘childlessness’ in Holland between 1919 and 1938 by assessing the fertility data of 3000 Dutch couples. Their findings revealed that during this time ‘childlessness’ increased. Taking into account the impact of the First World War, the Depression of the 1930’s, the subsequent economic downturn and the pronatalist ideologies of many religions, they identified unemployment as one of the indicators. However, they found that this was not statistically significant when compared to ‘childlessness’ in married, white-collar workers. Accepting that anomaly, they claimed the decision not to have children for both groups reflected traditional patterns of ‘childlessness’ (p.48). They identified these as a reaction to poor economic times, resulting in delayed marriage, sub fecundity, joblessness and postponement of parenting.

Turning to the relevance of religious beliefs, Van Bavel and Kok (2010) found that couples in a mixed marriage (people of different faiths) or in a marriage where both people are, non-religious had higher levels of ‘childlessness’. These couples were also highly educated and in
secure well-paid employment. They argued that people in mixed marriages rejected the confines of their respective religions and therefore, in rejecting religious beliefs, did not conform to the expected roles in society. As such, these couples would fall into the realm of the ‘modern’ patterns of ‘childlessness’ identified as, ‘the choice to live the life you want, exercise agency without interference from church or society’ (p.48).

2. The consequences of choices

Having outlined the findings from the studies, I will now go on to consider studies that explored the consequences for women who choose not to have children.

As noted earlier, ‘childlessness’ has always been a feature of society. However, women who choose not to have children tend to be negatively positioned. This positioning can best be understood as part of a universal phenomenon and within a societal context that continues to elevate the notion that womanhood and motherhood are synonymous (Meyers, 2001). As Adrienne Rich (1977) noted, ‘historically and cross-culturally, a woman’s status as a child bearer has been the test of her womanhood’ (p.261). She went on to assert that motherhood was an enforced identity for women, subsumed all other possible identities, and become the most socially accepted role. For this reason, a ‘childless’ woman is seen as an aberration and a woman who chooses not to have children as a possible threat to the way of the world. Consequently, the choice to assert a different identity to the norm can have consequences for individual women.

Studies from across the world suggest that having children is still the desired role for women (Mead, 1971; Rich, 1977; 1986; Silva, 1996; Cannold, 2000; 2005, Lopez, 2008; Sonia, 2009; Almond, 2010; Van Der Geest & Nahar, 2013). For instance, in Apache and Navajo cultures, reproduction can be perceived as a form of after-life. ‘Childless’ women are seen to have not fulfilled their reproductive role in life and therefore are denied an after-life (Horne, Nii-Amoo Dodoo & Dodua Dodoo, 2013). In certain African countries, such as Northern Botswana, and in The Gambia having children is seen as a duty to God. The more children you bear the closer to God you become (Sundby, 1997; Van Balen, 2000; Upton, 2001). Childbearing also increases your status within your community (Mead, 1971; Robinson,
In the African Igbo tribe, ‘childless’ women were so reviled that on death, their stomachs were slit and their names removed from the tribe. In the Upper Zambezi, once a ‘childless’ woman died, her body was covered in black coal dust to denote her non-reproductive life (Sonia, 2009). Korean culture based on Confucian values still stresses the importance of producing children to sustain patriarchal family lines (Yang & Rosenblatt, 2008; Yang, 2012). In Chinese culture, life is seen to be incomplete without marriage and adulthood can only be achieved through parenthood. In Southern India, a childless woman (but also an unmarried woman) could never achieve ‘nirvana’ (profound peace of mind) (Unisa, 1999).

Studies have also revealed that women who choose not to have children are still positioned, socially and culturally in a distinctly negative light. While motherhood provided a measure of legitimate social standing (Almond, 2010), women who choose not to have children were seen as immature, selfish and cold. As a result, they experienced strong criticism and censure from others. They enjoyed less favourable lives than mothers (Kopper & Smith, 2001; LeMastro, 2001; Park, 2002, 2005). Baker’s (2008) Australian study found that young women were perceived to be selfish for not having children. Veevers (1980) (See earlier) explored the stigma attached to ‘childless’ women and men. She discovered that ‘childless’ couples were negatively perceived within society and noted that the term, ‘childless’ denotes ‘lack’. Morell (1994) (See earlier) found that society’s consistent pronatilism disadvantaged all women. By ‘pronatilism’, I tend to agree with Doyle, Pooley and Breen (2012) who stated that it is an idea that, ‘encourages an increase in birth rate and reinforces the sociopolitical, familial and religious obligations of producing children for the good of the country and future generations’ (p.3). It disadvantages women without children since it depicts them as somehow deficient. Ultimately, a pronatalist society also disadvantages mothers as it conflates womanhood as motherhood.

The terms ‘childless’ and ‘without children’ all denote loss or absence. There is not a positive word to describe women without children. Letherby’s (1999) UK based research on infertility and involuntary childlessness, found that, ‘infertile and involuntary childless women were perceived as, unfulfilled and desperate’ (p.360). They become the ‘other’ (p.362). The positioning of these women as ‘lacking’ appeared to be a construct applied by
other people. However, these negative perceptions did not resonate with how these women viewed themselves. In her later study Letherby (2002a) found that, ‘voluntary’ childless women were stereotyped as, ‘aberrant, immature and unfeminine’ (p.10). She concluded that irrespective of the impact of the feminist movement, women who ‘do not mother’ are still positioned as somewhat lacking and felt stigmatised.

Gillespie (2001) maintained that while ‘involuntarily childless’ women were, ‘offered support and sympathy for having to bear their loss in life’, women who choose not to have children were, ‘perceived as maladjusted, selfish and immature and their choice is problematic’ (p.142). She went on to argue that women who do not produce children are seen as somehow less than real women in that they have denied themselves their real purpose in life by ignoring their maternal instincts. Similarly, in an autobiographical essay from the US, Nunez stated that they are seen as objects, ‘of curiosity, pity, embarrassment, and scorn’ (p.109).

**Summary and thesis structure**

It is important to situate this study within a wider context where childlessness is on the rise. In a number of countries, this trend has ignited anxieties about declining fertility and has been associated with a negative public discourse. This has been particularly evident in relation to women in political life (See earlier in this chapter). At the same time, there is some evidence of resistance. In addition to a growing body of academic research and personal biographies, a number of celebrities are openly ‘coming out’ and debating these issues within the public domain. Furthermore, new virtual opportunities are emerging to offer and strengthen an alternative discourse and to engage in supportive networks of women.

Findings from studies on this topic revealed a range of diverse factors affecting reproductive choices. These include personal family histories, individual psychologies, career and quality of life aspirations, relationship with partners, social situations, resistance to dominant expectations, and the desire for personal and social freedoms. As such, they point towards a range of psychological and sociological influences. These findings offer important insights
and reveal some of the complexities involved in understanding more about this important area of research. Studies from across the world also revealed that women who choose not to have children are positioned, socially and culturally in a distinctly negative light. They are described mainly in terms of ‘loss’ and ‘absence’. These findings reveal important aspects of the consequences of alternative choices.

In relation to choices, the focus of previous quantitative studies has mainly been on demographics, fertility rates, and motives. Qualitative studies have been mainly concerned with perceptions, personal biographies, and narratives. Therefore, it is difficult to compare or extrapolate these findings to point towards any definite sociological understandings. Furthermore, they do not throw a great deal of light on the pathways to choice or the process involved. Aside from the challenges of terminology noted earlier, researchers come from varied theoretical and methodological perspectives. Their aims have been to identify single or multiple causes with the focus up to now being mainly on the personal, the psychological and family experiences. Coming from a background in sociology, I found that this research while revealing many important aspects, did not sufficiently address my own questions. In particular, I found that while there is some interest in exploring choice from a sociological perspective, it is still a largely neglected area. In addition, women who choose not to have children have been largely overlooked in mainstream feminist studies. Most feminist researchers have tended to focus their attention on issues such as reproduction, motherhood, infertility, childbirth, employment, and childcare (Oakley,1984; Hakim,2000; Woodward,2003; Frost & Rodriguez, 2015; Klein,2015).

**Thesis structure**

The thesis will provide an account of my journey to address my research aims and objectives. The overall aims of the study were to critically understand why women choose not to have children and to consider the consequences of their choices on their lives. The objectives were to explore why and how they made their choices, to identify their experiences arising from their choices and to reveal the impact, if any, on their lives.

The thesis will take the form of seven chapters, including this first chapter.
Chapter 2: Methodology, Design and Fieldwork will trace the key sociological ideas that underpin and inform my methodology - Constructivist grounded theory. It will also outline and justify the research method adopted and describe the design, fieldwork, data collection, and analysis stages of both the preliminary and main studies.

Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 will present the three key findings from the study. Both chapters will give primacy to the voices of participants.

Chapter 3: Findings - The Complex Interplay of Choice will present the categories and the first theoretical finding that emerged from an analysis and interpretation of the data in relation to why and how participants chose not to have children.

Chapter 4: Findings - Perceived of Lesser Value but No Regrets will present the categories and the second and third theoretical findings that emerged from an analysis of the data in relation to the consequences of participants’ choices.

Chapter 5: Return to the Literature: Choice Following the theoretical finding on choice from Chapter 3, this chapter returns to the literature to identify and critique the relevant theoretical debates.

Chapter 6: Discussion of Findings relates and discusses all three key findings to previous substantive research, relevant literature, and sociological debates.

Chapter 7: Conclusion returns to the research questions by drawing on the entire thesis. It will reflect on the process, identify the contribution and limitations, and consider the need for further research.
Chapter 2: Methodology, Design and Fieldwork

Introduction

This chapter consists of two sections. The first section, Methodology, will trace and outline the key ideas and assumptions that underpin my approach to this study. The second section, Design and Fieldwork, will describe my method and how I designed and carried out the research. I will conclude each section with a summary.

Methodology

This first section will trace the key sociological ideas and assumptions that underpin my chosen methodology, Kathy Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory (See definition on p.46). I begin by tracing the key sociological ideas that informed the emergence of grounded theory. Following this, I trace the development and evolution of classical grounded theory from the work of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. I then consider Charmaz’s approach and explain why I have drawn on her ideas to guide my study. Finally, I consider the possibilities and limitations of grounded theory as a research methodology at this stage of my research.

Key sociological ideas

...at every point in our research – in our observing, our interpreting, our reporting, and everything else we do as researchers- we inject a host of assumptions. These are assumptions about human knowledge and assumptions about realities encountered in our human world. Such assumptions shape for us the meaning of research questions, the purposiveness of research methodologies, and the interpretability of research findings. Without unpacking these assumptions and clarifying them, no one (including ourselves) can really define what our research has been or what it is now saying (Crotty, 2003, p.17).

I agree with Crotty’s view that as researchers, we are approaching our task with our own assumptions about the world and how we believe knowledge is created. Our assumptions shape what we do and how we do it (Mullender et al, 1993; Gitlin & Russell, 1994; Crotty, 2003). For this reason, it is important that I trace and clarify the key ideas that underpin my constructivist research approach to this study. A constructivist approach challenges the
objectivism found in a positivist stance to the creation of new knowledge. Positivist approaches make a clear distinction between facts and values. Researchers from this perspective argue that ‘facts’ are primary and are seen to be independent of how people interpret them (Smith, 1998). In addition, they argue that the values of both the researchers and the subjects of the research have no place in scientific studies. In other words, they stress the ‘objectivity’ of the research process with the researcher as ‘expert’ (Grix, 2004). In contrast, constructivists argue that any interpretation of studied phenomenon is itself a construction (See later, Kathy Charmaz, Constructivist grounded theory).

The key ideas, which we need to consider, can be traced back to three important social scientists, Max Weber (1864-1920), George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), and Herbert Blumer (1900-1987). Their ideas were particularly influential in shaping the work of social scientists in the Chicago School of Sociology in the 1960s and 1970s, which paved the way for the emergence of grounded theory.

Max Weber’s ideas had a significant influence on a number of academic disciplines, especially sociology. Weber’s philosophical orientations to analysing society reflected a view held by the German idealist tradition in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This philosophy saw humans as active purposive free agents. Weber emphasised that we need an understanding of human conduct as opposed to seeking mere causal explanations of ‘social facts’ as was common in the natural sciences (Lee & Newby, 1983). He argued that natural laws, as proposed by Auguste Comte led to analytical and generalizing nomothetic approaches that could not be successfully applied to the study of people. He urged a more idiographic approach from the social sciences and in doing so, distanced himself from the positivist leanings of Comte (Gerth & Mills, 1948; Giddens & Sutton, 2013; Dillon, 2014). Weber called this ‘interpretative’ or ‘understanding’ sociology. Weber (cited in Gerth & Mills, 1948) explained that,

*Interpretative sociology considers the individual and his [sic] action as the basic unit, as its ‘atom’….in this approach the individual is also the upper limit and the sole carrier of meaningful conduct* (p.55).

Interpretative sociology considers the individual and his (sic) action as the basic unit, as its ‘atom’….in this approach the individual is also the upper limit and the sole carrier of meaningful conduct (p.55).
At the same time, Weber was also concerned with the individual in society. In one of his most influential works, *Economy and Society*, he argued that human beings act in rational ways. A central feature of that thinking rational self is dependent on an understanding of other people’s intentions, values, and actions. Using the gendered language of his time, he argued that,

*Man [sic] can understand his own intentions through introspection and he may interpret the motives of other men’s conduct in terms of their prescribed or ascribed intentions* (p.56).

Therefore, in order to understand human and social interaction, it was necessary to gain an *interpretative understanding* from the perspective of the individuals involved. The task of sociology was to ‘understand’ through interpreting the actions of people.

Drawing on Weberian ideas, the American philosopher and sociologist George Herbert Mead encouraged social scientists to move away from the ‘objectivist’ explanations of the natural sciences to a position which valued ‘subjective’ interpretation. Mead’s emphasis on ‘subjectivity’ centred on the relationship between the ‘I’ and the ‘Me’. For Mead, the notion of the ‘self’ is created out of the ongoing reflexive relationship between the ‘I’ (subjective) and the ‘Me’ (objective). He argued that ‘the essence of the self is ….cognitive, this is the individual takes on or internalises the attitude of others towards him or her and responds or reacts to these attitudes’ (Mead, 1934, pp.173-174).

This created ‘self’ is regulated through a process of socialisation and social interaction. Socialisation informs our behaviour towards our families but also and as importantly informs our behaviour towards what Mead (1934) referred to as the ‘generalized other’ (p.154). That ‘generalized other’ is the community we live in and the institutions with which we engage. The relationship with this ‘generalised other’ further develops both the ‘I’ and the ‘Me’ (p.135). The subjective self (‘I’) and objective self (‘Me’) is present when,

*I know who I am and I know how to respond and behave in a given situation because I have learnt from others’ attitudes towards me and from how they behave in a similar situation or in a common social activity* (Dillon, 2014, p.275).

Mead argued that communication between people required symbols and language to evoke shared meanings. Borrowing from Vygotsky’s *Thought and Language*, he described a symbol
as, ‘the stimulus whose interpreted response is given in advance’ (Mead, 1934, p.181). It is through the ongoing process of interaction that we learn how to be social, how to act, how to use and interpret symbols, languages, and the meanings ascribed to these (Mead, 1934). Mead understood the world as a place of, ‘intersubjectivity, interaction, community, and communication in and out of which we come to be persons and to live as persons’ (Crotty, 2003, p.63).

After Mead’s death, the American sociologist, Herbert Blumer (1986) built on Mead’s central idea of interaction through shared meanings. Shared meanings are, ‘meanings that things have for human beings are central in their own right’ (p.3). For example, certain artefacts, clothing, and words have symbolic meanings for groups of people as they interact with one another (Stern, 1980). It is through a shared understanding of these meanings that we are able to interact in the social world. Blumer cited in Hammersley (2010), defined this social interaction as,

...thus one observes an act as being respectful, for example, by sensing the social relation between the actor and others set by the situation, and by viewing the act from the standpoint of rights, obligations, and expectations involved in that situation (p.75).

Blumer further developed these ideas into the sociological perspective known as symbolic interactionism. He argued that symbolic interactionism rested on three main assumptions,

1. Human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that these things have for them
2. The meaning of such things is derived from, and arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows [sic]
3. These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he [sic] encounters (p.2).

The development of symbolic interactionism with its emphasis on interacting with and understanding those being studied, informed a new generation of qualitative researchers and research practices. Most of these came to be associated with the Chicago School of Sociology.
The Chicago School of Sociology

Set up at the turn of the twentieth century, the Chicago School of Sociology presented a distinct challenge to the state of American sociology at that time. In particular, to those who subscribed to the notion that the goal of science was to obtain objective knowledge on the social world using quantitative approaches (Layder, 2006; Hammersley, 2010). A key critique of the School was that the rigid structures of scientific analysis did little to understand or transform the complex social issues such as urban growth, poverty, crime, and race, which were a feature of city life in Chicago at that time (Park, 1952; Thomas & Znaniecki, 1958; Becker, 1966; Burgess, 1984). Another important critique was in relation to the role and values of the researcher. Up to the early 1940s, researchers in the social sciences were reluctant to share the experiences or the lives of the people they were researching (Lutters & Ackerman, 1996). As Burgess (1984) stated, many researchers, ‘were ‘outsiders’, they were strangers in their own society’ (p.16).

From 1931 to 1952, Herbert Blumer was one of the leading academics at the School. Throughout his time there, he strongly advocated symbolic interactionist approaches to researching people’s lives. Blumer, Robert Park and others inspired many graduates to develop innovative and humanistic approaches to research. Thomas and Znaniecki’s (1958) important work, The Polish Peasant in Europe and America is normally heralded as the study that paved the way for sociologists to develop new ways to conduct field research. From the early 1940s to the late 1960s, new approaches such as ethnographic and case study research shaped much of the work produced by the School. These approaches also stressed the importance of the researcher getting close to the participants of study and providing ‘insider’ interpretations on the topic of investigation. For example, (Park, 1952; Festinger, 1957; Warner, 1959; Becker, 1963; 1966; Goffman, 1959; 1963; Liebow, 1967; Humphreys, 1975; Whyte, 1981). Researchers were also encouraged to pay more attention to their own subjectivity and values (Blumer, 1986; Layder, 2006).

From the mid-1960s, these new, social scientific approaches would come under increased criticism as part of a changing political, social, and economic climate in the United States. Positivism, the belief in scientific logic and objectivity was once again asserting its
dominance within the social sciences (McCracken, 1988; Charmaz, 2006; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011; Dunne, 2012). McCracken (1988) referred to this period as, ‘the winter of positivism’ (p.14), and a time when qualitative research was ‘derided as impressionistic, anecdotal, unsystematic and biased’ (Charmaz, 2006, p.5). However, despite this shift back towards positivism, the impact of the ideas initiated within the Chicago School prevailed.

To sum up, a number of key ideas were central to the emergence of these new and innovative research methodologies. Crucially, Weber’s original ideas encouraged sociologists and others to move away from the often-dogmatic positivist approach to explaining society to an interpretivist approach based on understanding the social world. Weber’s thinking ‘rational self’ is central to that understanding. Following this, Mead’s work on the distinction between the ‘I’ and the ‘Me’ and the development of the self through social interaction. Furthermore, Blumer’s concern with shared meanings and the development of the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism. Finally, the Chicago school of sociology facilitated the emergence of more humanistic approaches to research that prioritised the voices and understandings of participants and sought more engagement from the researcher. Such ideas would be particularly influential to the development of grounded theory.

**Grounded Theory**

Having briefly traced some of the key sociological ideas that paved the way for grounded theory, I will now turn to the work of Barney Glaser (1930 - present) and Anselm Strauss (1916-1996), credited as the ‘founding theorists’ of what is now referred to as classical grounded theory (See later, Theory from data). In 1967, Glaser and Strauss published *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Strauss was a student of Herbert Blumer and later become a member of the academic staff at the Chicago School. Glaser’s background was in quantitative research methods, having studied at the Universities of Stanford and Columbia, before joining the Chicago School.

Glaser and Strauss, along with many others, revolted against the supremacy of quantitative research methods in the social sciences. They argued that dominant approaches to research were mainly deductive and about testing ‘grand theory’ (1967, p.vii) which was often based
on ‘a priori’ assumptions. They argued for a different perspective in response to the hegemony of quantitative research that existed in the mid 1960’s,

*What is required, we believe is a different perspective on the canons derived from vigorous quantitative verification on such issues as sampling, coding, reliability, validity, indicators, frequency distributions, conceptualisation formulations, constructions of hypothesis and presentation of evidence* (1967, p.viii).

Glaser and Strauss advocated a move away from the ideas of sampling, reliability, and validity to an approach where the theory is generated from the data. Their emphasis would be on generating, ‘theory that will be relevant to [their] research’ (1967, p.vii-viii). At the same time, Glaser and Strauss were responding to the internal contradictions within the field of qualitative research itself (Dunne, 2012). While drawing from the Chicago School, they also argued that the methods used by sociologists at the School had not managed to, ‘close the embarrassing gap between theory and empirical research’ (1967, p.vii).

Glaser and Strauss’s grounded theory emerged from their collaborative work on death and dying in hospital settings (Glaser & Strauss 1965, 1967). They combined two contrasting traditions in sociology, the positivism of Glaser’s former work in Columbia University and the social interactionism from Blumer’s work at the Chicago School. Glaser aimed to develop a systematic approach to codify qualitative research data similar to methods of analysis in quantitative research. Strauss, drawing from the influences of the symbolic interactionists in the Chicago School advocated a qualitative approach that gave precedence to meanings, subjectivity, and interaction. Charmaz (2014) outlined the distinct contributions both Glaser and Strauss brought to their collaboration,

*Glaser imbued the method with dispassionate empiricism, rigorous codified methods, emphasis on emergent discoveries, and it’s somewhat ambiguous specialized language that echoes quantitative method .... Strauss brought notions of human agency, emergent processes; social and subjective meanings, problem-solving practices, and the open-ended study of action to grounded theory* (p.9).
Theory from data

The idea that theory emerges from data is central to classical grounded theory. It, ‘constituted a catalyst for the development of a method that could generate theory from data obtained in the real world’ (Dunne, 2012, p.112). Crucial to this approach is how the researcher engages with and processes the data. The role of the researcher was to remain objective while collecting and analysing data, Glaser and Strauss (1967) maintained that the research process should not be influenced by the researchers own personal beliefs. Hence, their suggestion,

*to ignore the literature of theory and the facts on the areas under study, in order to assure the emergence of categories will not be contaminated by concepts more suited to different areas* (p.37).

Glaser and Strauss recommended that once the researcher went into the field and collected data, coding and the identification of categories should begin. They explained that coding needs to, ‘consist only of noting categories on margins but can be done more elaborately” (p.106). They maintained that coding for a category could lead to confusion. They saw this as a normal element of the journey towards developing theory. If this happened then the researcher should, ‘stop coding and record a memo’ (p.107). The writing of a memo allowed the researcher, ‘to reflect and carry his [sic] thinking to its most logical (grounded in the data, not speculative) conclusions’ (p.107). The resulting process, coding, and memo writing led to what Glaser and Strauss called the identification of categories. Glaser (1978) maintained that categories were,

*The theoretical reflections and summarizations of the patterned, systematic uniformity flows of social life which people go through and which can be conceptually ‘captured’ and further understood through the construction of basic social process theories* (p.100).

The identification of categories informed another vital element of their approach, which they called theoretical sampling. Glaser and Strauss (1967) stated that,

*Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyses his [sic] data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them in order to develop his [sic] theory as it emerges* (p.45).
Analysed data informed and supported emerging categories. Ultimately, the researcher reached theoretical saturation, a point where there is sufficient data to generate a formal theory.

**The Glaser and Strauss split**

In 1992, Glaser and Strauss had a much-publicised public disagreement as to what constituted grounded theory. This led to the breakup of their partnership. The breakup was significant in that it led to the development of several new approaches to the development and use of grounded theory. Strauss went on to develop a new more structured approach to grounded theory with his colleague, Juliet Corbin. Kathy Charmaz, who studied under the tutelage of Strauss, went on to develop constructivist grounded theory. Glaser was and continues to be critical of many of the new versions that have emerged and continue to emerge. For example, in his 1992 book, *Emergence vs Forcing, Basics of Grounded Theory analysis*, he is critical of Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) approach suggesting that it is, ‘*too prescriptive*’ and does not allow for the emergence of theory from data. Instead, he suggested that their methods promoted, ‘*full scale conceptual forced description*’ (p.61-2). Glaser has never deviated from his original position that ‘*all theory is grounded in data*’ (1967, p.3) and continues to develop and promote his original idea in his ongoing work (Grounded Theory Institute, 2016).

**Strauss and Corbin**

When Glaser and Strauss developed grounded theory, they did not specifically spell out their ontological, epistemological, or methodological assumptions. In particular, the influences of the pragmatist philosophy of Mead or the symbolic interactionism of Blumer. However, one could argue that these assumptions were characteristic of their approach. Others have argued that these assumptions became more apparent in the work of Strauss and Corbin (Strauss & Corbin 1997; 1998). These assumptions can be simply listed as follows:

- The nature of reality as subjective and multiple
- The researcher and the research participants are linked interactively in a mutual relationship
Shared meanings are understood through the interaction between the researcher and the participants within the context of study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell, 2007; Aldiabat & LeNavenec, 2011).

Strauss and Corbin’s concern with shared meanings and the interaction between the researched and the researcher revealed the enduring influence of symbolic interactionism on grounded theory and their increasing compatibility. They retained the essential ideas of Glaser and Strauss. At the same time, they created a more constructivist approach to the collection and analysis of data. In their book, Basics of Qualitative Research (1998), they argued that the researcher could develop categories prior to analysing the data. This major change to the original version is based on the assertion that the coding of the data can be structured around two elements, ‘open’ and ‘axial coding’. Open coding was understood, as, ‘the analytical process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data’ (p.101). The purpose of axial coding was, ‘to begin the process of reassembling data that were fractured during open coding” around preselected categories (p.124).

This new form of analysis presented a challenge to the original Glaser and Strauss approach. Glaser responded by criticising ‘axial coding’ as being too deductive and restated their original hypothesis that, ‘grounded theory is induction from data with a bare minimum of deduction from the emergent to further data collection’ (1967, p.85). Strauss and Corbin (1998) rejected this criticism and responded by arguing that, ‘the analyst begins to build up a dense texture of relationships around the ‘axis’ of the category being focused upon’ (p.124).

Other critics of the Strauss and Corbin approach argued that the creation of a prior framework, axial coding, rests more within a quantitative rather than a qualitative approach (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Despite Glaser’s disapproval, Strauss and Corbin’s approach and particularly the use of ‘axial coding’ continues to be one of the most popular versions of grounded theory (Stern, 1980; Morse et al, 2009). However, some studies remained faithful to the original ideas of Glaser and Strauss (Elliot & Higgins, 2012; Andrews, 2012; Urquhart, 2013) while new approaches continue to be developed. One of which is the approach developed by the American sociologist, Kathy Charmaz.
Kathy Charmaz – Constructivist grounded theory

Biography

Charmaz was one of the many theorists I read when I first became interested in pursuing grounded theory as my methodology. I was initially drawn to her work for a number of reasons. To begin with, I attended a conference where she was the keynote speaker and I joined one of her workshops. I was heartened by her warm approach to us as students using constructivist grounded theory and by her generosity and encouragement in answering our questions. In addition, her work resonated with my own professional practice of working with marginalised people and my re-entry into higher education. Charmaz had trained and worked as an occupational therapist with physically disabled people before returning to academic studies as a mature student. In one of her earlier studies, *Good Days, Bad Days, The Self in Chronic Illness and Time* (1991), she explored the meaning of chronic illness from the patient’s perspective, the impact on their lives, their relationships, their families, and their work. I was interested in this approach and how she stressed the importance of participants’ voices in research and how she openly acknowledged her own constructivist position in the process. Overall, I found (and still find) her approach and writing, honest, transparent and refreshing.

Key ideas

In distancing herself from her predecessors, Charmaz (2014) choose the term ‘constructivist grounded theory’ to explain her own approach and to distinguish it from Glaser, Strauss, and Corbin’s methodologies. She is critical of the positivistic leanings in the earlier writings of Glaser and Strauss while at the same time retaining and building on some of their central ideas. In addition, she wanted to show how her constructivist approach differed from the social constructionism of the 1980s and 1990s. Her main criticism of these approaches was that researchers failed to acknowledge the, ‘processes of construction of the research and the structural and situational encroachments on it’ (p.14). Charmaz argued that any new knowledge creation has to consider and account for the social context and social worlds in which it is constructed. It is in and through social interactions with one another, as researchers and participants, that we can generate, ‘interpretative understandings’ and
construct new knowledge (p.14). She used the term ‘constructivist’, ‘to acknowledge subjectivity and the researcher’s involvement in the construction and interpretation of data’ (p.13).

I was further drawn to Charmaz’s approach to grounded theory and particularly the notion of ‘theory discovery’ and the importance of the researcher’s subjectivity in the research process. She offers a coherent method of analysis while at the same time stressing general principles and flexibility rather than ‘formulaic prescriptions’ (p.3). In particular, I was attracted to the links she made between the subjective and the social, the co-construction of knowledge and the importance of reflexivity in the research process. I will seek to clarify her thinking on each of these in turn.

**Linking the subjective with the social**

An important principle of constructivist grounded theory is to engage with diverse human voices and lived experiences within the social world (Charmaz, 1990; 1996; 2006). Researchers working within this approach want to learn about research settings and the lives of participants. They are interested in meanings, understandings, and stories. Personal and collective experiences are the starting point to a deeper understanding of social issues and problems. Researchers seek to create new knowledge and theoretical interpretations, ‘from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data’ (Charmaz, 2014, p.239).

Equally, the constructivist approach seeks to link the subjective with the social and thus value both, ‘micro and macro levels of analysis’ (Charmaz, 2014, p.241). By combining both interpretative and positivist assumptions about knowledge production, Charmaz (1996) sought to combine insights from ‘inside’ lived experiences and ‘outside’ relations of structure, power, values, and ideologies. Thus, any constructed theories are ‘grounded’ in not only the views and experiences of participants but in deeper structural issues and their consequences. It is not enough to study individuals in isolation from other people and the world around them. It is necessary to learn, ‘how, when, and to what extent the studied experience is embedded in larger and, often hidden structures, networks, situations, and relationships’ (Charmaz, 2014, p.240). In this way, ‘differences and distinctions between
people become visible as well as the hierarchies of power, communication, and opportunity that maintain and perpetuate such differences and distinctions’ (p.240).

Knowledge co-construction

Knowledge exists and is created within the social world (Charmaz, 2014). Drawing on the symbolic interactionism inherent in Blumer’s work (See earlier), she concurred with the view that people create their own meanings and act on them as they interpret their private and public worlds. People develop subjective understandings through lived experience within ‘temporal, cultural, and structural contexts’ (Charmaz, 2000, p. 524). Charmaz (2000) argued that research undertaken within a constructivist approach starts from the assumption that social reality is multiple, processual and constructed.

From this perspective, the subjective researcher cannot be abstracted from the social world that shaped them. New knowledge is co-constructed through interaction between the researcher and participants (Charmaz, 2014). Interviews become shared contexts for communication and the creation of something new. In taking this view, Charmaz (2003) was critical of the ‘objectivist’ stance of the researcher within classical grounded theory. She stated that researchers within this tradition have,

*treated their analyses as accurate rendering of these worlds [the worlds they have studied] rather than as constructions of them. Nor did they take into account their processes of construction of the research and the structural and situational encroachments upon it. In keeping with the conventions of the times, researchers erased the subjectivity they brought to their studies rather than acknowledging and engaging in reflexivity* (2014, p.14).

Instead, she argued for a mutual relationship between the researcher and participants resulting in the creation of a shared reality. She argued that the researcher is not neutral but the constructed theory is influenced by the researchers’ views and values. The ‘constructivist sees facts and values as linked, what you see and what you do not see rests on values’ (p.131). From her standpoint, it was necessary to take the researcher’s position, privileges, perspectives, and interactions into account. They are an inherent part of the social world as it too is a construction. For Charmaz (2014) they are,
Thus, the researcher is very much involved in theory construction and this is particularly evident at the analytical stage. Here, she differs considerably from one of the fundamental principles advocated by Glaser and Strauss which asserted that researchers can ‘discover theory’ from data. In particular, Charmaz (2005) argued against Glaser’s notion of induction and asserted that, ‘no qualitative method rests purely on induction, the questions we ask of the empirical world frame what we know of it’ (p.509). In the same vein, she was also critical of Strauss and Corbin’s axial coding techniques. She critiqued it as being too, ‘didactic and prescriptive rather than emergent and interactive’ (Charmaz, 2000, p.524). In her view, interacting, iterative, and reflective processes allow the researcher to construct their theory through interaction with the data. She contended that the researcher ‘constructs theory’ from the collected data (p. 441). Charmaz does not seek to extract a social reality from an objective world but to construct it with others.

Charmaz (2014) builds on previous analytical methods within classical grounded theory while at the same time offering her own distinct approach. She argued that ‘coding impels us to make our participants’ language problematic to render an analysis of it’ (p.114). Her approach to coding data involves at least two phases. The initial phase where the researcher names each line or segment (line by line coding). This is followed by more focussed selective coding where the most frequent or initial codes are subjected to deeper levels of analysis. Constructed analytical codes are then checked against batches of data to look for patterns, context, and relevance. These higher-level codes then become ‘tentative theoretical categories’ (Charmaz, 2008, p.164). This theoretical integration, which begins with coding, continues throughout the whole research process (See later, Data analysis).
Reflexivity

Charmaz (2014) argued that reflexivity is an important feature of constructivist grounded theory. She clarified what it meant to her,

*the researcher’s scrutiny of the research experience, decisions, and interpretations in ways that bring him or her into the process. Reflexivity includes examining how the researcher’s interests, positions, and assumptions influenced his or her inquiry. A reflexive stance informs how the researcher conducts his or her research, relates to the research participants, and represents them in written reports (p.344).*

In saying this, Charmaz is clear that reflexivity is integral to the research journey. It is necessary for the researcher to reflect on themselves and their own assumptions through the stages of planning, fieldwork, analysis and writing up. Not to do so risks reproducing, ‘*current ideologies, conventions, discourses, and power relationships*’ (2014, p.241).

Sociological studies conducted prior to the 1980s did not place any particular requirements on researchers to reflect on their practice (Burgess, 1984). Charmaz (2014) referred to this period as a time of, ‘*smash and grab*’ research (p.33). Since then, there has been a substantial body of literature written on the significance and importance of reflexivity in the research process. Feminist scholars spearheaded much of this work (Moch & Gates, 2000; Delamont, 2003; Roberts, 2007; Solbue, 2011; Letherby, 2015). Thus, reflexivity is often sprinkled like gold dust on studies. As a result, it can sometimes be seen, as ‘*self-centred*’, indulgent and narcissistic (Marcus, 1994, p.146). Reflexivity has also been linked with sociological theories concerned with ‘*self-identity*’ (Adams, 2006). Ruby (1980) saw being reflective in research as being ‘*honest and ethically mature*’ and acknowledged that ‘*no researcher can assume a value-free position of being neutral*’ (p.154). Holliday (2002) concurred and stated that, ‘*researchers and their methods are entangled with the politics of the social world they study*’ (p.146).

I can see Marcus’s point that reflexivity can sometimes be self-indulgent. Having grown up in Ireland where self-aggrandisement is almost certain to result in
ridicule, any attempt at too much introspection is to be avoided. I am more inclined to agree with Charmaz, Ruby, and Holliday that as researchers we are not neutral but ‘entangled’ with the world (See also earlier in this Chapter). As researchers, our ideas and theories are in constant interaction with the data and permeate the research from start to finish (Grix, 2004). As a result, we need to be aware of our own lives and values and how they affect our research. In doing this, it is not necessary to reveal intimate details of our lives. However, we need to be aware of them and how they can influence our own preconceptions on data and concepts (Charmaz, 2014; See Introduction, Context, and Review and Methodology, Design and Fieldwork).

Reflexivity is important throughout and particularly through the exercise of writing. Memoing can help the researcher capture thoughts, connections, insights and ideas along the way (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz (2014) advised that memo writing becomes more analytical as the research progresses. In addition, the process of writing up different stages of the research requires deep reflection. As Charmaz (2014) said, ‘writing and rewriting become crucial phases of the analytic process. Writing demands more than deep reporting’ (p.289). It requires the researcher to be reflexive and analytical of the wider context that shapes the lives of both participants and researcher (Mills et al, 2006).

**Possibilities and limitations of grounded theory**

Having outlined the key elements of Charmaz’s approach and particularly how she has drawn on the work of her predecessors, I will now go on to briefly discuss at this stage some of the possibilities and limitations of grounded theory as a research methodology.

Grounded theory has posed a significant challenge to traditional approaches to research. It also contributed greatly to the credibility and rigour of human enquiry. Denzin and Lincoln, cited in Charmaz (2014) contended that grounded theory, ‘stands as a major force in igniting the qualitative revolution’ (p.10). Charmaz (2014) agreed and argued that grounded theory is, ‘a way to learn about the worlds that we study and a method for developing theories to understand them’ (p.17).
Currently, there are numerous versions of grounded theory. The main theorists in the field are Glaser, Strauss, Corbin, Charmaz, Clarke, Olesen, Stern, and Morse. According to Payne cited in Dunne (2012) grounded theory is now one of the most common approaches used by undergraduate and postgraduate students and popular across many fields of research. Examples of these studies include Pettigrew’s (2002) research on the consumption of beer, Coleman and O’Connor’s (2007) study on software development and Urquhart’s (2007) research on Information systems. Grounded theory approaches are also becoming increasingly common in health care and nursing studies (Bryant & Charmaz, 1990; Baszanger, 1997; Orona, 1997, Charmaz, 2005; Morse et al, 2009; Wilber, 2014). As noted earlier, Glaser remained critical of many of these developments and particularly those, which strayed from the original ideas. For example, he cited the Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory, (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) as the essence of poor taste and an example of how a whole industry has been created on the subject.

Despite the obvious possibilities that grounded theory offers to field researchers within the qualitative paradigm, I am also cognisant at this early stage of some of its potential limitations. Firstly, an important critique of interpretive sociologists and grounded theory researchers is their primary concern with ‘interaction’, the ‘interpersonal’, ‘subjectivities’ and ‘meanings’. For instance, Layder (1994; 2006, p.294) offered the critique that interactionist perspectives tended to be ‘inward-looking’. He maintained that they neglected the impact of structural issues such as inequalities of class, gender, and racial divisions. They were also inclined to downplay the impact of ideological factors in shaping subjectivities and human meanings through powerful forces such as the media. Layder argued that grounded theory approaches should pay more attention to exploring the links between human interaction at the micro level and wider structural contexts. Some feminist sociologists also concurred with this critique (hooks, 1981; 1989; Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantley, 1992; Collins, 1994; 2000; Dillon, 2014). Collins (2000) reminded us of the importance of ‘intersectionality’ in people’s lives. Intersectionality referred to the ways in which gender, race, sexuality, class, our different biographies and locations situated our individual experience and life chances.
Secondly, despite the assertions of Glaser, Strauss and others that theory is grounded in data, the use of analytical terms such as ‘properties’, ‘codes’ and ‘categories’ seem to mirror more the language of deductive and quantitative approaches to research (Burgess, 1984 p.181). Similar criticisms were also levelled at Strauss and Corbin’s ‘axial coding’ (Olesen, 1994; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

Thirdly, questions continue to be raised about the assertion of some grounded theorists that researchers should initially ignore the literature until the fieldwork is completed (Dey, 1999; Olesen, 1994; 2005; Charmaz 2007; Creswell, 2007; Dunne, 2012). Glaser and Strauss (1967) contended that a literature review is not required prior to undertaking fieldwork. They claimed that undertaking a review would spoil the approach to coding data and the development of any subsequent theory. This claim continues to be contentious and is a topic for ongoing debate (Cutcliffe, 2000; Dey, 2004; McGhee, Marland & Atkinson, 2007; Dunne, 2012). However, this controversy leaves the novice researcher with somewhat of a dilemma and particularly those undertaking PhD studies. It is generally a requirement of most university departments and ethics committees to conduct and include a review within research proposals (Flick, 1998; Giles, King & deLacey, 2013; Charmaz, 2014).

Fourthly, Glaser and Strauss may also be criticised for their use of gender specific language in their writings, which suggests that all researchers of the period were male. Indeed, white men, taught by white middle class men, produced the majority of the studies undertaken by the Chicago School in the 1960s and 1970s. Whilst acknowledging this contribution, it could be argued that these male researchers failed to acknowledge the enormous contribution to qualitative methods made by earlier female sociologists. Examples include the work of Dorothy Smith (1926- ) and Harriet Martineau (1802-1876), or indeed the significant ethnographic work of the anthropologist, Margaret Mead (1901-1978).

Finally, an obvious but surprisingly rarely noted limitation is the time it takes to conduct grounded theory research. A grounded theory study generates a huge amount of data. This can include planning, a preliminary review, fieldwork, data collection, recording, transcribing, and a lengthy process of in-depth analysis, returning to the relevant literature, line-by-line coding, memoing, and identification of categories. It also necessitates a level of
experience and expertise and a confidence to be able to make important decisions in relation to theoretical saturation and theory generation (Thomas & James, 2006; Ke & Wenglensky, 2010; Elliot & Higgins, 2012).

Summary

To sum up, the sociological ideas of Weber, Mead, Blumer, and the humanistic approaches that emerged from the Chicago School are crucial to an understanding of the origins of grounded theory (Figure 2.1)

![Figure 2.1. Key influences on the development of grounded theory](image)

As a methodology, grounded theory poses a significant challenge to conventional approaches to research and opens up new possibilities for understanding the social world. It also continues to raise important questions about theory construction and the role of the researcher. Currently, there are numerous versions of grounded theory and it has become one of the most common approaches within qualitative research. However, there continues to be much controversy surrounding new interpretations and particularly in relation to whether it has strayed too far from its original philosophy.

I was drawn to Charmaz’s approach, as it is relevant to the human sciences, addresses real social issues and is concerned with ‘theory discovery’ from the bottom up. Constructed
theories are ‘grounded’ in the experiences of participants and in the wider social context. New knowledge is co-constructed through interaction between the researcher and participants. The researcher is not neutral but integral to the construction and interpretation of data. They are part of the world with their own histories, positions, privileges, and values. Reflexivity is also central to the research journey to avoid the researcher reproducing existing discourses and inequalities.

**Design and Fieldwork**

Having outlined the key ideas and influences of grounded theory theorists to this study, the next step was to design my research and conduct the fieldwork. In this second section, I will firstly outline the relationship between my methodology and research question. I will then go on to justify the method I employed. Following this, I describe how I planned and conducted a preliminary study in 2012 and the main study during 2013 and 2014.

**Constructivist grounded theory and research question**

I sought to ensure congruence between my research question and constructivist grounded theory. I wanted to find out why and how participants made their choices, to identify their experiences arising from their choices and to reveal the impact, if any, on their lives. These objectives were addressed through the following research questions:

1. Why and how participants choose not to have children?
2. What were their experiences arising from their choices?
3. What was the perceived impact, if any, on their lives?

Firstly, I was concerned with participant understandings, experiences, and stories. As the researcher, this was my starting point (See Introduction, Context, and Literature Review). Equally, a central belief of constructivist grounded theory is to enable participants to share and voice their perspectives (Charmaz, 1990; 1996; 2006). Through this congruence, I sought to enable an inductive enquiry that would both respect the voices of participants and be a starting point for analysis, interpretation and the construction of new theories and understandings.
Secondly, my starting point as a researcher was to see people as individuals and as part of society. I wanted to explore both the lived experiences of participants and their relations to wider society. Constructivist grounded theory seeks to value personal experiences and is concerned with exploring and analysing our realities at societal levels (Charmaz, 2014). This seeks to transcend both interpretative and positivist assumptions about knowledge production (Charmaz, 1996). From this, I hoped to construct new theories that are grounded in the experiences of participants and based on a deeper analysis of their choices.

Thirdly, new knowledge is constructed from dialogue and from the mutual relationship between researcher and participants. Similarly Charmaz, (2014) argued that knowledge is co-constructed through interaction between people. Questions facilitate communication and the sharing and creation of new knowledge. As the researcher, I am not neutral but actively involved in this process of research. My own values, interactions and interpretations would also shape the outcome and the resultant theory.

Based on this approach, I wanted my questions to be broad and open enough for their purpose. I sought to devise a semi-structured interview schedule that would enable participants to share their own life stories and experiences. I was seeking stories, reflections, narratives, and understandings. In addition, the ‘why’ and ‘how’ elements of my questions could enable participants to reflect at a deeper level on their own experiences, societal influences and the consequences of their choices. Therefore, within a context of listening, empathy, trust, and confidentiality, participants could talk freely and have the space and time to tell their own stories.

**Method – Interviews**

Interviewing is used extensively in grounded theory studies across a range of disciplines (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Stern, 1980; Olesen, 1994; Bryman & Burgess 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Morse et al, 2009; Dunne, 2012; Urquhart 2013; Charmaz, 2014). I chose semi-structured interviews as my method for collecting data (Oakley, 1984; Finch, 1989; Tanner, 2010). The purpose of my research was to find out why some women choose not to have children. To hear about how they made that choice, their experiences arising from that choice and the perceived impact,
if any, on their lives. Thus, I was primarily interested in exploring women’s subjective experiences and understandings. I believed that semi-structured interviews would enable women to tell their stories in a way that was comfortable for them and to do so at their own pace.

I was conscious that what may be considered a sensitive topic for some would be best discussed on a one to one basis. Tanner (2010) maintained that this type of interview, ‘facilitates a more egalitarian research relationship’ (p.45). The researcher can go back and forth to develop points made during the interview. They are also free to concentrate on what the person is saying, rather than being anxious about whether the data answers the research question (Tanner, 2010; Allen, 2011; Charmaz, 2014). Feminist researchers have also emphasised the importance of semi-structured interviewing. They argued that such an approach enabled women to share their experiences, in their own way and particularly in relation to sensitive issues, such as domestic abuse and sexual violence (Oakley, 1984; Finch, 1989; Lather, 1991; Reinharz, 1992; Moustakas, 1994; Letherby, 1999, 2015; Ramazanoghi with Holland, 2002; Charmaz, 2003; Allen, 2011).

I considered the option of using focus groups at some stage in the research. Focus groups could potentially have offered an opportunity for dialogue between participants. The use of focus groups has proved successful in researching sensitive topics. For example, the study by Gele et al (2012) on female genital mutilation among Somali women in Sweden. Likewise, Munday, cited in Hesse-Biber (2014) found that focus groups were particularly successful in her research with victims of domestic violence. However, following reflection at the planning stage, the practicalities of arranging focus groups for a UK wide study were unrealistic. In addition, I was not convinced that bringing a group of women together and asking them to share their experiences of how and why they choose not to have children would be the most appropriate method at this stage. However, it may be useful to consider using focus groups as part of the methodology for future research of this kind (Chapter 7, Conclusion).
Insider/outsider

I was also mindful that in carrying out this research I was both an insider and an outsider. As an insider, I informed the participants that I was conducting this research as a woman who had chosen not to have children (Chapter 1, Introduction, Context and Literature Review). As an outsider, I was a researcher, conducting this study for my PhD. I was relying on these women to share their experiences with me. Without their cooperation, I could not have carried out my research. Thus, my approach necessitated some element of solidarity with participants (Gilligan, 1982; Oakley, 1986; Finch, 1989; Birch, 1997; Parr, 1998; Tanner, 2010; Karp, 2011).

On the one hand, I was mindful of the potential of over-identifying with participants. As women who had chosen not to have children, we shared a distinct experience. On the other hand, I did not want to be the detached researcher seeking to mine the participants for data. As Charmaz (2014) reminded us, ‘human beings are unlikely to relish being treated as objects from which you extract data’ (p.209). Oakley (2005) suggested that as women interviewing other women, we are ‘insiders’, since we share gendered places in the world, thus we can identify as females. However, I believe there was a danger in making too much of this suggestion. Gender is embodied in very different ways for different women (Butler, 1990). I shared this sentiment and concurred with Lee (1993) who argued that a good interview is dependent on more than a shared gender. Every interview depended on a, ‘complex interrelation between the relative structural positions of interviewer and interviewee and the interviewers skill and personal style, than in does on a simple identity of gender’ (p.109).

Preliminary study

My PhD was carried out in two stages, a preliminary study, and a main study. The main aims of the preliminary study were to collect some preliminary data, check the feasibility of developing on this for my main study (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001) and to fulfil university requirements. I conducted my preliminary study in 2012. I interviewed four participants. Following this, I coded and analysed the data from each. From these I constructed four tentative categories (See later, Data analysis). In adhering to the principles
of theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014), I used these tentative categories as a guide and a base for my main study (See later). Most importantly, conducting a preliminary study gave me the opportunity to test out my interview questions, to reflect on my use of probes, to construct tentative categories, to have the opportunity to write memos and to collect code and analyse data. The process involved in carrying out the preliminary study will be presented under the following headings:

- Proposal and ethical approval
- Criteria for Inclusion
- Design of interview schedule
- Sampling and recruitment
- Profile of participants
- Planning and interviews
- Transcription
- Data analysis and findings

**Ethical stance and approval**

The study adopted a positive ethical stance, which was informed by two main influences. Firstly, by a number of key values which had underpinned my previous practice. These included honesty, trust, respect, transparency, and taking time to work with people. From the outset, I was open about the fact that my research topic was inextricably linked with my own choices and biography (Chapter 1, Introduction, Context, and Literature Review).

Secondly, I was guided by the ethical and reflexive stances of Letherby (2002b) and Charmaz (2014). Letherby challenged traditional ethical stances and argued that researchers are not detached observers, but integral to the research process. Researchers need to acknowledge the centrality of their own biographies. Our observations of the social world are filtered through our own values and views. Letherby (2002b) cited Ribbens who stated,

> *the key point is that 'society' can be seen to be, not 'out there', but precisely located 'inside our heads', that is, in our socially located and structured understandings of 'myself', 'my life', 'me as a person', and so forth (original emphasis)* (p.10).
This stance resonates with the importance of reflexivity. Charmaz (2014) argued that,

reflexivity includes examining how the researcher’s interests, positions, and assumptions influenced his or her inquiry (p.344)...a constructivist sees facts and values as linked, what you see and what you hear rests on values (p.131).

She stressed that reflexivity is integral to all stages and particularly to planning, fieldwork, analysis, writing up and dissemination. Taken together, these diverse but related influences were significant in shaping my own approach to this study.

Proposal and ethical approval

I submitted my research proposal to the ethics committee of the School of Health Sciences at Cardiff Metropolitan University in September 2011. Following the acceptance of my proposal, I applied for and was granted ethical approval (Appendix 2A). The application to the Ethics committee included the selection criteria, sampling method, participant information sheet, consent form, and an interview schedule for my study (Appendix 2C; 2D; 2E). This process was not without its challenges (See Chapter 7, Conclusion, & Appendix 2B).

Criteria for inclusion

The starting criteria for participants were women aged 45 and over, who had chosen not to have children. The age criteria were selected since childbearing years are conventionally perceived to be between the ages of 15 and 45 (ONS, 2011). There was also a requirement, which was raised by the ethics committee. That was to exclude women who had undergone unsuccessful Invitro fertilisation (IVF) treatment or who had chosen not to have children because of a genetic disorder.

Design of interview schedule

In designing my interview schedule, I was conscious of a number of different expectations. On the one hand, the ethics panel (justifiably) required a sufficiently detailed schedule so that they could ensure that the questions asked would not result in harm to participants.
However, on the other hand Charmaz (2006) argued that, ‘detailed questionnaires are inconsistent with the emergent nature of qualitative research in general and grounded theory in particular’ (p.30). I choose to address this tension by opting for a more open approach, ‘a loose frame’ (p.30) to guide my schedule while ensuring an ethical approach to interviewing.

I was mindful of the importance of asking questions that fostered respect for the participants and allowed them to tell their stories in their own way. In designing the questions, I adhered to a number of ethical values (Jaggar, 1992; Gilligan, 1994; Letherby, 2002b; Charmaz, 2014). Firstly, it was important that participants would feel comfortable with the questions. After all, I was asking personal questions as to why and how they chose not to have children and about their experiences arising from their choices. Secondly, I was conscious that their feelings and welfare were my priority. My need to obtain good data for my study was secondary. Thirdly, I wanted to pay particular attention to the ‘ending’ of the interview. I anticipated that during the interview participants might have disclosed details of their lives that they may not have spoken about before or for some time. I wanted to ensure that each participant felt that the, ‘interview was a positive experience for them’ (Charmaz, 2014, p.70). Thus, I wanted to include a closing question which gave them the opportunity to add or detract anything they felt was important.

During the design stage, I wrote several drafts of the schedule. I was trying to clarify why I was asking certain questions. All the time, I was mindful of how to frame what I considered were searching personal questions and to check how certain probes might be heard. I tried these out with family, friends, and colleagues. To help me to do this I wrote memos based on the following questions:

- How would I feel if someone asked me to tell them how and why I chose not to have children?
- Where would I want to begin?
- Would I need time to think about this, could I weave back and forth?
- Does the question sound intrusive?
- Is there another way to ask it?
- **How might a participant feel?**

The interview questions I finally constructed were divided into three areas of questioning. These referred to the distinct elements of my research question. I would begin with an introductory question, which enabled participants to share their biographies, family backgrounds (Q 1). This was followed by three more focussed questions. These explored relationships, marriage, and choices not to have children and referred to how and why they made their choice (Qs 2-4). Questions five and six referred to participants’ experiences arising from their choices (Qs 5-6). These were followed by a final closing question (See Appendix 2D). I conducted a pilot interview with my supervisor to test out the questions. Following feedback and discussion with her, I incorporated some minor changes to the interview schedule.

**Recruitment**

I elected to interview a small group for the preliminary study. For this purpose, I planned to use a convenience sampling method. I believed that this was the most appropriate for a study of this nature. Convenience sampling is the simplest kind of non-probability sampling, ‘in which one simply asks whoever is around and available’ (Kane, 1983. p. 93). Convenience sampling is also commonly used when studying a sensitive subject (Blaxter & Hughes & Tight, 2001). I knew the first participant. She expressed an interest in my research and was opportunistically sampled. After her interview, I opted for a snowballing approach as she recommended the next participant and so on (Lee, 1993, Bell, 2005).

**Profile of participants**

I recruited and interviewed four women for the preliminary study. One participant was from Wales. The other women were from England, Canada, and Poland. They were aged between 47 and 52 years, educated to higher degree level and were all in employment. Three of the four participants were in long term relationships. One participant was divorced. All participants lived in Wales (See Table 2.1).
### Planning and interviews

In keeping with the ethos of sharing power and giving participants more choices in the research process, I offered participants the opportunity to be interviewed using different methods. They were invited to elect for a face-to-face, Skype or telephone interview. Once participants had agreed to be interviewed, I emailed each one to confirm the date and time. I included a copy of the participant information sheet and the consent form (Appendix 2C; 2E). Participants chose the locations and times. Two interviews were conducted in my place of work in a pre-booked interview room. I interviewed one participant in her home and one in a quiet restaurant. I audio recorded all interviews.

### Transcription

Three of the four interviews were professionally transcribed (For a fuller account of the transcription see later under Main study). All participants were offered a copy of their interview transcripts. Two participants requested a transcript and were sent a copy.

### Data analysis

The data from each of the four interviews was analysed (For a fuller account of the analysis see later under Main study, Data analysis). Four tentative categories were constructed.

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**Table 2.1 Profile of study participants for preliminary study**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant number</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Parental social class as defined by participants</th>
<th>Self defined social class</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>W/C</td>
<td>M/C</td>
<td>Wales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>M/C</td>
<td>M/C</td>
<td>Wales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>W/C</td>
<td>M/C</td>
<td>Wales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>M/C</td>
<td>M/C</td>
<td>Wales</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Middle class: M/C, Working class: W/C*
These were:

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.

These categories and a presentation of the initial findings were written up, submitted, and accepted by Psychology of Women Section Review online journal (See link to O’Driscoll & Mercer, 2015, References).

In a grounded theory study, initial categories are always provisional, tentative, and hazy. At this stage, I could not say with any certainty whether I could either theoretically sample or saturate the emerging categories. These were as Charmaz (2014) noted, ‘analytically thin’... insufficiently supported’ (p.212). For example, in the preliminary study only one of the four participants expressed loss and regret at her choice not to have children. The other three participants, whilst acknowledging regret as a potential element of such a life changing choice, did not experience any loss or regret. However, I felt I could use the tentative categories in the main study as a platform to theoretically sample new participants with a view to saturation.

**Main study**

Having described how I conducted the preliminary study, I now turn to the main study, which I began in June 2013. I re-applied for and was granted ethical approval (Appendix 3A). I used the same inclusion criteria for participants. The tentative categories constructed from the preliminary study formed part of the supporting information sent to participants for the main study (Appendix 3B). I will describe the key elements of the main study under the following headings:

- Recruitment and participants
- Planning and interviews
Recruitment and participants

In September 2013, I began the recruitment process. While the preliminary study was confined to Wales, I decided for the main study to recruit participants from across the United Kingdom (UK). The main reasons for opting for a UK wide sample was to try to attract participants from as wide a geographical area as possible and from a diverse population of women. In keeping with the principles of theoretical sampling required in grounded theory, I opted for a non-probability sampling approach, purposive sampling. Blaxter, Hughes and Tight, (2001) define purposive sampling as, handpicking, ‘supposedly typical or interesting cases’ (p.79). I needed to recruit a sample of women who specifically met the criteria for my study. Patton cited in Kane and O’Reilly-De Brun (2001), argued that, ‘purposive sampling is used when you need to get information rich material from special groups’ (p.100).

I emailed a list of UK wide women only organisations requesting the inclusion of an advertisement in their publications or on their websites (Appendix 4A; 4B; 4C). Endeavouring to attract women from as wide a demographic profile as possible, I also designed a poster, which I handed out in local hairdressers, slimming clubs, charity shops, and leisure clubs (Appendix 4D). I did not anticipate a great deal of response from the poster and it was more of a case of ‘testing the water’.

Only one women’s organisation [Women’s History group] placed my advertisement on their website. Another responded by email stating that their chief executive officer was too busy to deal with my request (Appendix 4E). The Older Feminist Network based in London responded to my request and placed my advertisement in their magazine. Over the next 12 months, 26 women expressed an interest in participating. Most responded to the magazine advert. One participant responded to the website advertisement. I did not get any responses from my poster.
Of the 26 respondents, eight women who initially expressed an interest did not participate. Seven women did not get back to me following the initial email contact and having been sent the information sheet and consent form. I sent a follow up email to these women but did not receive any further communication from them. One woman became ill during the recruitment stage and was unable to participate fully. Altogether, I interviewed 18 participants, aged between 40 and 75 years. These came from London, Yorkshire, Wiltshire, Sussex, Scotland, and Wales (See Table 2.2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant number</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Parental social class as defined by participants</th>
<th>Self defined social class</th>
<th>Location</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>Wales</td>
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<td>M/C</td>
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<td>M/C</td>
<td>M/C</td>
<td>Sussex</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.2 Profile of study participants for preliminary and main study
Middle class: M/C, Working class: W/C
Planning and interviews

A key principle, important for me, was to ensure that all my contacts with participants throughout the research process were transparent and honest (Yardley, 2000; Iphofen, 2009; Charmaz, 2014). Once participants contacted me, I telephoned them to check that they met the criteria for my study and to explain the purpose of the research. If participants met the criteria, understood my intention, and were happy to proceed, I then sent each, via email or letter, an information sheet, and a consent form (Appendix 3B; 3D; 4F; 4G). I requested each participant to contact me with her preferred mode of interview (face-to-face, telephone, or Skype). In addition, to suggest location, time, and convenient dates. I also informed participants that they were free to withdraw from the process at any stage.

As soon as participants got back to me, I arranged the interviews. Prior to the interview date, I again checked their willingness and ability to participate. This procedure was followed with all participants, irrespective of whether they opted for face-to-face, telephone or a Skype interview. Twelve participants opted for a face-to-face interview; three opted for a Skype, and three elected for telephone interviews. The advantages of telephone and Skype interviews are that participants can be interviewed in their own homes with little disruption to their lives. One of the advantages of Skype over telephone is that the researcher and participant can see one another, without the physical invasion on personal space (Sullivan, 2013). In addition, Edwards and Holland (2013) argued that they are, ‘low cost, ease of access, minimization of ecological dilemmas and overcoming physical interaction, makes it a valuable tool for interviews (p.49).

At the beginning of each interview, I checked if participants had any questions on the information I had previously sent. I then restated the purpose of the research, reiterating that I was undertaking this enquiry as part of my PhD. The informed consent agreement and conditions, such as audio recording and the use of anonymised quotes were discussed and agreed. Consent from participants who chose telephone and Skype interviews was verbally agreed at the beginning of each interview. This agreement was recorded and reported in the transcription.
As noted earlier, when I coded interviews from the preliminary study, I found that one participant expressed loss and regret at her choice not to have children. The other three participants did not. Following this, I wondered whether I would include this in the paperwork I was planning to send to participants for the main study. One option was to discard this. However, I chose to leave it in. When I made contact with each prospective participant, many of them referred to the provisional categories identified in the preliminary study. Most felt they could identify with certain elements of the first three. They felt they could least identify with the category around loss and regret. In my sixth interview, the participant opened her interview by saying, ‘you said some of them were sad about it, having made that choice...and I think having made that choice, why would you be sad’ (P6, p.1). This validated my decision to include loss and regret as an area of exploration in the main study. It was another way of allowing participants to elect to disclose what was important or pertinent to their choices. It also revealed to me the distinctiveness of each woman’s experience. Thus, it opened up a very insightful dialogue on regret (Cutcliffe, 2000), which led to the construction of one of my categories, which was that most participants experienced no regrets following their choice not to have children (See Chapter 4, Perceived of Lesser Value but No Regrets).

I audio recorded all my interviews. Grounded theorists differ on the merits of recording. In their original work, Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggested that note taking was sufficient and there was no need to transcribe recorded data. The role of the researcher was to attain the essence of the interaction or observation. However, and based on my own experience, I agreed with Charmaz (2014) who claimed that note taking, ‘not only misses situational details but also much of the construction of the interview’ (p.91).

During the interviews, participants were offered a break if needed. For example, one of my participants who opted for a telephone interview asked for a 15-minute break during her interview. I was happy to accommodate that request. When we restarted the interview, the participant told me that during the break, she had time to reflect on what she had shared earlier. As a result, she suggested several additions to her initial responses to the first question. I felt this offered her more autonomy over what she wished to include in her interview. It also gave me time to check my recorders.
I closed each interview with a question asking if participants wished to add or detract anything to what they had shared. Participants were also invited to email or telephone me if they wished to add or withdraw anything they had said. All participants were invited to have a copy of their transcripts. Five participants requested a transcript and were sent copies as soon as they were available. Following each interview, I emailed or wrote to each woman thanking her for being involved (Appendix 4H).

**Reviewing the sample**

After I had conducted eight interviews, I found the participants shared similar demographic profiles - white, educated, and [now] middle class. It is important to note here that while many of these women could now be described as ‘middle class’, they originally had come from ‘working class’ backgrounds and still shared many of those values. This revealed the complex nature of class and that people are often in transition or straddle social groups. Nevertheless, I was conscious at that stage that the profiles concurred with those from the preliminary study and indeed previous research enquiries (See Chapter 1, Introduction Context, and Literature Review). I began to ask questions of the data I had collected and coded. For example, in grounded theory the all-important, *so what* question? The *so what* question I asked at that stage was whether it was only white middle class, professional women who made these choices. To address this, I set out to try to actively recruit working class and black and minority ethnic women. I designed a flyer, which I handed in to community centres and hairdressing salons (Appendix 4I). I had a number of responses (5), all of which I followed up. Two of these women were subsequently interviewed. One woman responded but did not fit the age criteria (she was 40). Having discussed with my supervisors the option of modifying the inclusion criteria, we agreed that it was appropriate to interview her, which I did. There were two main reasons for modifying the criteria. Firstly, the woman approached me directly and expressed a wish to participate in my research. Secondly, she identified herself sardonically as growing up in family she described as, ‘*one of Charles Murray’s underclass*’. She disclosed that from an early age she had made a very clear choice not to have children. Despite her class and gendered expectations, she had resisted the pressure to have a child. I included this woman, as I believed she had an important experience and perspective to share.
Transcription

I elected to have 19 of the 22 interviews (the total from the preliminary and main study) professionally transcribed. This was solely for pragmatic reasons. I did not have the time to devote to transcription as I work full-time in a demanding role. Transcribing audio-recorded interviews takes up a substantial amount of time. Bell (2005) stated that it takes one hour to transcribe 15 minutes of audio recording. My transcriber also confirmed this. However, I did transcribe three interviews. One because it contained confidential personal (health related) information and I wanted to further protect confidentiality. Another was from an interview as the quality of the audio recording was poor. I transcribed the notes I recorded during the interview together with what I picked up from the recording. From this experience, I discovered that the process of writing from notes and recall is not ideal as highlighted earlier by Charmaz. In this instance, it did not reflect the rich data that I heard during the interview (Weller, 2015). I transcribed the third interview while on summer holidays.

The debate on whether or not to transcribe, who transcribes and what to transcribe is a contested area in qualitative research. Smith (1987) argued that transcripts do not represent ‘voices in the raw’, rather they are one-step away from the authentic voices in the original interview. Denzin (1997) asserted that all qualitative research faced a crisis of, ‘representation, legitimation and praxis’ (p.3). It assumed the research process could directly capture the lived experience of participants. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) highlighted some of the issues that may lead to inaccurate transcription of data by outsiders. They referred to the difficulties some transcribers have with accents, sentence structure, and the potential to mistake words or phrases. They also pointed out that transcribers may often insert a comma or a full stop, which can completely change the essence of a sentence. I did not experience any of these problems with my transcriptions. I tend to concur with McNiff (2013) who maintained that professional transcription mitigates against asking questions about what to include and what to exclude.

Based on my experience I found that having my interviews professionally transcribed added important elements to the research process. To start with, an important advantage was that
the transcripts included key elements of what DeVault, cited in Hesse-Biber(2014) referred to as, ‘hesitant language and terms’ (p.203). Professionally trained transcribers in this field are adept at detecting detail. For instance, the pauses, ah’s, um’s, ok’s, you know, and so on. Thus, they can provide a more accurate account of the communication than I would be able to achieve within a particular time frame. I was also mindful that in grounded theory research, all of this language constitutes data (Charmaz, 2006). These subtleties of communication were also beneficial while coding the data. Furthermore, the transcripts were provided promptly and in the format requested. This was a particular advantage as I was working in a demanding role while at the same time seeking to analyse large amounts of data within a particular timescale.

Overall, I did not feel ‘distant’ from the professionally transcribed data. If anything, the advantages far outweighed the time and effort that would have been required to transcribe the interviews myself. However, it is important to acknowledge that professional transcription costs are high and may be prohibitive for some researchers. In addition, it is important to identify and select appropriate transcribers for the task and to be clear about layout and the format of transcripts required.

Recordings and transcripts of the interviews were kept in a locked filing cabinet in my home.

Data analysis - memoing and coding

I now go on to describe the process I followed in the analysis of my data, which led to the construction of my categories. To do this I will use the example of one of the categories I constructed as part of the main study. Following each interview, I listened a number of times to the audio recordings. Based on these, I wrote memos. The memos reflected my initial impressions of what participants were saying and why. They reflected my thoughts and feelings on what I heard. These were free flowing or what Orana (1997) referred to as ‘flights of fancy’ (See for example my free flowing memo below).
There is an expectation that a woman’s life is nothing if she does not have children, because that is what you were put on this earth for, to reproduce. This is particularly true in working class communities where it is expected. You can be lots of other things, but if you are not a mother, then your life is less than that of a woman who is a mother. So, are you under pressure then to have a child or not? I guess you are really, and if you don’t you are not a good wife either.

Once I received the transcript, I checked it for accuracy against the recording and began coding. This involved a staged process (Figure 2.2) I selected a slice of data (Figure 2.2 (in blue) and began line-by-line coding. Line by line coding means naming each line of your written data (Glaser,1978). Charmaz (2006) noted that the benefit of this approach is that the researcher stays, ‘close to the data and when possible starting from the words and actions of your respondents, since this preserves the fluidity of their experiences’ (p.49).

To begin, I often took the literal meaning and adopted participants’ words as much as possible. I did this to ensure that I was immersed in the data and was not running the risk of applying some ‘alien professional language’ (p.49) to describe what I was hearing and reading. This may appear unnecessary since not every line is a full sentence. However, the benefit for me was that it gave me time to think, to generate ideas, to question the data. For example, asking myself the question: what is this participant telling me? I found that in carrying out line-by-line coding, participants stories took on different meanings. Ultimately, line by line coding afforded me the opportunity to familiarise myself with the data at a deeper level. Following this, I took the codes I created, for example, ‘clever sister’, ‘popular pretty child’, ‘ideal daughter’ (Line by line coding, Figure 2.2) and subjected these to another level of analysis. When I re-read the codes I began to see these as the, ‘mothers desire to create perfect family life’ (Coding 2, Figure 2.2 below).
And X went to school well, she did well at school, she was very popular, she was very pretty, so she was kind of what my mother wanted as a perfect daughter, over-exaggerated her femininity a lot you know from what I can see in pictures and from my experience of remembering her.

And I came along and I was completely different because I probably precipitated her... pregnancy with me and physical illness with me precipitated one of the worst periods for her in terms of her depression. So, I was probably pretty unwelcome, unconsciously unwelcome.

So my father took over the caring of me almost immediately and stayed up with me all night while I cried and so on and so on, did the things that mothers normally do.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slice of data</th>
<th>Line by line</th>
<th>Coding 2</th>
<th>Coding 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>And X went to school well, she did well at school, she was very popular, she</td>
<td>Clever sister</td>
<td>Mothers desire to create the perfect family life</td>
<td>Pressure for ‘idealised’ family life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>was very pretty, so she was kind of what my mother wanted as a perfect daughter, over-exaggerated her femininity a lot you know from what I can see in pictures and from my experience of remembering her.</td>
<td>Popular pretty child</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ideal daughter</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Opposite to sister</td>
<td>Pregnancy equates with illness and long term depression</td>
<td>Motherhood= illness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not helped by mothers illness with pregnancy</td>
<td>Unconsciously not welcome</td>
<td>Fathering/Mothering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ill throughout and following the birth</td>
<td></td>
<td>Fragmenting family life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Awareness of Mums illness before her birth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changing role for father</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father takes on the ‘normal’ mothering role</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.2 Stages of coding

Once I had completed these two stages, I moved on to the final stage of coding. By then I was seeking to raise the codes I created in Coding 2 to a more analytical level. For example, the code, ‘mothers desire to create perfect family life’, became ‘pressure for ideal family life’ (Coding 3, Figure 2.2).
Once I had coded a batch (for example four interviews), I checked these for patterns. A pattern occurs when the researcher finds similar material in the data from different interviews. This allows for comparisons. For example, when I coded this batch of interviews I discovered the pattern that all participants spoke about their experiences of motherhood and fatherhood. This ‘constant comparative method’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) allowed me to make connections in and between interviews. (See example of coding across four interviews below Figure 2.3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview 1: coding 3</th>
<th>Interview 2: coding 3</th>
<th>Interview 3: coding 3</th>
<th>Interview 4: coding 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pressure for ‘idealised’ family life</td>
<td>Contradictory messages from mother</td>
<td>Mother very domineering in the home</td>
<td>Absence of choice in mother’s decision to have children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motherhood/ illness</td>
<td>Did not enjoy marriage or childrearing.</td>
<td>Dissatisfied with her life/children</td>
<td>Ambivalence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fragmenting family life</td>
<td>Good enough father</td>
<td>Passive silent father</td>
<td>Father wanted children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father takes on mothering role</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I also checked my memos and where appropriate, integrated these into the analysis. For example, this memo (below) was written during my analysis of Interview 4 above.

*An awareness that her husband [participant’s father] wants a child. Realisation that they have not really discussed their expectations for life before marriage. Power of community, class, this is what women do, they become mothers. Awareness of the isolation of motherhood, awareness also of loss of identity for her as a woman now a mother. Husband would be better parent, but not an option. He is the breadwinner, therefore home and motherhood become her life, and one she is ambivalent about.*

At this stage in the process, I began to consider developing tentative categories. In doing so, I selected the most significant codes found in my analysis and checked how adequate these were for my emerging tentative category. For example in this batch, I discovered from my analysis there were different kinds of mothering and fathering experiences. These were reflected in the three different codes I created. These codes were, ‘Domineering mother and
the silent passive father, Discontented mother and good enough father, The take it or leave it mother and the non-directive father (Figure 2.4). Once I achieved saturation of these codes, in my analysis across a number of other interviews, I constructed a category. I called this category, Experiences and influences of parenting (Figure 2.4)

![Experiences and influences of parenting](image)

Figure 2.4 Construction of a category

Throughout these stages, I continued to write memos that I integrated into the developing codes and categories. As the analysis progressed these memos became more detailed and focused.

Interesting how much Mums influence feature in stories, decisions, choices. This batch of interviews is telling me how these women experienced their mothers and fathers and how similar their experiences appear. Mums appear by and large to be ill at ease with their lives, not enjoying motherhood, Dads are almost not present, silent, passive even. Interesting also that these women come from different social classes. Something to check on other interviews.

This process was carried out for all 22 interviews. I did this in batches of four interviews as outlined above. To begin with, I found the coding process demanding and challenging. Line by line coding of all transcripts generated a vast amount of codes. For example, on a 33-page interview from the initial line-by-line coding stage to the final focused stage, I generated 2,668 codes. I was aware that generating this amount of codes might render analysis more difficult. At the same time, I was reluctant to dismiss any in case they were central to the development of a category. As I became more confident with the data and
with my own ability, coding became easier and quicker. Many codes were discarded due to lack of saturation. Only codes that were saturated were used to inform categories.

By the end of this process (two years later), I had constructed five categories. These were:

**Category 1**: Experiences and influences of parenting

**Category 2**: Education as a defining experience

**Category 3**: Journeys to choice

**Category 4**: Women of lesser value

**Category 5**: No regrets

These categories and their relationships informed my three theoretical findings. (See Chapter 3, The Complex Interplay of Choice and Chapter 4, Perceived of Lesser Value but No Regrets).

**Summary**

In the final section of this chapter, I outlined the design and fieldwork undertaken. Central to my approach was the need to be transparent and to treat the participants with the utmost respect and sensitivity. I wanted to listen, interpret, and understand. The process has had its challenges and achievements. The fieldwork was exciting. At the same time, it was also demanding physically, financially and emotionally. I found that in conducting UK wide research, it is necessary to be physically able and have sufficient financial resources (See Chapter 7, Conclusion). I found that my past and current professional life equipped me well when it came to building relationships with participants, being sensitive to language and emotional expression. The most positive outcome was the involvement of a group of women whose voices have been marginalised from traditional research. Participants were willing to be involved in the research and offered positive feedback about the whole process. In particular, they valued the time and the opportunity to reflect on their lives and the choices they made (Appendix 4H; Charmaz, 1991).
Over the time period (2012-2014), I completed both the Preliminary and Main studies. I used semi-structured interviews as my method for data collection. I recruited and interviewed four women from Wales for the preliminary study. For the main study, I recruited 19 women and interviewed 18 from across the United Kingdom. The data from both studies were analysed based on the principles of constructivist grounded theory. In the next two chapters (Chapters 3 and 4, Findings), I will present the five categories and identify the three theoretical findings constructed from the study.
Chapter 3: Findings - The Complex Interplay of Choice

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to show how I arrived at my first theoretical finding that relates to my first research question: why and how participants choose not to have children. The finding can be stated as follows:

**Theoretical finding 1**

Participants’ choices not to have children are best understood as part of a complex interplay between *restraining* and *liberating* experiences in their social worlds. Social class had a significant influence on life experiences and subsequently on their choices.

In this chapter, I will present the three categories and codes from which this finding was constructed. The categories were:

**Category 1:** Experiences and influences of parenting

**Category 2:** Education as a defining experience

**Category 3:** Journeys to choice

In doing so, I will draw heavily and give primacy to the voices of participants. Category 2 is covered in more depth than categories 1 and 3. This is because participants identified their educational experiences as important and around which they had most to share. Following presentation of the three categories, I will summarise the main points from each. Finally, I will consider the relationships between the three categories and how I constructed the above finding.

When presenting categories, I will use the term ‘participants’. Throughout, quotations are referenced with a participant number and page in the transcription. My main reasons for doing this was first to protect the confidentiality of the women who had accepted my invitation to be involved in the research. Moreover, it has become the accepted practice in recent times to use this term within the social sciences. The important consideration here is
that the term portrays people as active players who are making a real contribution to the research. This contrasts with traditional way of referring to people merely as data sources or objects of study (British Psychological Society, 2010).

I chose to use numbers for each participant as opposed to selecting pseudonyms for the following reasons. I had not informed participants that I would choose a name to represent them in my research. I had however discussed with them that they would be identified by a number. That number corresponded to the number on their participant consent form, which they signed and kept for their records. In addition, I believe people’s names have specific meanings for them and are identifying markers by which each of us is known. Thus, I would have found it difficult to appropriate their actual names and (mis)appropriate them with another name. As Allen and Wiles (2015) argued,

> the common practice of allocating pseudonyms to confer anonymity is not merely a technical procedure, but it also has psychological meaning both for the participants and the content and processes of the research (p.2).

I am also aware that trying to find appropriate and respectful pseudonyms for 22 participants would be difficult.

Throughout the chapter, I use the terms ‘middle class’ and ‘working class’. These are crucial sociological terms to understand the context of the time and the backgrounds of participants. While notions of class are highly contested, I will use the term ‘middle class’ to mean participants whose parents occupied professional, white collar jobs and were homeowners. By ‘working class’ I mean those whose parents worked in manual or blue collar jobs and tended not to be home owners. It is also interesting to note that many participants described themselves in class terms and used these frequently while sharing their own stories (See participant profile).

**Category 1: Experiences and influences of parenting**

I constructed the first category as the experiences and influences of parenting on participants’ choices. The key insight from this category was that experiences of parenting, and particularly relationships with mothers influenced participants’ lives and particularly their reproductive choices. The codes that formed this category arose from
questions, which asked participants to recall their experiences of childhood and family life (Appendix 3C). Participants spoke in depth and movingly about their mother’s role in parenting and home life. In contrast, they spoke little about their fathers. The focus on the mothers’ role may reflect her higher status, particularly within working class households at that time (1950s to 1970s). Three distinct experiences of parenting (Figure 3.1) emerged and were coded as follows:

- The domineering mother and the silent passive father
- The discontented mother and the ‘good enough’ father
- The take it or leave it mother and the non-directive father

![Experiences and influences of parenting](image)

**Figure 3: 1 Codes to Category 1: Experiences and influences of parenting**

I will now go on to report on each of these codes in turn. As noted above, most responses will reflect experiences of motherhood.

**The domineering mother and the silent passive father**

First, a common experience identified was that of *the domineering mother and the silent passive father*. She was recalled as having a central role in the home. She would have been very critical of the child (ren) and rarely showed any gratitude to them or her husband. As one participant succinctly put it, ‘*my mother was really domineering and she was very selfish*’ (P11, p.30). This dominance manifested itself in a number of ways. To start with, participants spoke about how their mothers could be very demanding and how they spent most of their childhoods and young adult lives trying to please her. Where mothers worked full time, they were expected to help out in the home. However, they recalled that despite
the amount of commitment and effort they put in, it was never quite enough. As this participant stated, ‘I was a good daughter, a devoted daughter, and I would do a lot of cleaning. I helped them to buy their council house and she loved that, but ... it was never enough’ (P7, p.10).

The demands of the domineering mother often continued after participants were married and in their own homes. There was an expectation to continue to please Mum, to be there for her, as and when needed. As a result, participants found it difficult to be assertive about their own needs and to live their own lives. As this woman explained,

*My mum was dominant and matriarchal; she really couldn’t get enough of your time... So all my life I saw my mother all the time....every weekend of my married life, every Christmas. It wasn’t until she passed away that I was free* (P7, pp.8-9).

The domineering mother was also recalled as a woman who did not take responsibility for her duties as a mother and seemed to be happy to pursue her own needs over those of her children. For example, this participant stated, ‘I think she was really unhappy with the responsibility of her children, and so she sidestepped it really, went off and did her own thing’ (P11, p.30). In addition, she showed little interest in their education and ambitions, even when they showed ability, ‘I had potential like a lot of people and never lived up to it. I couldn’t apply myself [At school]. I’ve always assumed I’m stupid. My mother was very very critical of us when we were kids’ (P7, p.14).

An important insight to emerge was that the domineering mother affected relationships with fathers. In these mainly working class homes, both parents tended to work full time. However, participants were generally not aware of the nature of their father’s employment. Their primary relationship was with their mother, who cultivated the image of an uncaring and disinterested father. Fathers were recalled as silent and passive. At the same, he was seen as someone who tried but failed to intercede when she [mother] was unreasonable. Participants recalled that the behaviour of the domineering mother tended to silence their fathers. As a result, fathers felt unable to intervene and hence had low status within the home. As one participant remembered, ‘my father tried to step into the breach but my mum...undermined everybody, so it was hard to value him’ (P11, p.31). These perceptions of weakness led to a level of disrespect and pity for their fathers at that time,
As a child I don’t value him and although I used to be pained for the way my mum treated him as a person...I didn’t see him as a valuable resource...his love didn’t count as much (P11, p.31).

I used to feel sorry for my dad you know (P7, p.8).

Some remembered a sense of liberation and happiness when their parents divorced. One woman recalled that ‘they were never happy...you know typical stayed together for the kids and stuff (P14, p.2). Interestingly, following a divorce, participants were able to re-establish positive relationships with fathers. Some expressed a certain amount of guilt as they recalled the disrespect they held for their fathers at the time. At the same time, they were happy to have the opportunity to get to know him later in life and re-built relationships based on mutual love and respect. As this participant explained, ‘I worked very hard to create a relationship with him and I was successful. I really valued him. And I could see that he was the strength in our family’ (P11, p.32).

The discontented mother and the ‘good enough’ father

The second experience was of the discontented mother and the ‘good enough’ father. From this experience, the discontented mother was recalled as, ‘just extremely unhappy with her life’ (P4, p.5). Depression was sometimes a feature of this unhappiness. Consequently, discontented mothers spent long periods in bed. This meant those participants, with their fathers’ help, had to take on the mother’s role in the home, ‘between my father and myself for a six-month period, we ran the house together and that included taking care of two younger brothers’ (P8, p.21).

Another aspect to this discontent was tense family and marital relationships. As a result, relationships were carefully managed, so as not to upset an already fragile situation. As these comments revealed,

My mother ... she was a volcano [laughs] you know so all the time I was growing up, till I was about 16, there was always, is it a good day, is it a bad day (P8, p.4)

My mother did not have an easy time ... in raising children, it wasn’t a bed of roses for her to raise children (P2, p.24).
Another recollection was that discontented mothers tended to link their own unhappiness with having to please others. For instance, they told their daughters that the only reason they had children was to please other people, particularly men in their families. One participant recalled the reason her mother had children was to please her father in law, ‘I remember my mother told me she only had me because my grandfather wanted to have grandchildren, not even her father, it was my father’s father…my mother had me to make other people happy’ (P6, p.6).

A recurring pattern was that the discontented mother found it difficult to create and uphold notions of motherhood and the idealised nuclear family,

_I don’t think pregnancy and having babies was everything she thought it would be. She was very disciplinarian and tried to create the ideal family setting. Pregnancy with me and physical illness with me precipitated one of her worst periods of depression. So I was probably pretty unwelcome, unconsciously unwelcome_ (P4, pp.5-6).

There was also a sense that the discontented mother was not happy when the focus of attention was on her children. It seemed to detract from her own feminine identity, furthering her sense of isolation and unhappiness with motherhood. This participant recalled a particularly painful experience involving her sister,

_Some passer-by said what beautiful red curls your little girl has got to my mother, whereupon when they got home my sister was looking in the mirror, haven’t I got beautiful red curls… my mother took the scissors and cut it all off…she couldn’t give you the sort of admiration. The nice bits really (laughs) (P15, pp.45-46)._  

As already noted, those who experienced discontented mothers rarely mentioned fathers, other than to describe them as being ‘good enough’, _my father was a nice quiet man, he liked me, I liked him_ (P6, p.11). Only one participant, who was from a middle class family, described him as being the opposite of her discontented mother in that he was, ‘_incredibly liberal and very lax with us and had a very easy-going temperament_’ (P4, p.5).
The take it or leave it mother and the non-directive father

The third experience was that of the take it or leave it mother and the non-directive father. These parents tended to be from mainly middle class homes. These mothers had given up work on marriage. These are recalled as women who were ambivalent to the whole notion of motherhood. Once married, they had children, as this was the general expectation of the time. As these two participants told us,

...I think she could have as me, taken it or left it, um, but I think... it was post war. I was born in 1948 and I think the nation expected you to have children, she was not unhappy and I think she gave us everything she had really (P21, p.30).

My mother did not want any children, she never wanted children, she thought my father felt the same, however when they were married, he wanted a family, so my Dad sandbagged her into it (P1, p.2).

At the time, most of these mothers had no choice but to give up work on marriage (the Marriage Bar, 1920s to 1950s). However, the consequences of motherhood often meant they were lonely and socially isolated. As these participants recalled, ‘when she married, she stopped work. I don’t think she wanted to stop work. I think she wanted to go out to work’ (P21, p.11),

Once she had the baby, me, she was fine until he [husband/father] went back to work and then she was left on her own with this tiny baby and she was like is this is my life from now on (P1, p.3).

Participants who experienced a take it or leave it mother did not recall their mothers as unduly unhappy. It was more a sense that they were unfulfilled in their mothering roles. An important insight recalled is that once they had the opportunity to re-enter the world of paid work, they did so and remained working long after their normal retirement age. Interestingly, participants recalled this as a time when they felt their mothers reclaimed their identities as women, developed new friends, and seemed happy and fulfilled in their lives. As this participant recounted, ‘I was 11 or 12 and I can remember ... she did [went back to work] and all her friends had cars and she had a whole new set of friends’ (P9, pp.15-16).

Again, revealing the similarities with the experiences of the discontented mother, participants did not speak in any depth about fathers. Rather, they were recalled mainly for
their non-directive role in day-to-day parenting. Principal relationships were mainly with mothers and fathers tended to be in the background. Nevertheless, fathers were remembered fondly. One participant recalled her father’s words when she was leaving home for the first time,

*Just as I was getting on the coach, he said to me, ‘if you ever need to come home you must come home’. And I know he was saying if your find you’re pregnant you come home and it’s alright you know* (P,21, p.29).

**Shared influences of parenting experiences**

A key insight from this category was the influences of these experiences on reproductive choices. To start with, the impact of a domineering mother meant that participants felt unable to assert their own needs. This also tended to spoil relationships with fathers. As a result, there was a sense that participants worked hard to ensure that their adult choices did not reflect these often negative and destructive childhood experiences. As this participant stated, ‘I don’t feel I had a particularly happy childhood and part of me didn’t want to be like that to someone else’ (P17, p.8). As children and young women, participants felt they lacked confidence in their own abilities. As adults, they still found it difficult to be assertive in pursuing their own needs. After all, they were brought up to prioritise the needs of domineering mothers. One participant disclosed that even now, ‘I have to be really assertive with my mum, she’d walk all over me…you know she would completely control me like a puppet if she could’ (P7, p.33).

Those who had a discontented mother shared how those experiences influenced their own thinking in relation to children. As one participant divulged,

*My mother hates children. She brought me up not to like children, so therefore I would not want to have children. I don’t have a great relationship with my Mum; she did not have a great relationship with her Mum, so it did not seem to me a good point to bring something into the world that would hate you* (P6, p.2)

*She [her mother] would say to me, oh, you know if I had my life again I wouldn’t have children …by having children you do ruin your life; you do ruin your life* (P17, pp.14-15).
Having to take on a mothering role at a young age was also influential. Participants became more aware of the enormous amount of work and commitment required. It raised questions about the kind of family life they wanted for themselves. One participant simply stated, ‘I certainly did not want to live my mother’s life’ (P16, p.13). Another recalled,

*I realised that... very early, that it was a huge commitment and it was a lifelong commitment ... I could see what it meant to be a parent, witnessed what it meant and no, I wasn’t prepared for that sort of commitment* (P8, p.21).

In addition, the influence of the *take it or leave it* mother meant that participants grew up appreciating the significance of and the personal satisfaction of having a job and career outside the home. For many, motherhood did not equate with a fulfilled happy life. It represented a loss of identity and an absence of social connectedness. Participants learned that women were better mothers and happiest as women when they returned to work outside the home. As one participant noted, ‘*my mother went back to work once I was in secondary school and she worked until she was about 78... and loved it*’ (P21, p.11).

**Category 2: Education as a defining experience**

I will now present the second category: Education as a defining experience. An analysis of the data suggested that an experience of success and failure in secondary education was a defining influence on participants’ subsequent life choices. From the analysis, three distinctive educational experiences emerged. It is important to note that these need to be understood within the particular educational context of the time. The Tripartite System arranged state supported education in England and Wales from the 1940s until the 1970s. As part of this arrangement, grammar schools were selective levels of secondary education and students were admitted based on the results of the Eleven Plus examination. While some working class students attended grammar schools, the majority were from the middle classes. Those who did not gain admission to grammar schools went to technical or secondary modern schools (later comprehensive schools). The majority of these students were from working class families.
The three educational experiences were coded as follows as in Figure 3.2:

- Middle class participants in grammar school
- Working class participants in grammar schools
- Working class participants in secondary modern schools.

![Figure 3.2: Codes to Category 2: Education as a defining experience](image)

I will now go on to report on each of these codes in turn.

**Middle class participants in grammar school**

Middle class participants who went to grammar schools came from homes where at least one parent, usually the father, had also been to university. Most fathers had professional careers, ‘my father was a school master’ (P21, p.2) or were self-employed, ‘my father had his own business’ (P17, p.4). Mothers had mainly worked outside the home before marriage, ‘my mother worked for XXX bank, before she was married’ (P6, p.12); ‘my mother was a dance instructor before she married’ (P19, p.20). Once married, women tended to give up work and became full time housewives and mothers. For these families, grammar school education was not a privilege. There was an expectation from both parents and participants as children that they would attend, take their A levels and go on to University, ‘my father had been to Cambridge, so he would have liked me to go there’ (P4, p.19).

For parents, education was important and was supported within the home. At the same time, there was also a parental expectation that their daughters would lead conventional lives. This was particularly the case for parents from religious and traditional families who
expected their daughters to marry and have children. The preferred trajectory was grammar school, university (unless you were married by the age of 18), marriage, and children. This participant from a Jewish family recalled that ‘they [parents] assumed that I would complete university, come home and after a short period, get married’ (P16, p.4). She went on to say, ‘whilst they were pleased with school success, it did not occur to them for one moment that this would lead to a completely different [way of] life...particularly my mother who was very traditional in her views’ (p.8).

Another participant from an upper middle class family recalled similar parental aspirations, ‘I remember my mother telling me that the head teacher [in private junior school] had said to her, ‘Oh X will be married by 18’, so you know that was an expectation’ (P19, p.19). She stated that she did receive two serious marriage proposals by that age. However, she realised that this was not what she wanted, ‘I remember thinking at the time, I am not ready’ (P19, p.7).

Participants from this group acknowledged that they had both the cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1984) to engage and be successful in grammar school. A common view among this group was that teachers did not have significant influences on their lives. They merely looked to them to facilitate their learning and progress their careers. As one participant noted, ‘teachers were of some help’ (P6, p.7) but, as she recalled, it was her middle class peers and wider social circle that had a greater influence on her choice of university,

...physics was my best subject and my boyfriend at the time said you must do double maths, physics and English...light relief you know...and he said well I am going to Cambridge and you are also going to Cambridge...[which we did] both to study engineering (P6, p.8).

Therefore, for this group, attending grammar school was a normal stepping-stone on their journeys towards pursuing somewhat pre-ordained lives. However, the interesting and very relevant point to note here is that participants were not inclined to follow this path (See also earlier, Category 1, Experiences and influences of parenting, p.77). For instance, some went abroad to work as au pairs. Others took time out to travel, ‘my grandfather left me some money... to travel..., which I did. I was in Geneva for a year, studied in Paris and was in the United States in my 20s’ (P19, p.4).
Working class participants in grammar school

Participants from working class families who attended grammar schools recalled very different experiences. These experiences were largely shaped by their class backgrounds. Fathers worked in manual or blue-collar jobs. Once married, mothers tended to give up employment and stayed at home to look after them. As recalled by one participant, ‘my mother worked in a dress shop…very posh, before she married’ (P9, p.8). However, some mothers did part-time work to facilitate childcare responsibilities, ‘my mum didn’t work until we went to grammar school, she was dinner lady in a local school, and she took a job that did not interfere with her role as mum’ (P13, p.25).

This group of participants revealed that their education was supported at home. Many parents did not have the opportunity for education themselves and thus were keen for their daughters to be educated. As this woman stated, ‘[my mother] had passed at the grammar school and everything else and she couldn’t go because they couldn’t’ afford the uniform’ (P8, p.17). For many working class families, passing the Eleven Plus examination and getting a place in grammar school was a gateway to a successful job and ultimately a better life. This view is supported by sociological studies undertaken at this time (Douglas, 1964; Hargreaves, 1967; North, 1980). However, once in grammar school, participants were aware of their class and aspirational differences from other children. As this participant put it,

...there were children there from very privileged backgrounds, so different from where I had grown up, so the majority of children, their path had already been laid out for them, they would go off to University, because that’s what people in their families did (P14, p.6).

Another freely admitted to have had very little in common with other students at her school. She was raised in a different social and political environment. She found it difficult to make friends and was geographically isolated from her peers,

I went to the local girls’ grammar school, the only girl from our working class estate. I was the only person at grammar school that had come from that estate in that year. They [the other children] all lived in different places... I had little or nothing in common with them anyway...my parents were socialists, my grandparents were socialists, so (P8, pp.2-3).
The general feeling among this group was that they were reluctant to consider any other option apart from finishing their A levels. However, as they approached their examinations, they were encouraged to consider university. None of them had thought about University and no one in their immediate families had been,

People in my family didn’t...go to Uni...even though my parents were very supportive of my education...I didn’t think about going off to uni...I stayed on and did my A levels because everyone in XX [school] stayed on and did their A levels (P14, p.6).

In contrast to the experiences of middle class participants above, working class participants highlighted the important role grammar school teachers, male and female, played in their lives. They recalled that their teachers were not overtly concerned with class backgrounds. Their thinking was that as they had earned a place at grammar school, they had the opportunity for education and were expected to do something with their lives, ‘because we were in a grammar school and it was expected of us that we were all going to be clever...and do interesting things’ (P5, p.4). Furthermore, teachers did not hold or promote gendered ideas. There was no sense that girls took one set of subjects and boys another. They were encouraged to take subjects in which they showed aptitude and were expected to excel. As a participant who went on to study medicine remembered,

I did chemistry, physics, and zoology at A level...things I was best at...encouraged...[to do]...the things you were good at. There was no suggestion you should do the arts or humanities...science was very much encouraged (P13, p.3).

This non-gendered approach to education was considered very significant. They pointed out that there were very few options for alternatives particularly from within their own families and communities. The widely held expectation was that all young women would find a job, get married, and have children. However, most participants found that marriage and motherhood were not mentioned. One of the possible reasons for this was that many of the heads and female teachers were single women without children. Interestingly, they were seen as important role models and lived lives to be emulated, as evidenced by this comment,
If you wanted to have a job and stay in your job, you couldn’t get married. So our headmistress was never married and of course, we all admired her. Knowing there was no place for us [women]...well we had the Queen and that was it, all other women were more or less drudges, I couldn’t bear it (P5, p.5).

Whilst these recollections highlighted progressive and liberating options for working class young women within grammar school settings, they could sometimes be somewhat elitist and controlling. As noted above, there was an expectation to excel. Indeed most participants did excel, passing their A levels and progressing on to higher education. However, excellence was celebrated only if it met certain expectations of the headmistress. The experience of one participant highlighted this point. She and three other young women in her class did not take their A levels. Instead, they chose to take up places to train as nurses. The London hospital in which they trained had over 3000 applications for 150 places each year, so getting a place was quite an achievement. In the grammar school yearbook all pupils’ grades, university places, and jobs were listed. However, as she recalled,

Our headmistress was a Cambridge graduate and she was completely obsessed with academics and the girls who went nursing did not get their names in the school magazine at the end of the year...the lowliest of the low achievement job wise, got their names in, but we three were omitted. Even the girls who went to Woolworths got their names in. I wonder if she felt we had gone on to be servants you know nurses were. I think it was because it wasn’t an academic subject (P21, pp.6-9).

Working class participants in secondary modern schools

Participants who attended secondary modern schools had failed their eleven plus examination (apart from one who did not take the examination). This group of women were from mainly urban working class families where both parents tended to work full time. Their parents had few educational aspirations for them. In fact, in some homes, they had no desire for their child to continue education past the leaving age of 16. Consequently, and perhaps out of a desire to please their parents (mostly their domineering mothers, (See earlier, Category 1, Experiences and influences of parenting), they did as expected. Parents were more concerned that their daughter found a job, earned some money, and was able to make a financial contribution to the home, eventually becoming independent, ‘it was a
given I would work and get a job’ (P7, p.12-13). In effect, becoming independent meant getting married, moving out, and setting up your own home. As one participant told us, ‘I left school at 16, got a job in an office, working for British Gas, paying good money …I got married at 17’ (P11, p.14). Another recalled that even though she had been earning some money from the age of 12, and was in full time work by the age of 16, she was still living at home on her 18th birthday. She revealed that this was not what her mother had expected. Her mother had hoped that her daughter would be married and in her own home by that age. She recalled, ‘…so yeah… my mother gave me a housing application to get my own flat for my 18th birthday’ (P20, p.42).

All shared memories of teachers. However, these were significantly different memories to those of working class participants who had been to grammar school (See earlier). They shared stories of teachers who showed little or no interest in their lives and in some instances were disrespectful. They commented on occasions when teachers were drunk in class and when male teachers objectified women and ogled their breasts. One person was of the view that teachers, ‘had no aspiration for us…none whatsoever’ (P20, p.5). She went on to say, ‘I had no respect for teachers, because I didn’t really see them as acting respectful’ (p.11).

Teachers’ lack of interest was also evident in their attitudes and lack of aspirations for their students. Students were discouraged from aspiring to anything other than what was expected of working class young women at that time,

> School certainly was not about a career. If anything, I felt, I feel now that it was just about getting us to a level of competence, it felt like a lot of time wasted …It felt like it was manoeuvring us into a socially convenient channel (P12, p.3).

A great deal of emphasis was placed on subjects such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. One person was told, ‘as long as you have maths and English you’ll be ok’ (P21, p.3). At the same time, participants were discouraged studying science-based subjects. Some schools lacked the facilities to offer these as noted by this comment, ‘The [school] did not have lab facilities, so I could not continue with biology’ (P5, p.8). However, perhaps more significantly, science based subjects were not seen as relevant to the lives of young working
class women, ‘I gave up science in second year at school; I got the feeling that the, particularly the physics teacher wasn’t interested in girls [education]... I did get the feeling that science was possibly not for girls’ (P17, p.6).

Expectations amounted to secretarial jobs for those who showed ‘some ability’ and factory work for all others, followed by marriage and children. This was reflected in the curriculum as this participant explained, ‘subjects focused on women, yes...we did quite old fashioned domestic science, so all the things you do to cook a meal and then tidy up your stuff before the husband comes home things like that’ (P17, p.7).

These low expectations were also reflected in the nature of the careers advice on offer. A participant recalled her experience of the service,

> When we were about 15 the careers adviser from the labour exchange came in to talk to us in school and she said “ all right girls do you take Latin, and of course we didn’t and she said, ‘right then your options are the glove factory or the tea factory’. And I was really really outraged at that because I knew they were not our options...that was a disgustingly, ignorant and classist remark (P12, p.5).

Such a culture reinforced a sense of worthlessness and stifled any commitment to engage in education, ‘I was intelligent but...school didn’t do it for me. I left comprehensive school after O levels. I never paid much attention at school’ (P6, p.14). As significantly, the option of progressing to A levels was actively discouraged, ‘I left school at 16 and um told that I was too stupid to go to university and I would never do anything with my life’ (P5, p.2). Not all of these participants took A levels at that time, opting to leave at 16 to take up jobs. They recalled taking O levels but were unsure as what subjects they took or the grades they achieved. One person best summed up these experiences when she stated, ‘I left school at 16, I think I had C’s and D’s, I never even looked at them...all of them years in school, I remember being given a piece of paper [results] what a waste’ (P20, p.11).

Participants could not recall any of their classmates going on to higher education at that time. All went on to find jobs. Some married young but divorced shortly afterwards. One person told us, ‘I got married at 17 and we split up when I was 21 (P7, p.13). Another recalled, ‘I got married at 21, and on my wedding day realised this was a mistake and
divorced after a year’ (P20, p.13). Those who married young realised that being a wife did not bring them fulfillment. Once married, they found they had yet another set of expectations to meet from husbands and in some instances, mothers in law. These were primarily about becoming a good wife and looking after a husband. As this comment revealed,

But when I got married, I had this expectation that I had the contents of the fridge in my head all the time...if we ran out of anything my mother in law would glare at me...and I was finding it very difficult you know these expectations that I should be a certain way now I’m married (P7, pp.10-11).

Most realised over time that failed marriages and jobs without any prospect of intellectual, social, or financial progression was not what they wanted. Increasingly, they became more aware that their social circle consisted of people similar to themselves. People with low self-esteem, low expectations, and few aspirations for their futures. They recalled friends from school, some who were unemployed, and some who were lone parents by the age of seventeen. The fathers of these children tended to be in and out of prison, but almost always absent or in relationships with other women. One participant remembered her school friends every Saturday begging for money or asking to mind their children, ‘that is what I was seeing, women begging for maintenance or begging fathers to see their children’ (P20, p.14).

Crucially, many participants were aware of the need to change this pattern in their own lives. For some, one option was to return to education,

... it occurred to me that this wasn’t the life I wanted for myself ...and I went off to the technical college to do my A levels, sociology [laughs] was one of my subjects and I made a completely new set of friends (P5, p.3).

This was an important choice and for these the most defining time in their lives. Returning to an education previously denied, led to a profound sense of liberation and self-confidence. They spoke passionately about how education changed them. It offered a challenge while at the same time liberating them intellectually, socially and culturally. Participants spoke about returning to study subjects such as sociology, politics, and philosophy for A levels. This participant described the personal and political impact on her from studying sociology,
sociology was a huge influence because of course at 16 you’re starting to think very critically about the world and it politicised me, gave me a focus to my sort of angry thoughts and helped me to analyse my situation better (P4, p.18).

For the first time in their lives, many were introduced to alternative ideas and engaged with people from very diverse social and cultural worlds, ‘I was part of a world that was thinking politically and I guess I joined that world as it was very very cool to be radical’ (P12, p.6). Many became activists in feminist, political, and social movements. They found new opportunities and developed the confidence to engage with independent minded people from different social class backgrounds who led alternative lives. These were some of the comments shared by participants, which reflect their radical involvements at that time,

Oh at that time it was just fantastic, you know lots of friends, lots of parties, lots of meeting people you know, met hundreds of people ...a very active full social life (P11, p.15)

I was involved in the campaign for nuclear disarmament...I remember my nickname was Bomb and that gave me an identity (P12, p.6)

I got involved with the women’s movement and the politics...of women’s lives ...that is when I first learned to study and learned to read things...you know to me it was fascinating, I loved it  (P16, p.13-15)

I was kind of in my radical feminist stage when I was 18 and onwards ...it was the height of the women’s liberation movement.....and I have been a Ms since I was 16 (P5, pp.10-11)

I had a friend whose parents, both doctors, were Quakers and they were a revelation to me that parents could be so interesting, kind, radical, not uppity and equal (P12, p.6).
Category 3: Journeys to choice

I will present the third category: Journeys to choice. This category was constructed from patterns within the data that reflected different journeys to choice. These were coded as follows and as in Figure 3.3:

- Unconventional choices
- Autonomous choices
- Negotiated choices.

![Figure 3.3: Codes to Category 3: Journeys to Choice](image)

Similarly, to the previous categories, a range of complex and diverse factors influenced these choices. I will present the category under the different codes as above.

Unconventional choices

An unconventional choice was one that broke with the dominant gendered expectations that all women will get married and have children (See earlier, Education as a defining experience). As this participant stated, ‘the conventional thing to do was to fall in love, get married and have children and set up your own home’ (P19, p.8). Reflecting on their personal biographies and backgrounds, participants spoke about how their early family lives functioned on given and accepted gender norms. The roles of men and women were clearly defined and established (See earlier, Category 1, Experiences and influences of parenting). Irrespective of whether or not mothers worked outside the home, the expectation was that she was primarily responsible for looking after her husband and caring for her children. By making unconventional choices, participants as young women were very much aware they
were challenging the gendered expectations of the time. They were clear that they did not want to follow the conventional norms, ‘I think there was something in me that rebelled against that’ (P19, p.8).

Participants recalled a range of factors that influenced unconventional choices. Throughout their lives, these factors often combined and overlapped to both shape and reinforce their choices. Firstly, and from an early age, they felt no need or desire to have children. For this reason, they questioned the widely endorsed concept of ‘maternal instinct’ and its presence in all women. One woman shared that she, ‘never had a maternal instinct’ (P7, p.1). Another, while acknowledging the experiences of other women, concurred, ‘I assume it exists, many women say they have an instinct, a very strong desire to have children, so I assume it exists, but I’ve never felt it, no’ (P11, p.25).

The need or desire to be a mother and to have children was not something participants either felt or thought very much about. These two participants stated this clearly,

Never needed children, I don’t feel I need to be a mother. I never imagined that I was going to have children. I never grew up thinking actually my pathway in life is going to be ...go to college, get married, have children I never grew up with that, I never grew up thinking actually that I needed to have children (P5, pp.4-5)

Women that have children if you see them in parks pushing pushchairs, wiping the children, feeding the child, touching the child...and this need to be needed, this need to care, to clean to feed. I just don’t have this need to be needed or this need to be loved or to nurture and care, I just don’t have it…, but it must drive a lot of women (P7, p.28).

Secondly, negative experiences of family life and motherhood were also important influences. As these comments revealed,

I was aware of the oppressiveness of family life and a consciousness of the role of women as nothing more than slaves...you see to me being a mother means being a slave and being a domestic servant and why would I want to be a mother (P6, p.15)

...the oppressiveness of family life, wife spends her time servicing her husband and children’s needs, not her own (P5, p.8).

Such experiences were reinforced by their own mother’s ambivalence towards motherhood and an awareness that her role led to her unhappiness (See earlier, Category 1, Experiences
and influences of parenting). As one participant put it, ‘my mother did not want children’ and I may have absorbed this experience, ‘unconsciously’ (P7, p.7).

The third influence was the negative experiences associated with pregnancy and motherhood when participants were young. Participants’ best illustrated this when they reflected on the issue of teenage pregnancy. One group of participants recounted the sense of shame and failure associated with teenage pregnancy when they were at school,

\[
\text{this girl got pregnant and she was made to stand in front of the entire school and confess her terrible crime and she was made to have the baby ... say...we just thought you know, that is it, her life is over} \ (P1, p.5).
\]

From this perspective, it was about the, ‘the grubbiness of teenage pregnancy’ (P5, p.8), and ‘a few of my friends had kids, had them by accident, unfortunate accidents without contraception and preparation’ (P12, p.12). Such experiences seemed to exert some influence on choices later in life. They realised early on that being a mother and all that goes with it was not something they wanted for their own lives, ‘we were more concerned with pregnancy avoidance’ (P1, p.9), ‘most of my life women...tried not to have children’ (P8, p.18).

For another group of working class participants, there was no sense of shame attached to being a teenage mum. On the contrary, it was often an expectation desired by their own mothers. As young women, there was no awareness of reproductive choice. Their main aspiration as working class young women was employment, marriage, followed by children,

\[
\text{People were waiting for me to have a child, like it was expected of me to have a child, what else was I going to do with my uneducated lifestyle if I never had a child. I remember when I was 27 and all my friends children were now 10 years old, so I am the only one who haven’t got children...my mother constantly from the age of 16, I can’t wait to be a nana... you have children and I will look after them and mind them... and that used to make me angry because I used to think you should want more for your children} \ (P20, pp. 20-22).
\]

Participants experienced these early expectations as both oppressive and limiting. They felt a huge expectation to conform to traditional roles. Instead, they opted to make unconventional choices. As this participant said, ‘I didn’t have one [a child]... I made a decision, no, it’s not for me’ (P20, p.20).
Fourthly, there was a growing awareness that they wanted something different for their lives. However, as this participant stated, ‘realising I had choice was a slow process’ (P11, p.7). For some, their unconventional choices were reinforced and supported through involvement in feminist and political movements. They felt a greater need to be part of social movements that reflected their own emergent thinking at that time,

*I joined the women’s movement because I was not living the life I wanted, I wanted something different and I found it…it was just fantastic. We were intelligent, we had our own minds, we looked good, it was a fantastic time really* (P11, pp.12-13)

...it was also the beginning of the feminist movement. As soon as I heard about women’s group, I wanted to join. Because I’ve always had a feminist consciousness of my own. I couldn’t find many female role models in history and I certainly did not want to live my mother’s life (P16, pp.12-14).

Within these movements, participants found people who shared similar outlooks on life and who were interested in careers, intellectual and political ideas,

...typically pretty young women who wanted careers, had various intellectual kinds of interests and struggled again being confined at home and a woman’s right to choose was a dominant thing...we weren’t really into the children thing (P16, p.15)

*We were very politically engaged and other women friends were saying well you know we can’t bring children into this world...we have got other really really important things to do with our lives. We can’t have children* (P1, p.14).

On a personal level, involvement met their need to be different. At the same time, it helped to support and validate their unconventional choices. This participant recalling her first women’s conference in 1969, told us,

*I felt all the funny instincts I had, I liked writing, I liked cats, I liked flowers, and all the feelings I had as a young child were coming together. I felt we could do anything and I did not feel any sense of duty to have a child* (P12, p.21).

On a political level, involvement also empowered them to challenge inequalities in the world,

*Well it was flower power and I was a chick in the underground world. I was in London by then and living the alternative lifestyle that I wanted to live...I was writing for left wing magazines, Rolling Stone. As a features editor I did*
a lot work on women’s lives at that time. My life was about creating change in the world. Having children never occurred to me, it wasn’t cool really (P12, pp.11-12)

I love children, they love me, but never just been quite for me. Choice formed by my experience, politics is my choice that is the thing that excited me, not family (P5, pp.3-7).

**Autonomous choices**

Autonomous choices were made independently and at a young age. These participants did not deviate from their choices in later life. A number of disparate experiences and ideas appear to have been influential to these choices. For one participant, it was fear of having a disabled child. She recalls growing up with an awareness of the stigma and fear attached to disability, ‘thinking disability, I was very scared about having kids who would turn out like that...that was my first thought then’ (P3, p.2). However, it was her experience in school where she had the opportunity to engage with ideas of overpopulation, which ultimately influenced her choice (See earlier, Category 2- Education as a defining experience). As she stated,

...my opinion of having children changed in school at the age of 11 or 12. I started reading theories of population, Thomas Malthus, and became more interested in biology, the environment, and issues of over population, so my attitude changed into well really I should not add to the overpopulation and that was it (P3, p.3).

Another recounted a key experience as growing up in a world, which appeared to be in ongoing crisis. She recalled the murder of an 18-year-old local girl, killed by her boyfriend as influential since it created a deep sense of fear in the whole community. She also evoked the assassination of President John F Kennedy [1963] and the political uncertainty surrounding the Cold War, as also being significant to her awareness, ‘I can remember thinking I don’t want to bring children into this world because I don’t like it very much. I had made up my mind when I was 13 or 14 that I didn’t want children’ (P21, p.26).

Early childhood experiences of caring for siblings and other children appeared to influence some participants (See earlier, Category 1, Experiences and influences of parenting). From
these experiences, they realised they did not want their mother’s lives and the commitment involved,

I knew I didn’t want my mother’s life because I had so much of it...I mean I used to be in charge of four siblings (P9, p.5)

I didn’t want children. It was my choice. Huge lifelong commitment and I wasn’t sure I was that kind of person to make that commitment...rather than be uncertain I’d rather not have children. I chose not to have children and people forget they have actually made a choice to have children...well I hope so (P8, pp.7-10).

For others, their choices were reinforced whilst working as au pairs,

Au pair at 17... and I didn’t enjoy looking after the children and I already knew that I was not going to have children (P15, pp.20-21)

I liked the idea [being an au pair] but I did not like looking after the children (P12, p.9).

For another, the experience of growing up in a child-focused culture was very influential. She argued, ‘a woman’s role regardless of what else you have achieved in your career is to have children; your kids define you’ (P22, p.8). She recalled an aunt with children who worked outside the home. She was regularly the subject of criticism for not looking after her children, ‘everyone’s complaint was she’s had kids but she is not really a mother’. She did not want to be defined in this way. As a young child, she was aware that she did not want children and so made an early choice, ‘at the age of 12, I had a strong feeling actually I am not interested in children, I’m never going to have kids’ (p.7).

**Negotiated choices**

Negotiated choices are those made in relationships with one other person. In this case, the partners of participants. I use the term ‘partner’ to include both women and men. Prior to these relationships, participants did not give any serious thought to marriage or having children, ‘I have to say I don’t think I ever thought about marriage and motherhood’ (P14, p.13); ‘Life journey, marriage, and settling down never entered my head. I mean I don’t think I ever gave it a thought, no’ (P4, p.5). For others, and particularly for participants from working class backgrounds this life journey was accepted as the norm, ‘in working class communities, having a family was a kinda given’ (P1, p.5).
For some, negotiated choices were made in circumstances where partners already had children from previous relationships and did not wish to have any more. Participants who entered into these relationships were aware early on of their partner’s decision. A participant reflecting on her thoughts on this time, told us that she knew that her partner had had a vasectomy and,

_I was quite blasé about it, I was like well if I was going to have kids, I would have had them by now...and if you’re telling me that you’ve had your three children and you’re done...that is fine_ (P2, p.16).

For this participant, having children was not important. Being a mother was not one of her life’s goals. She was aware that if it had been she knew that, ‘_if I really put my foot down, he’d have the vasectomy reversed_’ (p.17).

Some partners of participants had found the process of having and rearing children difficult. Because of these experiences, they were unwilling to contemplate having any more children. This woman remembered her partner informing her of this and her response at the time,

_I’m not having anymore, I would not have had these if I had known what it was going to be like, so at that point, it’s like, well the choice is either X [partner] or a child, so there was no choice, because as I said X is the love of my life_ (P1, p.13).

Another participant was mindful that having a child with her partner may have presented some difficulties in their relationship and was unwilling to take the risk, as reflected in this comment, ‘_I was in a relationship with a man who has three children. Adding a child to that mix would produce some financial weakness, some emotional weakness, some time weakness, having a child would not improve things_’ (P2, p.24). Participants spoke of connections their partners had with their ex-partners and children. One participant stated that these relationships were often fraught with difficulties. As a result, ‘_I was questioning do I really want to bring another child into this_’ (P1, p.13).

Negotiated choices were made in circumstances where male partners had already chosen not to have children. In these cases, participants were generally made aware of a partner’s decision early on in their relationship,
at 21, I entered into a relationship with a man of 28... and he said...I can’t see myself ever having kids (P14, p.17)

X [husband] definitely did not want children...and we did talk about it (P15, pp.28-29).

In such circumstances, participants had a choice to remain in their relationships or to leave. All appeared to prioritise their relationships with partners over choosing to have children. As this participant said,

At the age of 30, I remember saying well I don’t want us to decide we’re not going to have children at this stage. And he said, well I’m afraid I don’t want them you know, I definitely know I don’t want children. And I remember thinking I’m going to have to leave him but I didn’t so, it can’t have been a strong feeling, as I stayed in the relationship (P4, p.30).

Summary of categories

Experiences and influences of parenting and particularly relationships with mothers suggest subsequent influences on participant choices. Three types of parenting experiences offer insights to understanding some of the influences on later reproductive choices. Firstly, the domineering mother who was demanding, needy, disinterested and tended to dominate her husband. Secondly, the discontented mother who was unhappy, associated with tense family relationships, never really wanted children, and found it difficult to uphold notions of the ideal family. Thirdly, the take it or leave it mother who was ambivalent to motherhood, socially isolated but at least could also reclaim her happiness and identity through returning to work. In contrast, experiences of fathers tended to be associated with passivity, weakness, and having a limited role in family life. These experiences led to negative feelings towards family and particularly motherhood. In addition, the oppressive nature of these experiences eroded confidence and fostered powerlessness. At the same time, an important insight was that they enabled participants to question family life and to explore choices that had more meaning for them. In particular, to seek out opportunities for alternative lives and to pursue their own interests and careers.

Participants’ success or failure in secondary education was a defining experience on choice. Three distinct educational experiences were considered significant in shaping the life
choices of participants. First, middle class participants saw attending a grammar school as the trajectory for their lives. These experiences enabled them to be aware of and make choices, which allowed them to consider alternatives to the conventional lives of their parents. They were better equipped to resist parental and societal expectations of education, marriage, and children.

Second, the experiences of working class participants in grammar schools. In particular, the significance of female teachers as role models was important. This coupled with the opportunity to engage in a non-gendered curriculum enabled them to pursue careers and lives that previously may not have been an option for young women from their social class.

Thirdly, the experiences of working class participants in secondary education reflected and reinforced lower parental and educational expectations. Consequently, after leaving school, some took unrewarding jobs, married young and divorced shortly afterwards. Crucially, these experiences led to an increased critical awareness and consciousness to change their lives. An important insight to emerge is that in the face of these negative and often painful, destructive experiences both at home and at school, participants came to question and seek out alternatives. They did so mainly by returning to education on their own terms and participating in political and feminist social movements. This led to increased levels of critical consciousness and self-worth. Thus, out of often oppressive working class backgrounds and destructive school experiences, they sought to shape their own personal identities and consequently felt able to make more autonomous choices with their lives.

Three journeys to choice making emerged. These were unconventional, autonomous, and negotiated. Unconventional choices broke with dominant gendered expectations. These choices were influenced by a range of complex factors that often overlapped and combined at different stages in life. The main influences on these choices was no need or desire to have children, negative experiences of family life, motherhood and pregnancy and the search for something different.

Autonomous choices were personal and made at a young age. Participants never felt any desire to deviate from their choices. These choices were influenced by factors such as
awareness of disability, ideas of overpopulation and global insecurities, early experiences of childcare and growing up in a child-focussed culture.

Negotiated choices were made in relationships with partners. The key influences here were partners, their particular circumstances, and their own choices not to have children. As part of such negotiations, participants tended to prioritise their relationships with partners over having children.

**Relationships between categories**

Having presented and summarized the three categories that relate to my question on choice, I will now go on to consider possible relationships between them. I began to explore these relationships after I had presented and written the above categories, codes and summaries. I did this as I found it difficult to see participants’ choice making as solely dependent on the influences revealed within specific categories. As all had varied experiences that influenced their choices, I felt I needed to analyse the data at a deeper level. To understand more about the nature of the choices they made. I decided at that point to reread the codes, categories, summaries and my memos a number of times and I reflected on them intensively over a number of weeks. In doing so, I was guided by Charmaz who argued that researchers should get beyond the surface of data and to explore links between micro experiences and wider structural contexts (Charmaz, 2014). In addition, to remind myself that in constructivist grounded theory, ‘the theory depends on the researcher’s view; it does not and cannot stand outside of it’ (p.239).

I began to realise that while each participant had travelled their own personal journeys to the choices they made, the categories revealed a range of complex influences and experiences. Therefore, I found it increasingly difficult to isolate either shared personal experiences or societal factors that were significant. My key insight here was that while each participant had made their own personal choice not to have children, their choice was made within a particular social context and was shaped over a period of time. Central to their choice making were shared experiences and influences that arose within specific social contexts. For example, common shared experiences of parenthood, education, family life
and feminism. Although isolated personal and societal experiences were important and resonated with some previous research (See Chapter 1, Introduction, Context and Literature Review), I was not convinced that these alone were the significant factors on their choices.

During this analytical period, I also wrote a number of new memos for the purpose of trying to clarify my own thinking and to explore the relationships between categories. The following memo might serve to illustrate some of my thinking at that time.

What these categories reveal is that choosing not to have children is a complex process, which involved both the personal and the social. Participant’s personal worlds were in an ongoing collision with their social environments. When I asked participants HOW they made their choices, they all referred to it as a personal agentic choice. Yet when I asked WHY they all referred to the social institutions of family, education, peers and community as being significant. I find it difficult to disentangle the personal from the structural, as they appear to be in constant collision with one another. Participants wandered and meandered in and out of these two worlds. For instance, they knew they wanted something different for their own lives, yet motherhood was constantly being reinforced as the desired role for them. So the process of making choices seems complex, messy, fluid, difficult, but always contingent.

So, while the richness and breadth of the data was sometimes perplexing, I believed it was necessary to engage with the categories in all their complexity for the sake of gaining a deeper clarity of choice making (See Chapter 7, Conclusion). On one level, I was tempted to abstract out the specific categories and elements that concurred with previous research. However, at another level, I felt I needed to deepen the analysis. The more I reflected on it, the more I realised that participants’ choices could not be reduced to personal biography or specific societal influences. To understand their choices, I found that it was crucial to see them as part of a complex interplay comprised of the various experiences and influences revealed in the data (Figure 3.4).
I continued to think about the nature of this interplay over a number of weeks. While the relationships were complex, I would argue that participants’ choice making can best be understood in relation to what I describe as *restraining* and *liberating* experiences in their lives. *Restraining* experiences can be seen as the range of factors that included motherhood, fatherhood, family life, community, formal education and social expectations (See earlier, Category 1, Experiences and influences of parenting; Category 2, Education as a defining experience). These experiences could be seen to have stifled freedom of choice, which sometimes led to low self-esteem and powerlessness among many participants. While these *restraining* experiences can be seen as significant hindering factors in their lives (and especially for working class participants), they did at the same time compel many to question family life and to be open to more *liberatory* possibilities for their own lives (See earlier, Category 1, Experiences and influences of parenting; Category 2, Education as a defining experience). In contrast to *restraining* experiences, *liberating* experiences can include positive role models, access to non-gendered education, exposure to alternative ideas, relationships with like-minded partners, involvement in social movements and
opportunities to develop critical awareness (See earlier, Category 1, Experiences and influences of parenting; Category 3, Journeys to choice). From my analysis, such experiences seemed to foster freedom, positive self-esteem and a yearning for alternatives to motherhood. Consequently, both restraining and liberating experiences exemplify a deeper understanding of choice, which arise from the complex interplay between participants and their social worlds.

Within this frame of analysis, social class was also a key influence on choice and particularly in relation to educational experiences (See earlier, Category 1, Experiences and influences of parenting; Category 2, Education as a defining experience). It was influential from early-lived experiences and reinforced through social institutions and structures. It also had both significant liberatory and restraining elements. Middle class participants found that their personal aspirations and desires could be supported through formal institutions such as the education system. For working class participants, class remained a restraining force. For some, despite the restraining early experiences of social class and its reinforcement through formal education, their ability to engage with alternative ideas and social movements proved crucial.

Middle class participants had experiences that fortified them to challenge family and societal expectations. Working class participants at grammar school benefited from positive experiences that enabled them to consider alternatives to the limited expectations of their class. However, working class participants at comprehensive schools had very different experiences. Their class backgrounds reinforced low parental and societal expectations. Their experiences in formal education only served to reinforce their lower status. As a result, most were not even aware that they had life choices.

Finally, having presented the three categories and analysed the relationships between them my finding in relation to choice is as stated in the Introduction to this chapter and can be showed diagrammatically as in Figure 3.5.
A wide range of personal and societal factors influenced the choice making of participants. However and based on this analysis, it can be argued that participants’ choices not to have children are best understood as part of something more complex and intractable. From the data, choice appears as more of an interactive process that involved both restraining and liberating experiences. Participants’ choices were personal but they were also influenced by significant societal factors in their lives. The context of their lives and their social class also emerged as a crucial determinant for many.

In the next chapter, I present the theoretical findings, 2 and 3 and the categories that informed these.
Chapter 4: Findings - Perceived of Lesser Value but No Regrets

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to show how I arrived at the two theoretical findings that relate to my second and third research questions: What were participants’ experiences arising from their choices? What was the perceived impact of their choices (if any) on their lives? The findings can be stated as follows:

Theoretical finding 2

Participants who choose not to have children feel they are perceived as of lesser value. This positioning was expressed through negative language, stereotyping, and reinforced in families, communities, and workplaces. This portrayal needs to be understood within a societal context of motherarchy where womanhood and motherhood are seen as synonymous.

Theoretical finding 3

Most participants do not regret their choice not to have children. Instead, they acknowledged the potential for regret as a feature of any life choice of this magnitude. Motherhood is seen as just one of the many possible life experiences open to women.

In this chapter, I will present the categories (4 and 5) and the codes from which these findings were constructed. The categories were:

Category 4: Women of lesser value.

Category 5: No Regrets
As with the previous chapter, I will draw heavily and give primacy to the voices of participants. Throughout, quotations are referenced with a participant number and page in the transcription. Following this, I will summarise the main points from each category and discuss possible relationships between them. I will begin with Category 4.

**Category 4: Women of lesser value**

I constructed this category as women of lesser value. My key insight from this category was that participants believed they were negatively constructed within a culture of dominant familial ideas and where there was a resistance to exploring choice and alternatives. Three distinct codes led to the construction of this category (Figure 4.1). These were:

- Negative descriptions and perceptions
- Reinforcing the message
- Silencing

![Figure 4.1: Codes to Category 4: Women of lesser value](image)

I will report on each code in turn.

**Negative descriptions and perceptions**

In general, participants believed they were negatively constructed as women who choose not to have children. These constructions mainly took the form of negative descriptions and perceptions. All participants recalled a range of words such as selfish, abnormal, an...
aberration, unhappy, sad, immature, hard, unfulfilled, pitied, strange, alien, odd, and peculiar. The word ‘selfish’ was the most common, ‘oh you are selfish, just selfish’ (P8, p.11), ‘it was always seen that you were selfish not to have children, you know’ (P7, p.28). As one participant put it, ‘the negativity comes from other people’s reactions and the need to justify’ (P22, p.19).

Most participants appeared to want to challenge this negative portrayal,

I’m not a selfish person, but I am self-centred and aware of self, and know what I need (P5, p.18)

Selfish we might be but we might also be incredibly unselfish, we might be working incredibly hard for the betterment of humanity and be quite happy to do that (P1, p.29)

I think there is bafflement; there is a perception that if you have chosen not to have children, you are selfish (P22, p.19).

Some people queried why the label ‘selfish’ was not applied to women with children. They argued that mothers are perceived in an overtly positive way, ‘women who are mothers are contributors, productive, givers, nurturers, carers, all these very positive societal words’ (P2, p.37). Another commented on ‘the construction of the yummy mummy, what’s all that about’ (P1, p.28).

The link between selfishness and the motivation to have children was raised by this participant, ‘I don’t know what motivates people to have children, selfishness comes into it’ (P4, p.35). Others stated that it could be seen to be selfish to bring more children into a world that is already overpopulated and when so many are in need,

...you could also be critical of women who have three, four, five children. I don’t think so many children should be brought into an overcrowded world (P16, p.42)

People will tell you won’t they that you’re being selfish not to have children, work that one out, even when I was growing up, there were too many people in the world ...that always makes me laugh (P9, p.26)

When I am in my angry more analytical frame of mind, I really feel angry with women for bringing children into this world, where there are so many children in care who need homes. Alter your perspective and adopt if you really want children (P4, p.35).
As well as being subject to this ‘selfish’ discourse, participants felt that it was generally assumed that as women they had not fulfilled gendered expectations. Only mothers were considered ‘normal’,

I think it is seen as normative to have children and if you don’t follow the norm then there is something wrong with you in whatever way, physically, mentally, socially, something wrong with you (P13, p.17)

If you’ve got the mother tag, it rolls off the tongue, it’s a description that fills out a whole life history for society very easily, you’ve obviously spent your time wisely because you’ve been a mother. You could have buried people in the back garden but you’ve been a mother and so you’re covered (P2, p.39).

Linked to this was the view that women who choose not to have children were somewhat unhappy for that reason. One participant stated that even though she told people she was happy they found it difficult to accept. The assumption was that only by having children a woman could be happy and mature,

People think you are not sufficiently mature and that you have not bitten the bullet and got on with it. It is what one does if one is to be a sufficiently rounded, psychologically mature person (P12, p.19).

Without children, you are perceived to have a somewhat diminished life, as these participants revealed, ‘people assume because you have not got kids, there’s sadness, because as a woman you would have wanted kids’ (P7, p.21), and ‘if you don’t have children your life is blighted by not having children (P1, p.23).

Furthermore, participants were often perceived as ‘career women’. In other words, women who had favoured careers over motherhood. As one participant stated, ‘I think they see us women as career women, it was always you were seen as selfish not to have children, you have your career’ (P11, p.8) and, ‘oh they say, of course, you’ve got your career’ (P14, p.24).

Participants questioned this assumption. While most enjoyed successful and rewarding careers, none defined themselves as ‘career women’, ‘I would never describe myself in that way, people thought I was wedded to the job, I am not a careerist; it is just what I liked to do’ (P13, p.14). Another agreed and stated,
People say, oh well you have put your career first, but the reality is I haven’t, I think people are judging you, what’s all this about then, but I haven’t thought I am going to put my job over a family (P14, p.24).

In addition, there was the perception that women who do not have children do not like children, ‘if you haven’t got children, you must not like them’ (P1, p.23). This participant recalled that, ‘when people find out you have no children; they assume that you do not like children, so no children means you don’t like children’ (P2, p.9). This perception was also challenged. Some participants worked as professionals with children or as managers of children’s services. Others were actively involved in the day-to-day lives of children. Many had stepchildren, some step-grandchildren, nieces, nephews and others were godparents. In fact, most participants liked children,

I love children (P22, p.9)
I love children, I love being with children, children love me (P5, p.7)
I haven’t given birth to a child, but there are children in my life that I love so much, that I see and that is wow, beautiful,...I have seven god children, they chose me (P22, p.15-17)
I actually love spending time with children (P14, p.30)
I enjoy being with children (P19, p.12).

Of the few who state they disliked children, none saw this as a negative trait in themselves or indeed something they were uneasy about,

I don’t like children, I never have (P7, p.1)
I’ve always said I don’t like them, if asked (P13, p.25)
you know I don’t want to pretend I like babies I don’t, you feed them one end, and it comes out the other end and then you have to clean them up (P8, p.27).

Noting an inconsistency in this perception, one participant observed that ‘we never hear that, indeed some mothers do not like their own children’ (P1, p.23).

**Reinforcing the message**

As revealed under the previous code, participants were very aware of negative descriptions and perceptions. At the same time, they were also aware of how these were regularly
reinforced through powerful and incessant positive societal messages on motherhood and the family. Commenting on the structural aspect of such messages, one participant argued that society has a vested interest in the status quo, ‘there are certain structures we want to see replicated in society, and one of them is the nuclear family structure’ (P2, p.50). This referred to the way in which societal institutions promoted ideas about the value of family and children as the ultimate achievement in a woman’s life. As these participants argued,

...these times are so incredibly family orientated (P12, p.22)

*I think it’s about the whole thing of even in today’s society, man, woman and 2.4 children and it is constant and chronic. And so the message comes back again and again that real life, in other words a full acceptable complete life involves raising a family [of your own] (P2, p.29).

In such a context, as one participant put it,

*The only way to be normal is if you can’t have kids ... you are some sort of heartless person if you chose not to, versus, one of those poor souls that’s gone through IVF until your bankrupt and you can’t see a pregnant woman without bursting into tears...and you go through life weeping over prams* (P1, pp. 23-24).

The reinforcement of these dominant messages were best illustrated in relation to the workplace. Participants argued that in the workplace there was often a common perception that women are successful at work because they do not have children. No matter how smart a woman was, or how much she contributed or how much money she made, her success was always diminished. A participant recalled a female colleague commenting on her success, ‘oh it’s alright for you; you’ve got no kids’ (P13, p.21). Similarly, this participant stated, ‘I think people would perceive me as she got where she is because if she’d had children, she would have found it more difficult’ (P5, p.19). Another recalled how the personal achievements of women without children were often negated,

*the more you accomplish as a woman without children, the nastier the jibes get... In other words, of course you could do that, because you didn’t have kids. So, your accomplishments become less because you were obviously able to do them because you didn’t have kids, and it does diminish then the childless woman’s efforts because it’s like she was given a free pass* (P2, pp. 32-33).
Work based policies tended to reinforce this culture and to prioritise women with children. As this participant stated,

*policies only benefit mothers, not all women and sometimes I think, well I’ve worked very hard to get where I am and no one has made any concessions for me* (P13, p.22).

Many identified with the priority afforded to women with children in the workplace, and there was a certain resignation about it, ‘yes and you have to accept it’, (P13, p.23). However, they recalled instances where there was an expectation that they would cover for women who had to leave work at short notice to facilitate childcare. This participant commented, ‘in the workplace, there is a real issue isn’t there about people with children have particular needs and therefore take priority’ (P14, p.58). By contrast, they argued that women who care for animals and request time off to care for these are perceived as ‘completely bonkers’ (P13, p.23). A participant recalled an instance when she needed to take time off to care for her sick cat. She related that this was, ‘a source of amusement that you had to take time off to take my cat to the vet, it wouldn’t have been the same if you know it was my child’ (P14, p.63).

Another feature of this culture is that colleagues and management perceived that women who choose not to have children would not or should not want to take their annual leave during school holidays. Sharing their experiences of taking annual leave these participants recalled,

*I was on leave last week, and I did not realise it was half-term and someone said to me, why are you taking leave, you don’t have kids...it was almost like why have you time off because it that’s not your right, it’s for others to have it off you know [laughter] ...so for example, I worked in a Children’s home and when the Christmas rota came out, oh well people with children will have Christmas off...if I had wanted to spend that time with my family, it would have been frowned upon actually if I’d have wanted to take that time off* (P14, p.58).

Despite these experiences, many participants were happy to offer to work, particularly when they felt it benefitted children, such as at Christmas time,

*I used to work Christmas eves for my colleagues when it wasn’t my turn because I wanted them to be with their children...it was important that they were with their children* (P21, p.41).
Silences

As revealed above, participants argued strongly against these negative constructs. They also inferred to a general silence around non-motherhood. They also acknowledged that there are limited opportunities for dialogue with and between women around alternatives. However many felt unable to challenge this culture in public. In particular, they were reluctant to challenge this workplace culture and especially when it involved cover for childcare. As one participant succinctly put it, ‘oh, look at the mumsnet mafia, where if you disagree with anything you get stoned to death with cupcakes’ (P1, p.31). They were also mindful that this lack of challenge is of their own making. On the one hand, they felt that by not challenging, they were condoning these practices. As one participant said, ‘is this right... to be silent is to give consent’ (P8, p.31). On the other hand, they felt that to challenge would be considered as unreasonable behaviour on their part. To challenge might further reinforce the perception that women without children are indeed selfish and heartless (See earlier). Reflecting on this, one participant told us that, ‘you know in a sense that reluctance to challenge is almost depended on’ (P8, p.31).

Participants wondered if the absence of discussion is because there was no desire to explore alternatives and understand why some women choose not to have children. They recalled that they were rarely if ever asked about why they made the choice, ‘you know people don’t understand where that [choice] comes from or want to identify with it’ (P14, p.31).

Furthermore, they were never asked about their experiences as women without children. There was a sense that, ‘this is just people not wanting to understand that you can actually decide’ (P8, p.11). Others argued that there was something more deeper going on. As participants remarked, ‘childless women challenge other women’ (P1, p.30) and are ‘admired and envied in equal measures’ (P19, p.12).

Another feature of this silence was that women who choose not to have children found it difficult to be involved in discussions around children. As they did not have children of their own, the perception was that they were not able to have a conversation or hold an opinion on children. Comments are recalled such as, ‘oh you can’t possibly understand because you have not got children’ (P19, p.21) and, ‘you couldn’t possibly know anything about children’
Participants felt that these attitudes limited their ability to engage with debates about children. Those who worked in children’s services felt it diminished opportunities to share their knowledge and expertise. A participant who worked with children recalled that sometimes parents referred to her childless status by saying, ‘oh you can’t know what it is like’. She accepted this comment but asserted that it, ‘didn’t bother me really…I got expertise in this [her profession]’ (P14, p.20). Others argued that their perspectives and experiences were missing from debates around children, ‘we [women without children] do not have the emotional connection and therefore can be objective’ (P19, p.21).

Lesbian women were further silenced. They recalled that motherhood was promoted as the preferred option for heterosexual woman. Participants who came out as lesbian women following the break-up of long term relationships with men were not expected to either want, or have children. This contrasted with their experiences when they were in heterosexual relationships. Then, they were regularly asked about their intention to have children. However, as lesbian women they were never asked about having children, ‘well people don’t do they, it’s not [seen as] normal, the moment I came out, no one ever asked me that again’ (P11, p.5); ‘it was kind of assumed that if you were lesbian well you wouldn’t want to or have children’ (P1, p.17).

Some women with children were also silenced. Participants argued that even though some women experience very difficult pregnancies and childbirths, it is still the case that, ‘motherhood is good, even when you have an appalling experience of childbirth and indeed post-natal depression’ (P1, p.31). Commenting on the culture of upholding motherhood as the ultimate achievement for all women, they argued that this might not be what all mothers want. Some may have felt unable to say so. One participant recalled that when you talk to women who have children,

> they all say, whilst pretending to joke, no I wouldn’t have had them. So, I reckon it is a big myth and they’ve got to preserve that myth that it’s all wonderful when you know the research shows the reverse of wonderful (P1, p.31).

Another participant recalled a friend who ‘privately and publicly... was under an awful lot of pressure, because she walked out on her children, since she did not want to be a mother’ (P6,
As a result, it was very difficult for women to talk openly and honestly about these experiences with other women.

**Category 5: No regrets**

In this section, I will present the fifth category: No regrets. Analysis of the data revealed that most participants experienced no regrets following their choice not to have children. Others expressed what I coded as half regrets, while all pondered the potential for regret when older and in need of care. Only one participant expressed a deep sense of loss at her choice. The data, which led to the construction of this category, arose from questions about their experiences and the impact of making this choice (Appendix 3C). Loss and regret emerged as a category from the pilot study and informed the interview schedule for the main study (See Chapter 2, Methodology, Design and Fieldwork). Four codes led to the construction of this category (Figure 4.2). These were:

- No regrets
- Half regrets
- Loss
- Challenging the discourse

I elected to include the data from the one participant who spoke about loss. I wanted to include her perspective as I felt she offered some important insights. Crucially, she shared feelings of sadness about her choice, which was in stark contrast to other participants. In addition, her inclusion is consistent with the constructivist grounded theory principle of acknowledging differing realities (See Chapter 2, Methodology, Design and Fieldwork). I will now go on to present each code as listed above.
No regrets

Overall, the majority of participants had no regrets from their choice. Here are some of their comments,

I don’t regret not having kids, no (P7, p.37)
Never really thought about loss or regret (P5, p.19)
No loss or regret, no, not at all, always happy with my choice (P13, p.13)
Absolutely no regrets and I don’t feel I have missed out on anything (P14, p.53)
I have no regrets about not having children, definitely no regrets (P17, p.34).

Several different but related reasons were cited as to why participants felt they did not have regrets. An important reason for some was that the desire to have children was never part of their life plans. The plan was always to live lives of their own making outside motherhood. For this participant, not having children meant that she could be, ‘incredibly productive, so not having children means I can fulfil more desires and I don’t have to worry about a child or children’ (P12, p.21). From this perspective, it was about wanting more autonomy and personal freedom. As this participant stated, ‘I never wanted one [child], I wanted to have a really good life, I wanted to have a life of freedom without responsibilities. No loss, no regret, personal choice’ (P11, p.28).

In the same vein, others wanted to pursue education, find rewarding work and have a home of their own. Moreover, in pursuing personal goals, they did not feel guilty as this participant asserted,

I don’t feel guilty for my lifestyle either, I enjoy it. I don’t think there is anything wrong with it and I’m glad I never had children. No regret and no loss, no, because I have lived my life, so I feel relief. I have a life, I have an education, I have work, I have my own place (P20, p.42).

Another reason offered centred on the commitment involved with not having and rearing children. For instance, as a young woman, one participant experienced a mothering role with siblings. She did not enjoy this role and it made her aware of the demands of motherhood (See Chapter 3, The Complex Interplay of Choice). She asserted,
I have no reason to regret. What I thought about the bringing up of children and the commitment is as true today as it was when I was 14. I can see what it means; I think it is a fairly mature decision and recognition of myself. Did I want that sort of responsibility; no, I did not (P8, p.20).

For another, it appeared to be more about the loss of self often associated with motherhood. She expressed the view that some mothers appeared to live their lives through their children. Thus, they had little or no identity other than being a mother. She argued that this could lead to a resulting merging of identities - woman and motherhood. She accepted that some women are happy to accept that role. However, she realised early on that, had she chosen to have children she, ‘would not have had a life; your life would have been like all women before you, your children’ (P9, p.25).

Half regrets

For some, there was a sense of half regrets. From these perspectives, there was a certain inevitability about having at least some element of regret following any major life choice. As this participant observed,

I think I hold contradictory views like most people do, which is I do have regrets; there is a lack of something I could have done [having children] that would have been creative and would have been satisfying (P15, p.64).

Another woman agreed and stated that it is unrealistic not to experience some regret from choosing not to have children,

I knew I would regret not having children, because to imagine you can go through life and never have that feeling is unrealistic. I thought lots of time, will I regret it, but wouldn’t it be worse if you regretted having them (P4, p.31).

Another concurred with the view that intrinsic to choice are elements of regret. She said that her choice meant she rejected motherhood because it is not something she desired for her own life. Nevertheless, she accepted that because of her choice there was regret, ‘yes there will always be regret but not enough to do anything about it, so I guess they are not big regrets’ (P1, p.21). She acknowledged that being a mother might have been an interesting experience. However, at the same time she believed motherhood is only one
experience in life and not the only way to find fulfilment. As this woman explained, ‘the desire to have a child could not have been that strong, otherwise I would have pursued it’ (P1, p.21). Instead, she pursued activities for her that were interesting, satisfying, and creative. For example, she was involved in politics and women’s groups with people who shared her views on life and with whom she built rewarding and lasting connections,

it [having a child] was only one experience in life; there were also other as important things to do ... politics, environment...we can’t have children, we are too busy saving the world (P1, p.21).

All participants stressed that making the choice not to have children involved reflection, consideration, introspection, negotiation, and compromise (See Chapter 3, The Complex Interplay of Choice). For some, accepting responsibility for their choices was their way of dealing with any regrets they had. As this participant stated,

you know life is full of half regrets and ponderings over what it would have been like... it’s about taking responsibility for your choices. I mean god help me if I was dogged by regrets of not having children, what a waste of emotion (P4, p.31-43).

Loss

Only one participant spoke about loss. This participant expressed a deep sense of loss at her choice. She wondered as to why she was not chosen while younger to be a mother and whether she was to blame,

Why didn’t somebody look at me when I was 23 years of age and three stone lighter [laughs] and think this is the woman with whom I want to share my life?. I think I do struggle with why wasn’t I picked. Why didn’t a man think I was good enough to have his kids?. I sort of think what did I do wrong (P2, p.31).

She married in her mid-thirties at which time she chose not to have children. At that time in her life, she felt that her choice was the right one for her. However, she now experiences feelings of personal loss, ‘it feels like bereavement at 48’ (P2, p.6). She wondered if she ever made that choice or did she just react to life events,

You come back 15 years later wondering what was going on there. Why did I make those decisions, or was it simply a case of did I ever decide or was I just a passive reactor to the things that happened (P2, p.6)
She went on to say,

It’s probably something in me that I feel a sense of failure to take up the challenge [to have a child], was weak, was some sort of reject; it’s these sort of niggling monster in the bedroom kinda thing (P2, p.29).

When asked about this personal ‘failure’, she admitted that the external perceptions held of women without children invaded and reinforced her own negativity (See earlier). Thus, she felt her deep sense of personal loss was reinforced by societal factors. She felt like, ‘a zero, a nothing, you are a gap, you are a blank, you are a space, and I’m enough of an egoist to not like that’ (P2, p.19). In addition, her sense of loss was accentuated by not having a child to carry on the family name, ‘so that means I don’t have any relative connections in blood’, coupled with the lack of any ties to the future, which she felt mothers had,

women with children have natural ties, women without don’t, their experiences will be markedly different and societally negative. If you have children, you will have grandchildren and they will have societal links and you are seen as a matriarch and we have these words you know in society, so that you receive some sort of title (P2, pp.18-19-30).

The participant enjoyed a very successful professional life. Yet, despite enormous professional achievements, not having a child created a sense of failure, ‘what did I do wrong, been good at lots of other things, and like to fail at something which other people think is so important’ (P2, p.31). She accepted that marriage compensated and brought elements of normal life,

being a wife has solved quite a few societal conventions...god forbid if I hadn’t been married, having been married takes the heat off, my mother used to say to me in hushed tones about women she knew ‘she never married and she never had children’ (P2, pp. 39-30).

**Challenging the discourse**

A number of participants highlighted that they were often reminded both privately and publicly that their choice not to have children meant there would be no one to care for them in old age. However, they did not accept the correlation between not having children and the lack of care when older. Challenging what she believed was a misconception, this
participant asserted that, ‘I don’t look to my old age thinking god there is no one to look after me, I don’t, I just don’t’ (P21, p.36). Another supported this view and thought the idea that, ‘oh your children will look after you in your old age, is a load of rubbish’ (P5, p.27).

Others were less certain and more circumspect, ‘you know there will come a time when the clichéd fear of being old with nobody around hits you’, (P4, p.31). This sentiment was also reflected in other responses. This woman had fears that she would be vulnerable and isolated when older,

*Until ten years ago, I would have said 100% no regrets. But now sometimes I regret it partly because I am an outsider and a loner and that is hard sometimes. I am also 64, my body is disintegrating, I think of having a nice daughter to look after me in my ailing years..., and I guess love. I’m not in a relationship at the moment, there is not enough love in my life, and I would like that ordinary love some friends have with their daughters, that profound connection with someone. But 60% [of her regret] is about lifestyle, 25% is about not having blood relations and 15% is about not having a child (P12, pp. 22-23).*

A participant who lived in a rural area with poor transport links shared her caring experiences of a friend, ‘who will care for me, crossed my mind last year when a friend of mine died, like running people to hospital and you know that kind of thing’ (P17, p.31). However, she went on to say there is no guarantee that even if one had children that they would care for their parents, ‘I look around other friends with children and by the time they have got to this stage, the children have got lives of their own, they are married with their own families’ (P17,p.32). Some felt that even if children are in a position to help they might not want to do so. One person recalled her neighbour, who was over 90 years old. She went on to say, ‘she had a son who she absolutely doted on, and you know he wouldn’t even send her a birthday card, and it was just sad because she had somebody who just wasn’t there for her’ (P14, p.48).

Participants whose parents live abroad pointed out that it was not possible to provide care in such circumstances. Any care they were able to offer was remote,

*My Mum lives in X, I live here, so does my brother. She sees us once a year. I speak to her almost every day that is my choice, so having children does not guarantee care. I am not there looking after them physically and everything*
I do is remote, but if they were relying on me in old age, it is not going to happen (P22, p.12)

Look at my parents, I am not able to offer care and attention to them, I live on the other side of the world (P2, p.48).

Participants raised the question as to whether older people in care without children will have a poorer quality of life compared to older people with children. One participant who worked in adult services stated that it was important to have a family member who can advocate when you are in need of care. In her experience, such advocacy was closely linked to the quality of care you received,

... you could map the quality of care sometimes, appallingly so in care homes, for those people who have regular visitors [family member]...because people know there’s somebody else looking out for you (P5, p.27).

The general feeling was that instead of expecting children to care for older parents, there was a need to rethink current provision and government policies on care for older people without children. As this participant argued, ‘I sometimes think of the future and wonder about what it will be like, we need to rethink provision we need for [all] older people’ (P13, p.28).

Summary of categories

The key insight from Category 4 was that participants believed they were negatively constructed as women of lesser value. Participants tended to be constructed largely through negative words and perceptions. They were perceived as a deviation from the norm, selfish, careerists, and people who disliked children. This negativity was contrasted with the positive perceptions of mothers as contributors, carers and nurturers. These negative perceptions were constructed within a culture of dominant familial ideas and a resistance to exploring choice and alternatives to motherhood. They were reinforced through powerful societal institutions. The workplace was revealed as a key area of reinforcement and where the needs of women with children took precedence over childless women.
There were silences around motherhood and non-motherhood. These silences were exacerbated by a reluctance to challenge established cultures for fear of reinforcing the stereotypes. Participants seeking to explain the silences felt that many women were resistant to the notion of choice and to exploring alternatives. Consequently, important perspectives were missing from debates around motherhood and children. Specifically, those of women who choose not to have children, lesbian women, and women with negative experiences of motherhood.

**Category 5, No regrets** revealed that the majority of participants did not experience regret at their choices not to have children. Several different reasons were cited for the absence of regret. For most, children were never part of their life plans. Others wanted to pursue different goals and activities in life. Some did not want the commitment involved while others saw motherhood as contributing to a loss of self. Some participants acknowledged the inevitability of regret from making what was a major life choice. However, for these, motherhood was viewed as only one life experience that could bring happiness and fulfilment.

Only one participant expressed a deep sense of loss and personal failure at her choice. She questioned if she ever really made a choice or did she merely react to the needs of others. Her experience of loss was reinforced by negative societal perceptions of women without children.

Some participants challenged the societal expectation that without children there will be no one to care for them when they are older. Others acknowledged real fears around ageing and the lack of social connectedness when older and frail. The question was raised as to who cares for older people who do not have children and the possible need to rethink current provision and government policies on this issue.

**Relationships between categories**

Both of these categories relate to the consequences for participants who chose not to have children. Category 4 revealed that participants were perceived and constructed negatively as women of lesser value. The language and perceptions all convey a sense of the ‘other’
while also assuming an absence of something. These constructions were reinforced within societal institutions. The workplace was revealed as a key area for this reinforcement and where the needs of women with children took precedence over childless women. Based on this category, and following further reflection, I devised the concept of *motherarchy* to understand more about how mothers are elevated and given a higher status relative to non-mothers. This idea can be understood as part of an ideological discourse (See also Chapter 5, Return to the Literature: Choice. p.124) that sustains the idea that womanhood and motherhood are synonymous. This concept can augment the diagrammatic representation of choice as part of a *restraining* and *liberating* process (Figure 4.3). I will return to a discussion of *motherarchy* in Chapter 6, Discussion of Findings.

![Diagram of choice as restraining and liberating](image)

*Figure 4.3: Choice as restraining and liberating*

Category 5 revealed that most participants felt no regrets following their choice. Instead, they tended to see the potential for regret as a feature of any life choice of this magnitude. In particular, within a context where gendered expectations are deeply embedded within society and where motherhood has been the measure by which we define women. As part of this, they also challenged the discourses in relation to care that sought to ignite personal insecurities.
It could be said that there is some association between these two categories in that both arose as a result of the choices women made. Women who choose not to have children were perceived of ‘lesser value’ because of the choices they made. At the same time, most had no regrets because they made alternative life choices of equal value. In addition, negative perceptions and regret occur within motherarchy and within a culture of dominant familial ideas where there are few alternatives to motherhood.

For discussion purposes I will consider each of these findings as distinct (Discussion of Findings, Women of lesser value, Regret).
Chapter 5: Return to the Literature - Choice

Introduction

In the previous chapters (3 and 4), I presented the categories and codes from the analysis. My analysis and interpretation led to the construction of three theoretical findings. These are restated as follows:

1. Participants’ choice not to have children are best understood as part of a complex interplay between restraining and liberating experiences in their social worlds. Social class had a significant influence on life experiences and subsequently on their choices.

2. Participants who choose not to have children feel they are perceived as of lesser value. This positioning was expressed through negative language, stereotyping, and reinforced in families, communities, and workplaces. This portrayal needs to be understood within a societal context of motherarchy where womanhood and motherhood are synonymous.

3. Most participants do not regret their choice not to have children. They acknowledged the potential for regret as a feature of any life choice of this magnitude. Motherhood is seen as just one of the many possible life experiences open to women.

Taken together, I would argue that these findings offer important insights for the purpose of addressing my research question. My research question set out to explore why and how women choose not to have children, their experiences arising from their choices and the impact, if any, on their lives. While findings 2 and 3 revealed important evidence on the consequences of participants’ choices, I would argue that the finding on ‘choice’ is central to understanding the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of my research question. Participants’ choices revealed a complex picture that could not be reduced to isolated phenomena or indeed to causal explanations. It was not possible to abstract out specific personal or societal factors that were significant. Choices were made within a context of diverse individual experiences and societal influences. Participants’ choices not to have children were formed out of the complex interplay between restraining and liberating experiences in their lives.
In relation to my finding 1 on choice, I had not anticipated the complexity of the concept at the outset of the study. Having analysed and reflected on the data at great length, I realised that participants choice making was complex. As there was very little research on choice in the substantive literature, I had to extend my search to engage with wider sociological ideas and feminist theory. This was necessary in order to situate and discuss this finding in relation to existing sociological knowledge.

In relation to finding 2 on Women of lesser value, I was aware that there was important empirical and other research on how women were positioned and perceived following their choice not to have children. Previous research has revealed important aspects of the topic and particularly in relation to the psychological and personal factors. I presented the relevant studies with findings in the earlier scoping review (See Chapter 1, Introduction, Context and Literature Review). I intend to draw on these to facilitate a deeper understanding in the Discussion of Findings chapter. In addition, I will draw on feminist and other sources.

In relation to finding 3 on Regret, I can draw on existing psychological studies and more recent autobiographical literature (mainly from the US) for the purposes of this discussion (See Chapter 7, Conclusion for my reflections on this part of the process).

In this chapter, I will firstly set out why and how I engaged with the theoretical concept of ‘choice’. Secondly, I explore the main ideas that underpin the term and identify the key tension between the differing perspectives. Thirdly, I consider how the structure agency debate in sociology may offer a way of transcending this tension and enable us to gain a deeper understanding of its complexities. In doing so, I draw mainly from the work of sociological theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens. Finally, I summarise the key insights from this chapter that can inform the later discussion of my finding on choice (Chapter 6, Discussion of Findings).
Return to the literature

As noted above, when I set out on this study, I did not anticipate that ‘choice’ would be such a complex concept. I was aware of everyday choices that we make almost unconsciously. For example, what to wear or what to have for lunch. I was also aware that both women and men make potentially life-changing choices in relation to careers, relationships, marriage and children. Kabeer (1991) referred to the distinction as first and second order choices,

*first order choices are those strategic life choices, which are critical for people to live the lives they choose. These help to frame second, less consequential choices, which may be important for the quality of one’s life, but do not constitute its defining parameters* (p.437).

In addition, I did not engage with the literature on choice before I began my fieldwork. I was aware that in grounded theory studies, the literature review is a controversial area. I choose to address this dilemma by conducting a short review (Chapter 1, Introduction, Context and Literature Review). The purpose of this review was to identify the key substantive research and place the study in some context. This was also necessary to meet the academic requirements for a PhD. In line with the principles of my adopted grounded theory approach, I intended to engage with and relate to the literature as the study proceeded and when necessary. In other words, I was primarily concerned with the grounded data and where it would take me. When choice emerged as a complex finding from the data (Chapter 3, The Complex Interplay of Choice), I realised I needed to return to the literature and familiarise myself with the relevant theoretical perspectives. This was also necessary to clarify my own ideas at that stage (Dick, 2000; Charmaz, 2006). While I brought my own knowledge of sociological theories to the analysis, I believed a deeper understanding of the sociological debates in relation to choice could help progress, locate, and inform my later discussion. Dunne (2011), writing from the experience of his own PhD recalled, how he sought to identify new theories that could support or refute his analysis,

*I also sought to identify new theories which could help explain or even contradict the multiple and diverse ideas emerging from the data analysis, in order to improve the quality, rigour and profundity of the analysis* (p.119).
A return to the literature was necessary to locate my finding within the relevant theoretical debates and to facilitate a thorough discussion in relation to these ideas.

With this purpose in mind, I returned to and reviewed again the substantive research (Chapter 1, Introduction, Context and Literature Review) and searched for any pertinent findings or discussion in relation to choice. In doing so, I could only identify a small number of passing references. Hakim (2000) did raise the question of choice in relation to her ‘preference theory’. She found that women make individual choices about production and reproduction. Kiernan (1989) discovered that women made ‘lifestyle choices’ such as valuing careers and leisure activities over family life (p.2). Gillespie (2000) found from her participants that there was an ‘early choice to remain childfree’ (p.125). Based on her findings, Shaw (2011) questioned the notion of whether women can own their own choices. She argued that there was, ‘inherent fluidity in women’s journeys towards childlessness’ (p.160) and that further research was needed to understand the factors involved (p.151). Letherby (2002a) revealed that personal choices were influenced by structural factors. And in their autobiographical work, Letherby and Williams (1999) argued that there was a need to explore women’s choices outside the language of deficit.

These references were informative and helpful. However, they also added to the complexity. In particular, Letherby and Shaw raised deeper and important questions in relation to choice, which resonate with the finding. At the same time, the lack of any in-depth theoretical discussion of choice across the substantive area presented me with a further challenge. At that stage, I felt I needed to return to the roots of the concept and particularly in relation to sociological and feminist debates. I needed to find out more about the key ideas that underpinned the term and especially to identify the key debates in relation to women’s choices. I was therefore compelled to review the wider literature and to engage with the relevant ideas. Before going on to do this, I will briefly introduce the concept itself and pose some of the questions I had at the outset.
What is choice?

In the modern world, choice is integral to our lives. We use the term as part of our everyday language. However, common assumptions around its usage tend to mask differing and complex understandings. It is a difficult term to pin down, as it has no generally accepted definition. It is defined as, ‘the act of choosing between two or more possibilities’ and ‘preferring one thing over another’ (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015). It is also defined as, ‘the opportunity or power of choosing’ (Collins Dictionaries, 2015). Such definitions raise thorny issues of ‘action’, ‘preferences’, ‘opportunities’, ‘power’, ‘awareness’ and ‘alternatives’. To add to this intricacy, the term is regularly used in association with ‘freedom’, ‘consumer’, ‘career’, ‘lifestyle’, ‘identity’ and ‘responsibility’. Moreover, while sharing an appeal across the political spectrum it also draws on a range of often competing philosophies.

In contemporary usage, it tends to be mainly associated with the ‘individual’ rather than the ‘social’ (Brannen & Nilsen, 2005). Hence, it has increasingly become part of a market discourse in consumerism, advertising, management, marketing, and leisure. We also find the concept appearing across a range of academic disciplines such as health and social care, economics, politics, philosophy, culture, and psychology. Policy makers, professionals and campaigners also use the term in public debates in relation to ‘user involvement’, ‘personalisation’ and ‘assisted dying’ (Barr, Fenton & Blane, 2008; NHS Choices, 2015; Dignity in Dying, 2015).

Free or determined

A key question in relation to choice is whether we, as human beings in the world, are free or determined. We had no choice over our conception or when or where we were born. We did not choose our biological parents, our sex at birth, our ethnicity, our class, our names or our physical characteristics. We have no choice over our ageing or when our bodies will die. Indeed, some contemporary neuropsychologists argue that our behaviours and the choices we make are part of our own neurological makeup (Plomin, 2015). Others argue that most of us develop some capacity for choosing one thing over another. Some of our life and everyday choices are made in conjunction with partners, friends, and colleagues. Family backgrounds, educational opportunities, economic, political, religious, and social factors
may also be important. These factors may influence how aware we are that we have choices in our lives and whether we have the means to make them (Salecl, 2011).

To begin to explore these questions it was necessary to probe deeper and unravel some of the key ideas that surround sociological and feminist debates on choice. I was surprised how little attention there has been to a specific or deeper discussion of the term within the literature and particularly within my own discipline of sociology (Collyer et al, 2015). It may be as Reay, David and Ball (2005) stated that within sociology, choice is, ‘highly problematic...threatens all sorts of theoretical and ontological difficulties and needs to be handled with great care’ (p.160). With this cautionary note in mind, I entered the theoretical quagmire. I will now go on to provide a brief synopsis of the relevant perspectives from a diverse literature that crisscross a range of disciplines. The main ideas presented are liberal/neo-liberal and marxist/critical perspectives.

**Liberal and neo liberal perspectives**

Liberal perspectives see a clear relationship between choice and freedom. The main concern is with freedom for the individual. The individual is seen as more important than society and prioritised over values of equality or justice. The aspiration of liberal freedom was best described by Berlin (1969) when he stated,

> I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men's, acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from outside. I wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer-deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men [sic]as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is, of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realising them (p.131).

From a liberal perspective, the key assumption is that individuals already possess rationality and the capacity to realise and achieve their own life plans within a pluralist society (Leadbeater,1988; Goodwin,1992). There is a suspicion of ‘external forces’ or anything that encroaches on personal freedom. Liberal thinkers tend to favour notions of negative freedom. This is defined as ‘freedom from interference’ and the absence of obstacles,
particularly from the state to enable individuals to pursue their own rational choices (Williamson, 2010). In contrast, positive freedom is more about what a person can actually do. From this standpoint, people have a range of choices in their lives (considerable negative freedom) but may find obstacles in their way to achieving their goals. As such, positive freedom is more about the degree of opportunities available to the individual and having access to the resources to make their own rational choices (Berlin, 1969).

The growth of liberalism has also paralleled the development of capitalism. While liberalism can be interpreted differently, new ideas became more prominent from the 1980’s. A neo liberal discourse emerged which linked choice with the philosophy of the market, and particularly with individualism, competition and self-reliance (Goodwin, 1992; Hughes, 2002; Walls et al, 2015). This discourse is about expanding the liberal notion of ‘freedom of choice’ by rolling back the influence of the state on people’s lives. From this viewpoint, the state limits individual choices in areas such as housing, health and education (Leadbeater, 1988). These ideas are also linked to debates around privatisation and increasing consumer choice within UK society. Citizens are re-classed as customers who choose and purchase from a range of products and services within a supermarket society. Global media and technologies such as the internet increasingly facilitate access to the marketplace of choice. These ideas emphasise the wants and choices of the individual ‘customer’ who engages in exchange relations with others within the marketplace. As part of this discourse, empowerment becomes part of the rhetoric of choice (Stephens, Fryberg & Markus, 2011, Pullen-Sansfacon & Cowden, 2012). The individual acts rationally, evaluates costs and benefits, and makes their choices based on how they will advance their own interests (Hughes, 2002; Grix, 2004). If we make the right choices within the marketplace, we will achieve our goals. If not, we must take responsibility for the consequences of poor choices. Ideological messages around choice resonate with economic changes, availability of consumer credit, retail, and marketing. These messages are all underpinned by a neoliberal economics that,

rests upon an image of the autarkic human self. It assumes that individuals alone can master the whole of their lives, that they derive and renew their capacity for action from within themselves. Talk of the 'self-entrepreneur' makes this clear (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. xxi).
These ideas also underpin rational choice theory. Rational choice theorists argue that complex social manifestations can be explained in terms of individual actions (Sen, 1977, Coleman & Fararo, 1992; Scott, 2000; Collyer et al, 2015). Collyer et al (2015) identified three basic assumptions that underpin this theory. Firstly, that people act independently of the social world. Secondly, individuals are constant and consistent in the choices they make. Thirdly, that people want more choice in their lives and revel in a marketplace of infinite choices.

Postmodernist thinkers share much of the liberal and neo-liberal view that we are no longer constrained by tradition or external forces (Butler, 1990, Hines, 2013). One of the main threads of this thought is in relation to the politics of individuality, difference and identity (Phillips, 1993). In the past, our roles and destinies were largely determined by ‘place’ (Anderson, 1992) and our communal relationships with others. Our identities were largely shaped by our social context and maintained by traditional norms, values and roles (Etzioni, 2015). For the most part, we rarely if ever had to examine our identities. We merely accepted them without question. In general, postmodernists argue that ‘individuals’ do not possess a stable permanent identity such as being ‘working class’ (Storey, 1993; Belsey, 2002). On the contrary, they argue that individuals comprise a range of different identities, values, and beliefs that are subject to constant change. In the modern world, people now find they can choose their identities rather than having to accept the one designated by others. For example, people can choose their sexuality or religion. For postmodernists, the concern is with heterogeneity, diversity, and difference.

As such, postmodern thinkers are more concerned with the impact of culture rather than structure on people. They argue that capitalism and its structures do not necessarily constrain people from making choices (Ward, 1997). From these perspectives, we are free agents to choose at will. We can choose from a range of identities and interests on offer in the superstore of the modern world. We can choose to belong to particular groups or organisations or to engage in particular leisure activities. We can even choose our own gender and thus our own normativity (Butler, 1990; 1993). In this way, we consume aspects of our lives in the same way we consume commodities. We become what we choose to consume.
Liberal feminist perspectives

Liberal and choice feminists have drawn on these ideas particularly in relation to notions of ‘personal agency’. This term has gained increasing prominence within social theory and particularly within feminist sociology. Agency has also been associated with concepts such as ‘the self’. For example, ‘self-determination’, ‘self-identity’ and ‘self-fulfilment’. In addition, with phrases such as ‘autonomy’, ‘empowerment’, ‘voice’ and ‘taking control of your life’ (Gill, 2007; 2008; Wolf, 2015). While all of these can be interpreted differently (Biesta & Tedder, 2006), I will use ‘agency’ from now on to refer to the broad ambit of terms associated with this liberal discourse.

Kabeer (1999) defined agency as, ‘the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them’ (p.438). It incorporates the desires, meanings, motivation, and purpose that people bring to their actions on the world. A woman has an individual subjective experience and the capability to make the right choice for herself. Personal feelings and desires are discovered and acknowledged. Personal goals, as distinct from those of others such as parents, teachers, and other ideological influences are pursued (Rogers, 1967). From this view, despite patriarchy and socialisation, women need only to exert sufficient agency (Ferro, 2015). She can choose to get married, have a career, stay home, take care of children, have breast or cosmetic surgery, or wear high heels and short skirts (Baker, 2008; Ells, 2013). Liberal feminists who advocate for more choices and opportunities for women (Friedan, 1963; Walker 1995; Wolf, 2015) promote this discourse. Women, and particularly middle and upper class women, can be empowered ‘to have it all’ particularly if they can afford domestic help and childcare (Douglas & Michael, 2004; Sandberg, 2013). All they have to do according to Sheryl Sandberg the chief operating officer of Facebook is to ‘combine niceness with insistence’ (2013, p.48).

Others argue that for women to be agentic, they need ‘positive freedom’. They need help to remove restraints within the social environment where they can pursue their aspirations (Edman, 2011). Many also need the capacity, resources, support and skills to seek out their own options and attain their own goals (Kabeer, 1999). Wolf (2015) stated that ‘when a young woman is encouraged to own her power and is given basic skills in claiming her own
voice then huge, good changes follow’ (p.3). The agenda here is very much about enabling women to exercise the full range of options open to men and to express their own sense of self in the world. It stresses personal freedoms and interests (Kiraly & Tyler, 2015). In doing so, these choice feminists echo the liberal and postmodernist call for more personal freedom. This view continues to have a significant influence on mainstream thinking and especially media representations of women in the Northern hemisphere.

Marxist and critical perspectives

Marxist and radical perspectives on choice are more a critique of liberal and neo-liberal ideas rather than having a particular view of the concept itself. Essentially, these theorists tend to reject the notion of a rational free and capable individual within a context of an unequal world (Crawford, 2009). They argued that individuals are largely determined by their histories and circumstances and prone to perpetual influence by powerful internal and external forces. Powerful forces within societies impose limits and constraints that affect our lives in complex ways. For instance, economic, institutional, and cultural forces shape our individual and social interactions and tend to largely reproduce the prevailing order over time (Layder, 1994; Inglis, 2012). Marx (1977a) summed up the essence of this thinking with his well-known phrase, ‘it is not the consciousness of men [sic] that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness’ (p.389).

In other words, it is mainly through our activities in and engagement with the world that we produce the material of our minds.

From this perspective, we are not all equally determined. Some have more choice than others do. In capitalist societies, we may all possess the capacity for free will and thus in theory be able to exercise choice in the market. However, as Bauman and May (2001) argued,

> freedom of choice does not guarantee freedom to act on those choices, nor does it secure the freedom to attain our intended results...To be able to act freely, we need more than free will (p.19).

Therefore, from this view, it does not follow that ‘being free’ equates with ‘freedom of choice’. Issues of inequality come into play here as our choices are increasingly
determined by the market place and constrained by the context of our lives and the amount of money we possess. Those with the necessary power and resources have access to a wider range of choices. More power means more freedom to pursue and achieve your own wants. Power provides the enabling capacity. For instance, middle and upper class people have greater access to economic and social capital than working class people do. They can gain access to the best education and have greater mobility and opportunities (Stephens, Fryberg & Markus, 2011). Those with less power have less choice, are dependent on others, and have to struggle for access to resources (Meyers, 2001).

Marxists and other critical theories also stress the power of ideological constructions in relation to notions of freedom and choice (Baker, 2008). Ideology refers to those ideas that arise from one’s location within class or other oppressive relations. Marx and Engels argued that our consciousness of the world is conveyed in ideas and explanations that refer to only a part of our realities (Allman, 2001). Ideological explanations offer only an abstracted view of our total experiences of the world. As a result, we only get a limited and fragmented understanding of how the world works and our place within it. ‘Ideology’ is seen by marxists such as Althusser (1971, p.162) as, ‘the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence’. Ideological explanations also chime with Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of doxa. Doxa in this context is acceptance of the widely held, ‘common sense’ belief that all women will want to be mothers. Bourdieu revealed that particular dominated groups, ‘often just accept things are as the way they should be or have always been’ (Webb, Schirato & Danaher, 2002, p.96). Thus, people can internalise certain ideological beliefs as unquestionable truths. Such ideas serve to explain a person’s position and role in the world and shape their way of relating and behaving (Freire, 1993; Allman, 2001).

Ideological beliefs tend to serve particular interests as they mask the contradictions inherent within society and the structures that perpetuate oppression. For example, dominant ideas based around ‘freedom of choice’ can disguise inequitable power relations deeply embedded in societies (Baker 2008, p.62). This interplay of ideological explanations and structural influences can legitimise and perpetuate inequalities that serve the interests of the most powerful. These explanations permeate the institutions of society such as the media, the family, the educational system, the state and so on. As a result, most people
tend to accept the dominant ideological accounts as being legitimate (Layder, 1994). They may be unaware of the oppressive relations that exist within society or indeed that they can make alternative choices in their lives.

**Critical feminist perspectives**

Feminists from this perspective tend to be largely critical of liberal notions of choice. One of the key questions raised is to what extent a woman can make rational choices for motherhood in isolation from the world around her. What about unconscious biographical, societal, and structural factors that may impinge on her choices? From this viewpoint, an important critique of liberal notions of personal agency is that it abstracts a woman from her history, the context of her life and her relationships and long-standing inequalities (Finley, 1987; hooks, 1989). In this sense, it assumes that a woman’s feelings, thoughts, desires, values, and choices can be isolated from the world around her (Meyers, 2001).

Drawing from qualitative research conducted with women in Australia, Baker (2008) found that,

> Choice was often used as an overarching and uncontextualised principle to illustrate the way in which purposeful and determined behaviour would bring rewards in the new meritocracy that young women envisaged. It reflected a strong preference for individualised explanations where individual effort is the key factor in determining opportunities and outcomes (p.57).

She argued that choices are primarily determined by dominant ideological ideas and women tend to make those that are most acceptable within their communities. Therefore, for many women, the choice to have children becomes habitual (Bauman & May 2001). As Marcus (2014) stated,

> how many women – or men come to that – have children because it’s what you do? You move in, get married – it’s what you do next. How many people even think about it? (fifth paragraph).

This feminist view is also critical of an ideological context that continues to promote ideas that womanhood and motherhood are synonymous. A traditional and many would argue an enduring view is that childbearing is a woman’s duty and her prime means to attain fulfilment in life. Right wing politicians continue to advocate in favour of the traditional
family unit (Centre for Social Justice, 2015). State employment, welfare and education policies continue to reflect this ethos (Pascall, 1986; Williams, 1989; BBC, 2006).

This critique raises questions as to what extent women choose to accept particular ideological beliefs even though they may be aware they are acting against themselves (Kabeer, 1999). Do women, unconsciously or otherwise contribute to their own oppression, and thus merely reproduce the status quo? Abrams (1989) argued that women experience ‘ideological determination’ (p.761) and that their choices are shaped by factors that promote gender inequalities. Baker (2008) stated that the oppressive relations of the traditional family and community have been, ‘replaced by the active participation of women in assenting to the often disadvantaging conditions of their lives’ (p.62). Therefore, while the traditional constraints have lessened, some women may still collude in their own oppression. They may want changes in their lives but are fearful or not prepared to challenge societal expectations to be a wife and mother. Some women who choose to have children may experience inner tension between their biological and traditional roles and their desire for freedom. They know there may be personal consequences for them but have chosen to accept the prevailing norms over their own feelings and desires.

Another critique of the liberal view is that the dominant discourse ignores how women’s lives and choices are structured by inequality. Kirkpatrick (2010) highlighted the issue of class inequality and argued that choice is more relevant to the lives of middle and upper class educated women than it is to poor women. She argued that for the former, notions of choice are entrenched since childhood and become part of their lives. Whereas the latter, have little or no concept of alternatives. For them, choice is an alien concept. Therefore, she critiqued the liberal feminist view that to only focus on creating more choices is simply to ignore significant inequalities experienced by the poorest and most excluded women. From her perspective, there is no level playing field but different starting points.

Hirschmann (2010) concurred and argued that all choices, ‘including the choice to mother, are still made under conditions of oppression’ (p.272). Similarly, Finley, (1987) asked what is the meaning of individual choice within a context where ‘an individual's race, class, ethnicity, religion, geographical location, and gender greatly affect his or her life options and character’ (p.932). Frost and Rodriguez (2015) argued that,
The ‘rhetoric of choice’ works to suggest that women have agency to make private choices but this focus on the individual works to subvert the larger neoliberal ideas and values by diverting the focus from oppressive structures that challenge them (p.193).

From these perspectives, it is a fallacy to believe that it is all about the promotion of personal agency and choice and that structural inequalities can be ignored (hooks, 1989; Collins, 2000; Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2011).

Another important critique is that the liberal discourse abstracts women from the social relations of power. Baker (2008) argued that, ‘the lauding of choice acts as a decoy for domination and its role in concealing the operation of power cannot be understated’ (p.62). This raises the issue of the power of socialisation and its impact particularly on the most powerless women (Finley, 1987; Jaggar, 2014). If a woman has the money and the resources then she has more possibilities to develop her capacity for choice and to exert personal agency. However, for the poorest women within a context of capitalist and patriarchal relations, there is often only the illusion of choice (Goodwin, 1992). In theory, they have a choice but their choices are severely constrained (Salecl, 2011).

The debate on choice

Choice as a concept in contemporary discourse is strongly associated with liberal, neo liberal and postmodern notions of freedom. These perspectives emphasise personal freedom over the controlling influences of history, tradition, religion, and structural factors. People draw on these ideas to choose and express their own sense of self in the world. In contrast to the conservative and traditional ethos of the past, personal choice making is seen and promoted as an empowering action within modern capitalist societies. The message is that each of us has the capacity to make ethical choices and are free to choose between competing interests on offer. From a dominant position, liberal and postmodern feminists have drawn on this discourse to argue for more choices and equal opportunities (Gill, 2008). They argue that there is potential for women to exercise individual agency and choices. In this sense, their struggle has focussed mainly around woman as mother and woman as
career orientated. Women can ‘have it all’ if they can only exert sufficient agency and there is reform within the system.

Clearly, for many women and particularly in the liberal democracies, the constraints of the past have lessened. Capitalism has opened up new opportunities and the feminist movement has made significant gains. Most women still want and choose to have (albeit less) children (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). They also seek to combine childrearing with full-time careers or part-time work. Clearly, it is possible to see the value of the struggle for more personal agency for women. Most women value personal freedom, employment opportunities, and childcare provision. It is a powerful message to think women can make choices and act on them in their personal lives often against the odds.

While understanding the personal agency perspective and applauding its benefits for individual women, it has been subject to a serious critique within the feminist movement. Mackay, (2015) argued that the nature of women’s choice making has been reduced to, 

*what amount of makeup to wear, whether to go “natural” or try mascara that makes your eyelashes look like false eyelashes, or what diet drink to buy, or whether or not to make the first move with a man – or other such modern and edgy decisions of the sort which face the feisty, sassy, pull-no-punches liberated woman of today. Excuse me while I get sick* (Mackay, 2015).

Critical perspectives reveal how we cannot ignore constraints on our choices that arise from our histories, the context of our lives and the influences of others. They argue that it is the powerful structural forces and the dominant ideological explanations that largely shape our choices. These tend to regulate our place in the world and to conceal inequitable relations of power. The result is that the prevailing order remains largely unchanged and many such as the poorest and excluded women are unaware that they have choices. However, not everyone experiences this determination in the same way. Individual women who can gain access to the necessary power and resources can liberate themselves from societal constraints and exercise alternatives.

However, despite important changes and the dominance of a ‘choice discourse’, some things have remained the same. The domains of marriage, motherhood and the primary role
of a woman are still not open to any serious questioning. From this view, the dominant view of choice has prevailed and critical or alternative views are largely absent or taboo. The dominance of the liberal discourse of personal agency makes it difficult for those women who choose an alternative path. The more powerful view is more socially acceptable than all others. It denies other possible meanings to human agency such as those demonstrated by women who choose not to have children. On the dominant side, the choice for motherhood is seen as positive, fulfilling and as a contribution to society. On the other hand, women who choose otherwise are perceived as ‘selfish’ and ‘not real women’ (Tobin & Aria, 1998; Letherby & Williams, 1999; Baker, 2008).

This critical perspective reflects a more challenging stance. Theirs is a call for ‘reproductive freedom’ and for a woman to have a life of her own choosing (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p.70 and p.120). It argues that, ‘maternity is not an incontrovertible universal value’ (Meyers, 2001, p.757) and does not guarantee fulfilment for all women. Feminists who share these views are clearly arguing for something more than just ‘freedom of choice’, ‘equal rights’ and the acceptance and celebration of difference within a community of women. While acknowledging the need to respect individuality and personal freedom (Finley, 1987), these feminists seek to reassert the connection between the ‘personal’ and the ‘political’. Essentially, they seek to embrace a wider understanding of choice and human reproduction. Most importantly, they raise questions that call for and seek a broader and more liberatory definition of choice.

Tension

It is possible to find at least some consensus within this debate as to the merits of choice. Choice, whether as a component of individual freedom, radical collective liberation or as a combination of these has a powerful allure in the modern world. There is increasingly a rejection of traditional community choices on offer and a search and struggle for new identities and freedoms. However, we are still left with an irreconcilable tension at its heart. One the one hand, the liberal notion of ‘free agents’ abstracted the individual from society. As Brannen and Nilsen, (2005) stated, a focus on personal choice alone has ‘eclipsed our understanding of how individual lives unfold, and of the contexts and
conditions under which individuals make choices’ (p.412). On the other hand, critical perspectives emphasised ‘social forces’ that as (Gill, 2008) argued are,

too totalizing in their accounts of social relations, and as producing a patronizing and politically offensive model of the subject as (variously) victim of “false consciousness”, governed “docile subject” or “cultural dope” (p.434-435).

All perspectives within the debate can help us to understand more about the underlying ideas that shape the language and practice of choice. In particular, critical perspectives challenge some of the main assumptions and raise important issues of inequality.

However, both liberal and critical views can be limited or totalising. While they both inform a deeper analysis of choice, they do not sufficiently help us to understand the complex nature of the concept as revealed in the finding from this study (Chapter 3, Findings The Complex Interplay of choice). Therefore, at this stage of my enquiry, I found it necessary to return to the literature once more and to explore theories that may inform a deeper understanding and have greater resonance with the finding. This search led me to the structure agency debate in sociology. I now go on to consider this debate.

The structure agency debate

This structure agency debate refers to the ongoing sociological puzzle posed by Grix (2004),

of whether it is the social context in which individuals act that guides, determines, constrains or facilitates their actions or whether it is the individuals (or actors) themselves who form and shape the social context and institutions around them (p.48-49).

The terms ‘structure’ usually refers to societal institutions, organisational and cultural practices. These are created by people and reinforce the social order (Layder,1994). The term ‘agency’ in this context refers to the capacity of individuals to act and exert their choices within the social order (Hicks, 2004).

This is an important and very relevant debate in sociology. It is an attempt to overcome the dualism between the individual and society and the enduring tension as outlined earlier. Indeed, some argue that it is the most important theoretical debate within the social sciences (Inglis, 2012). At this point, it is important to explore some of the key thinking in
this area and to gain more insights that can inform my later discussion of the finding. First, it will be necessary to outline some of the relevant ideas within this debate. A number of perspectives can be helpful here and I will start with some of these. However, I will mainly draw on the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens. Following this, I will consider how these ideas can inform a more complex understanding of choice and particularly as it pertains to the later discussion (Chapter 6, Discussion of Findings).

**Theories**

**Mead**

The structure agency debate is primarily concerned with the relationship between the person and society. G.H. Mead, coming from the pragmatist school of sociology (See Chapter 2, Methodology, Design and Fieldwork) sought to overcome the tension by seeking to explain how this process works through interaction. Mead saw individuals in terms of human and social interaction. He argued that the ‘self’ is created through the interaction between the personal ‘I’ and the social world (generalised other), which in turn creates the social ‘Me’ (Dillon, 2014, p.274). We learn to take on board the dominant community view. The self emerges through social interaction with family, community, and society. For Mead, the self is always involved in an ongoing process of self-monitoring and self-evaluation, ‘*the essence of the self is cognitive, the individual takes on and internalises the attitude of others towards her and responds or reacts to this attitude*’ (p.276). The resultant ‘self’ can be experienced as either negative or positive. Positive when the ‘self’ experiences feelings of joy, pride, and happiness. Negative when the ‘self’ experiences feelings of sadness, embarrassment and shame (Cooley, 1998).

The important point here is that from Mead’s interactionist standpoint, the personal and the social are both aspects of a dialectical relationship. People are not solely determined but are in constant interaction with the social world in multiple ways. The individual does not have a separate existence from others. It is only through interaction with others that our societal understandings are framed. From this view, we can interpret that within this form of relationship, there is some scope for the person to make choices and resist the dominant societal norms. Accordingly, we can understand this to mean that our choices are
largely shaped not by individual attributes but by the nature of our relations within particular contexts.

**Humanist Marxism**

Despite its location within a different sociological perspective, Mead’s interactionism is also consistent with humanist Marxist theory (Israel, 1971) that also seeks to find a middle ground between the constraints of structural factors and the freedom of individuals. As Marx (1977b) stated,

*men [sic] make their own history [however]...they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past (p.300).*

Marxists from this perspective argued that ‘social structures’ and the ‘actions’ of individuals are not separate but ‘dialectically intertwined’ (Inglis, 2012, p.19). The dialectic is conceptualised as being, ‘composed of two parts that are necessary to each other because they could not exist as they currently do without each other’ (Allman, 2001, p.52). From this perspective, the dialectic particularly refers to,

*where opposing forces clash with each other. The clash transforms both forces, each being reconfigured by the other, such as they come to have new natures, comprising elements of each other. The clash also creates a new situation, which takes elements of each of the opposing forces, but which goes beyond each of them to create something novel (Allman, p.18).*

**Bourdieu**

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) was one of the most important theorists concerned with transcending the dualism within social theory between ideas of structure and agency (Appelrouth & Edles, 2016). He drew on a wide range of philosophies and influences and developed a number of concepts to explain his approach. One of the most central concepts in his theory is the idea of habitus, the product of experiencing the social world from a distinct social location. Bourdieu (1998) described the habitus as,
a socialised body, a structured body, which has incorporated the immanent structures of a world or of a particular sector of that world - a field – and which structures the perception of that world as well as action in that world (p.81).

From early family and educational experiences, the habitus becomes embodied and we develop a ‘feel’ for the ‘rules of the game’ in a particular field of life (Bourdieu, 1984). A ‘field’ can represent a particular social context or space in our lives such as the family, education, the religious, the community and so on (Collyer et al, 2015, p.689; Reay & David & Ball, 2005). Within each field, there is a set of rules and a struggle for dominance over time. The habitus becomes increasingly evident in our opinions and even in our physical deportment (Mauss, Douglas, & Halls, 2001). It becomes ingrained in our attitudes, opinions, and embodied features such as manners, posture, ways of walking, sitting, eating, blowing our nose, and so on. We can also partly and unconsciously internalise or ‘take on’ the values rules and dispositions of the field (Fuchs, 2003, p.396). This can include elements of class, language, ethnicity, gender and so on. Thus, the habitus is like a body of history, knowledge, experiences, and opinions that people carry around with them from childhood (Thomas, 2002).

The habitus leads to individual practices that reflect our particular cultural and historical socialisation (Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002). These practices are socially reproduced over time. Bourdieu understands this social reproduction in relation to different forms of power. He saw power as domination and argued that all areas of social life must be examined from this perspective (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). While sharing a Marxist analysis of economic capital, Bourdieu also introduced notions of cultural and social capital. Cultural capital refers to competencies, including artistic knowledge and educational credentials that people incorporate over time. It is related to class opportunities such as having access to art, travel, literature, leisure, and educational pursuits. As Bourdieu (2016) stated, ‘educated people are at home with scholarly culture’. In contrast, those who do not possess this culture, ‘find themselves in a foreign society and present, for instance, at a ritual to which they do not hold the key’ (p.446). The accumulation of different forms of capital results in an increase in power. For instance, the more cultural capital people can accumulate the more power they have to influence others. Social capital refers to
networks of family, friends, colleagues, and contacts that can enable access to resources and opportunities (Collyer et al, 2015). Possession of these different forms of capital becomes a resource that is convertible into wealth and power (Callinicos, 2007).

For Bourdieu, social reproduction reflects the inequitable relations within society. One of the main vehicles for this reproduction is education. For instance, universities can serve to reproduce the established order and impose ‘legitimate’ meanings and values on students. Success is largely measured by how well students can absorb and reproduce the dominant culture and practices associated with education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). The reproduction of these inequitable relations supports the status quo. As a result, while small numbers may progress most working class students continue to get working class jobs. Therefore, the habitus is primarily disposed to reproduce the very social practices and relationships that sustain its existence and continuation (Appelrouth & Edles, 2016). As we embody the structures, we are predisposed to replicate them. As Crossley (2002) explained, it acts like a ‘hinge between agency and structure’ (p. 177). In doing so, the habitus has an important influence on our choices and our actions in the world. As Reay, David and Ball (2005) stated,

\[ \text{the concept of habitus emphasises the enduring influence of a range of contexts, familial, peer group, institutional and class structure, and their subtle, often indirect, but still pervasive influence on choices (p.27).} \]

Crucially, however, the habitus does not always just reproduce the dominant culture. It can also enable individuals and groups to create new practices that can transform the habitus. As Inglis (2012) explained, the habitus, ‘has a creative side, allowing a person to make decisions about what to do’ (p.215).

**Giddens**

Anthony Giddens (1984) argued that the dichotomy between agency and structure is a ‘phoney war’ (p.139). He wanted to move beyond structures and everyday experiences as the basis for sociological study. Rather than seeing two isolated elements, he argued that we should think in terms of one. He stated that, ‘the constitution of agents and structures are not two independently given set of phenomena, a dualism but represent a duality’ (p.25). By this, he meant that they are inextricably linked and neither can exist without the other.
This duality of structure is more usually referred to as structuration theory and attempts to transcend the dichotomy between micro (agency) and macro (structure) levels of analysis,

*The basic domain of the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across time and space* (1984, p.2).

For Giddens, social actors both adapt to and reflect on their social worlds. From this perspective, people are very involved with society. They are not totally shaped by dominant static structures but are purposeful reflexive agents who draw on ‘rules’ and ‘resources’ such as language to act in society (Giddens, 1984). Structure does not exist outside of individuals but is more of a process that is created and recreated by the continuous actions and interactions of people and practices (Inglis, 2012). In effect, through practices, ‘people actively make and remake social structure’ (Giddens & Sutton, 2013, p.89). For Giddens, social structures do not reproduce themselves. Societal structures and institutions merely act as a medium to exercise individual actions. It is the regularity and repetition of the actions of individual actors that reproduces the structure.

Social practices can reproduce the social order. However, they can also be ‘enabling’ (Giddens & Sutton, 2014, p.25). In contrast to structuralist theorists who argue that structures control and influence people’s lives in a mechanical fashion, Giddens (1984) argued that, ‘each of the various forms of constraint are thus also, in varying ways, forms of enablement’ (pp. 172-174). In this way, social actors can also be involved in transforming power structures. Giddens (1984) referred to this as the ‘dialectic of control’ (p.16) when the powerless can exert some influence over those who dominate them. For example, it can be easy to see how the life of a lone parent living in poverty on an inner city housing estate can be constrained by her social circumstances. At the same time, it may be possible for her to gain access to knowledge about her situation and develop the capacity to change it. So, for some people there may be potential to, ‘intervene in the world’ or indeed to ‘refrain from such intervention’ (Giddens, 1984, p.14). Transformative action can occur through ‘openings’ within structures and institutions which can create the conditions for resistance and change. Individuals and groups can avail of these openings to resist power and domination.
Giddens structuration theory must also be seen in relation to his ideas on choice. Giddens saw choice as a product of modernity and an essential element of our lives. He argued that the availability of such choices has its roots in a number of factors. These include the changes from traditional to modern societies. With the decline in the dominance of geographical communities, modern identities are more fragmented. We are no longer restrained by traditional allegiances and social identities. While tradition and backgrounds set limitations on our lives, the modern world presents us with a multiplicity of choices. For Giddens, reproduction does not have to comprise a woman’s destiny and different choices are available. Women can engage with new freedoms and explore alternatives.

In the modern world, Giddens argued that our choices, ‘are decisions not only about how to act but who to be’ (1991, p.81). In this sense, he makes the connection between choice and identity within modern society. However, while this opens up new possibilities for people it does at the same time offer less stability and security. Within this context, ‘we have no choice but to choose’ (p.81). In effect, there are more choices on offer but little or no guidance on how to mediate these choices. We are confronted by a plurality of choices increasingly presented through a globalised media where every ‘truth’ is competing for attention and selection.

**Informing choice**

Although not addressing the issue of choice directly, theorists who sought to transcend the structure agency debate helps us to understand more about the concept. All of these seek to explain or understand the relationship between agency and structure within their own conceptual frameworks and paradigms. Furthermore, it cannot be said that they share a unified approach. However, by drawing on this commonality and particularly the work of both Bourdieu and Giddens we can at least gain a deeper insight into the complex nature of choice in a number of ways.

Firstly, it may be helpful to understood choice as part of an interplay between personal and societal factors. The relationship may be the crucial element. The focus of attention shifts from the rational actor or the objectified powerless victim towards the complex interplay between the person and society. Clearly, the term ‘interplay’ can be open to many
interpretations. It is seen in terms of ‘interaction’ (Mead), ‘clash’ and ‘dialectical relation’ (Allman) or ‘social practices’ (Bourdieu & Giddens). However, by framing choice in terms of interplay we can at least focus our attention more on the nature of the relationship between the person and society rather than on two separate elements that act independently of each other.

Secondly, we can understand our choices as autonomous acts while at the same time being aware that we are not making them in conditions of our own choosing. From our personal histories, we inherit from the past particular ways of thinking and acting in the world. The economic and cultural context of our lives, our families, our communities, our faiths, educational and state institutions all play a part in shaping our consciousness and personal identities. These identities are also formed in relation to class, race, gender and other differences. From an early age, we may internalise our histories, external influences and differences. They become our habitus. We become part of the diverse fields of society, which shapes our bodies, minds, emotions, and experiences. Our choices are part of this process, at the heart of our habitus, formed, and made from within it.

Thirdly, to understand that our choices and actions mainly reproduce and sustain the social order. Our choices generally sustain social practices that are considered legitimate within the different ‘fields’ of our lives. Family and community norms, rituals, values, and ways of being are perpetuated without any serious contemplation or questioning. For instance, the discourse around motherhood and family can be seen as part of a reproductive practice that is considered natural and beneficial for society. We make choices every day that are informed by these practices while at the same time being largely unaware that we are part of this reproduction. If we do take the time to ponder our choices, we may consider them as ‘free’. We may not frame our choices within an awareness of our personal histories and of the societal norms and practices that we have embodied. Crucially, that we may be ‘unfree’ and consider that our choices perpetuate the inequitable relations within society.

Finally, and most important for this study is to understand that our choices are not fully limited by the constraints of our habitus. Bourdieu argued that most people are shaped by the habitus. This has given credence to some commentators that the habitus rules out the
possibility of alternatives or social change and that our biographies limit the choices we can make. However, others interpret this to mean that the habitus does not fully determine our choices but may only restrain them. Drawing on Bourdieu’s work, Crossley (2002) put forward the notion of a, ‘resistance habitus’ that originated from, ‘change and discontent’ and produced new practices (p. 189). Indeed, in his later work Bourdieu argued that the habitus was never pessimistic and, ‘does not completely determine people’s actions and thoughts, but no practice is explicable without reference to them’ (Webb & Schirato & Danaher, p.36). Societal changes and a weakening of traditional social identities assist this process. Therefore, there is still potential for transformation and we can make choices to resist and to transform the habitus of our lives. As, ‘practices reproduce the social order they can at the same time help transform it’ (Inglis, 2012, p. 229). Jo (2013) stated that,

habitus can be modified in accordance with the change of social environment or how individuals juggle between their old habitus and new habitus they acquire through social mobility. To them, habitus is a fluid concept, which helps understand the ways in which individuals interact with changing social circumstances (p.2).

This insight revealed that there is at least some space for choice and resistance between the individual and the social order. We are never completely powerless and opportunities to resist emerge and particularly when the habitus does not ‘work smoothly’. This resistance can take the form of questioning our past and present lives and choosing to reject the dominant norms, practices, and social relations that reproduce the status quo. We can resist as individuals or as a group by acquiring social and cultural capital to challenge our powerlessness. Opportunities open up for self and community liberation via ‘openings’. We can embrace new opportunities outside the traditional habitus. We can have exposure to alternative life experiences and create a new habitus. As individual liberated agents with new knowledge and experiences, we can make new choices, create new practices, and together with others sow the seeds of wider social transformation.

**Summary**

The dominant view is that individual people already have the capacity to make their own choices and realise their own goals in life. As such, they are seen to be independent of the social world and have infinite choices to draw on. Most women still want and choose to
have children and seek to combine childrearing with full-time careers or part-time work. Liberal and post modernist feminists have drawn on discourses of agency and empowerment to argue for more choices for women. Individual women can have it all if they can only exert sufficient agency on the world and there is reform and equality of opportunity within the system. These feminists tend to focus their struggles around woman as mother and woman as career orientated. This dominant view of choice has prevailed without any serious questioning.

An alternative view critiques this notion of personal agency as being exclusive and dominant. It also questions the assumption that a woman’s choice can somehow be abstracted from societal, ideological, and structural factors. It argues that the prevailing order continues largely unchanged and many are unaware that they have real choices. The dominance of the liberal discourse makes it difficult for women who resist and choose a different path. It denies alternatives to family life and children. On the one hand, motherhood is considered positive and synonymous with womanhood. Those who choose non-motherhood are perceived as not quite ‘real women’. Advocates from this perspective call for a deeper analysis and understanding of choice.

While there is some consensus as to the merits of choice, there is at the same time a significant tension at the heart of the debate. In particular, between theorists who argue about the relative influence of ‘free agents’ or ‘social forces’. The structure agency debate offers a useful insight into how best to understand the complexity of choice. In particular, the work of Bourdieu and Giddens and their ideas of habitus and social practices. These ideas help us to understand more about how the process of choice making can act to both shape and reshape our lives.

Choice can be understood as part of an interplay between our personal and social worlds. We are not free floating ‘actors’ in the world and neither are we passive ‘victims’. Our choices are not made in conditions of our choosing but from the internalisation of our past and the relations and influences of families and communities that form the habitus of our lives. Our choices tend to sustain social practices that largely reproduce the prevailing social order over time. These social practices are largely unquestioned. They are considered
legitimate and beneficial to society. However, despite significant restraints on our lives and particularly for those who are most excluded, there are still opportunities to understand and transform the habitus of our lives. Societal changes can facilitate choice and it is possible to resist and change social norms. These ‘openings’ reveal new opportunities, experiences and alternative ideas that can create possibilities for individual and collective liberation.

In the next chapter, I will go on to discuss the three theoretical grounded theory findings from this study. Specifically in relation to the ideas presented in this chapter and to the substantive research in the earlier literature review.
Chapter 6: Discussion of Findings

Introduction

The aims of this study were to critically understand why some women choose not to have children and to consider the consequences of their choices on their lives. Based on my analysis and interpretation of the categories, my key theoretical findings are:

1. Participants’ choices not to have children are best understood as part of a complex interplay between restraining and liberating experiences in their social worlds. Social class had a significant influence on life experiences and subsequently on their choices.

2. Participants who choose not to have children feel they are perceived as of lesser value. This positioning was expressed through negative language, stereotyping, and reinforced in families, communities, and workplaces. This portrayal needs to be understood within a societal context of motherarchy where womanhood and motherhood are seen as synonymous.

3. Most participants do not regret their choice not to have children. Instead, they acknowledge the potential for regret as a feature of any life choice of this magnitude. Motherhood is seen as just one of the many possible life experiences open to women.

In this chapter, I will discuss each finding in turn. This is necessary, as each finding, although related to each of the others, has its own complexities, and requires specific attention for the purposes of discussion. Each finding will be considered in relation to the literature presented both in the early review (Chapter 1, Introduction, Context and Literature Review) and in the later review (Chapter 5, Return to the Literature-Choice). In addition, I will draw on sociological and more recent autobiographical literature that are particularly relevant to findings 2 and 3. My main purpose in this discussion is to mine deeper in order to gain a fresh seam of understanding to address my research question (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006; Suddaby, 2006; Charmaz, 2014).
Choice making as complex interplay

My first finding is that participants’ choices not to have children can be best understood as arising from the interplay between restraining and liberating experiences in their lives. Restraining experiences include influences in relation to motherhood, fatherhood, community, formal education, concerns about disability and bringing a child into a fractured world. Positive role models, exposure to alternative ideas, involvement in social movements and relationships with likeminded partners can be seen as liberatory experiences (Chapter 3, The Complex Interplay of Choice).

From the data, it was not possible to single out isolated or specific factors that led to individual choices. My interpretation points towards a more complex scenario. To understand why and how participants made their choices, it is necessary to look beyond their individual narratives. In particular, to explore the complex interplay between restraining and liberatory experiences in their lives. Restraining experiences, tended to limit and determine their choices. At the same time, these experiences, while restraining, also led participants to question, to resist and to be open to other possibilities. Crucially, liberatory experiences helped and supported them to overcome restraining experiences, and to resist dominant societal expectations and pursue alternatives. The key insight here is that while each participant made a personal choice not to have children, their choices were influenced and shaped by restraining and liberating experiences in their social worlds.

Consequently, this finding suggests that their choices are best understood as part of the complex relationship between personal biographies and the social context of their lives.

This finding is similar and different to previous research on this topic. It is similar in that the finding reveals a diverse range of factors that can influence women’s choices not to have children. For instance, restraining experiences identified in this study can be compared with previous research findings such as family histories, negative mothering, and gendered expectations as reviewed in Chapter 1, Introduction, Context and Literature Review).

Similarly, liberatory experiences can be seen in relation to previous findings that identified factors such as career aspirations, impact on the world, feminism, and education (Chapter 1, Introduction, Context and Literature Review). There are important similarities here.
However, there is also a key difference with previous studies. The key difference is that while most previous research identified or isolated single or multiple explanations for women’s choices, the finding from this study reveals that participants’ choice making was a much more complex process. This is consistent with Shaw’s observation on the complexity of choice and the need for further exploration of the concept. It also resonates with Letherby (2002) and Letherby and Williams (1999) and particularly their acknowledgement of the importance of structural factors on choice.

Different theoretical and methodological approaches may help explain the disparity with previous research results as outlined in Chapter 1, Introduction, Context and Review, p.10) The adoption of a constructivist grounded theory approach and my open approach to interviewing may also have been significant. I sought to enable women to share and reflect on the journey of their lives (Brannen & Nilsen, 2005) rather than focusing only on their particular choices. Taken together, this methodology, my own biography and my sociological interpretation of the data led to this finding. Based on the evidence, I would argue that the value of this finding is that it seeks to go beyond personal narratives and isolated experiences as key factors in choice making. Instead, it offers a glimpse of the complex nature of choice making for women who choose not to have children. Accordingly, it is a helpful starting point and supports feminists who call for a deeper and more critical understanding and exploration of choice (Chapter 5, Return to the Literature-Choice).

**Relating to theory**

In keeping with the principles of grounded theory, an important step is to locate the finding in relation to relevant theories. As Charmaz (2014), stated,

*Through comparing other scholar’s evidence and ideas with your grounded theory, you may show where and how their ideas illuminate your theoretical categories and how your theory extends, transcends, or challenges dominant ideas in your field* (p.305).
Challenging the liberal view

This finding clearly challenges the liberal and postmodern view on choice (Chapter 5, Return to the Literature-Choice). This is the view that emphasises personal agency and choice making as independent of the social world. From this perspective, women have the capacity to make their own choices from an unlimited array on offer in the modern world. For instance, women are free to make conscious choices to have or not to have children. While supporting the merits and aspirations of personal freedom, I would argue that based on the evidence from this study, it is very difficult to see how participants’ choice making can be reduced solely to individual psychology. Participants’ capacities for choice were not inherently personal but dependent on a range of complex influences from an early age that acted to both constrain and liberate their choices. Therefore, the finding is clearly at odds with the notion that people are somehow atomised within society and devoid of external influences. This also concurs with Walls et al (2015) who stated that, ‘individual agency does not exist within a vacuum’ (p.49).

Participants in this study spoke about significant restraining experiences within families, communities, and formal education. For example, family members, teachers, and others sought to shape the lives of working class participants,

People were waiting for me to have a child, like it was expected of me to have a child, (P20, p.20)

School certainly was not about a career... It felt like it was manoeuvring us into a socially convenient channel (P12, p.3).

These experiences occurred within a culture of dominant gendered expectations that saw womanhood and motherhood as synonymous (Chapter 4, Perceived of Lesser Value but No Regrets). Clearly, such experiences are more consistent with critical feminist perspectives (Chapter 5, Return to the Literature-Choice). Feminists from this standpoint argued that women’s lives are subject to powerful internal and external forces that influence their awareness and capacity for choice. The finding from this study supports this critical view that a concern with personal agency alone merely abstracts the individual from issues of context, complex human relationships, and the long-standing inequalities that influence women’s lives. It also concurs with the evidence that there are substantial structural
restraints, which arise from the histories and context of our lives and from the influences of others (Chapter 5, Return to the Literature-Choice).

**Consistent with structure and agency theories**

Significantly, I found from the study that it was in the space between being determined as women and their personal and collective desire for freedom that we can best understand participants’ choices. In this space, restraining experiences, while often painful and oppressive, led to questioning, strong feelings, and resistance to ideas and institutions that sought to shape their lives. One participant spoke about how the expectation to be a mother made her angry,

*my mother constantly from the age of 16, I can’t wait to be a nana... you have children and I will look after them and mind them... and that used to make me angry because I used to think you should want more for your children* (P20, pp. 21-22).

At the same time, liberatory experiences and opportunities offered possibilities to channel this anger, resist restraining forces and seek out alternatives, ‘*well it was flower power and I was a chick in the underground world. I was in London by then and living the alternative lifestyle that I wanted to live*’ (P12, p.11).

Participants were subject to an amalgam of complex and often opposing influences from an early age. While each as younger women had their own personal feelings and desires, these were often suppressed as they were expected to feel as most other women. Trying to reconcile personal desires, restraining experiences and societal expectations was a complex process. For some, this was a very long journey, ‘*realising I had choice was a slow process*’ (P11, p.7). It can be helpful to understand this process as part of the interplay between the habitus of their old worlds and the possibilities of the new. Consequently, their choices not to have children are best understood as arising from their restraining and liberatory experiences and as part of the complex interplay between both.

The dialectical nature (complex interplay) of this finding informs and supports the sociological debate in relation to structure and agency (Chapter 5, Return to the Literature-Choice). The finding reveals that their choices were not necessarily a determinant of
structure or agency but arose more from the complex interplay of their human experiences within a societal space over a period of their lives. Participants’ lives were shaped from an early age and situated within particular social contexts where womanhood and motherhood were considered synonymous. It was the nature of their personal experiences and their relationships with the social world that created the conditions for their choices, ‘it was also the beginning of the feminist movement, ‘as soon as I heard about the women’s group, I wanted to join. Because I’ve always had a feminist consciousness of my own’ (P16. p12).

Crucially, to understand their choices at a deeper level, we need to study them not in isolation but in relation to their lived experiences and to the structural forces that shaped them. Participants’ choices did not emerge from their own agency alone. Neither were their choices solely determined by structural influences. They can be best understood as arising from the complex and dialectical relation between agency and structure. Evidence from the study revealed that their choices contained elements of both and therefore tends to supports theories that comprehend choice in terms of the structure agency relationship.

Restraining experiences can be overcome

The finding supports feminist ideas that restraining and oppressive experiences in women’s lives can be overcome. Participants were subject to restraining social experiences that often eroded their personal confidence and fostered powerlessness as noted by this participant, ‘I’ve always assumed I was stupid…my mother was very critical of us when we were kids ( P7,p.14) (Chapter 3, The Complex Interplay of Choice, Chapter 4, Perceived of Lesser value but No Regrets). This seems to resonate with the argument put forward by both Hirschmann and Finley (Chapter 5, Return to the Literature-Choice), that choice needs to be considered in relation to oppression. As one participant stated, ‘I was aware of the oppressiveness of family life and a consciousness of the role of women as nothing more than slaves’ (P6, p.15). However, and as noted earlier, while restraining experiences limited their capacity for choice, they also led to a critical questioning and aspirations to seek out something different for themselves. As one participant recalled, ‘it occurred to me that this wasn’t the life I wanted for myself…and I went off to the technical college to do my A levels…and I made a completely new set of friends’ (P5, p3).
This raises the very important insight that oppressive experiences although often painful at a personal level, can at the same time (at least for some people) be a catalyst for change. For participants, this searching was facilitated, supported, and sustained by more liberatory experiences in their lives. For example, an important liberatory experience identified by one participant was studying sociology and engaging with other women in political and social movements, ‘I was part of a world that was thinking politically and I guess I joined that world as it was very very cool to be radical’ (P12, p.6). From such liberatory experiences, participants were enabled to challenge restraining family and educational experiences in their own lives. From this insight, their choices can be understood as part of the interplay, ‘clash’ or ‘relation’ between their restraining and liberatory experiences and within a context of dominant ideas of motherhood (Chapter 5, Return to the Literature-Choice). From this ‘interplay’, they overcame the restraints and created new situations that led to a new experience of freedom. Thus, they showed it is possible to overcome an oppressive past that imposed one view of what a woman should be. Participants in this study rejected dominant social expectations and made a choice for freedom and non-motherhood.

We can also relate this to Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus’ (Chapter 5, Return to the Literature-Choice). Early negative experiences in our lives can be internalised and mediated as restraining. One participant recalled her mother telling her, ‘that the head teacher had said to her, ‘oh X will be married by 18, so you know that was an expectation’ (P19, p19). Such discourses within families acted to sustain and reinforce the dominant ideas around motherhood. However, the habitus does not always ‘work smoothly’ and cracks can appear. When they do, change is possible. For instance, certain teachers did not always socialise participants according to the dominant expectations. Instead, they offered alternative role models (Chapter 3, The Complex Interplay of Choice). Similarly, the ‘splintering’ in the habitus occurred when for instance working class participants became aware of their place in the world. For instance, one participant recalled that a worker from a local Job Centre came to her comprehensive school and said that as they were, ‘not taking Latin, the only options open to them was to work in the glove factory or the tea factory’ (P12, p.5). Reflecting on this experience, she said, ‘what an ignorant classist thing to say’ (P12, p.5). She stated that this experience made her realise that she was not going to follow this route,
‘I made up my mind that I was not going to do that’ (P12, p.6). Thus, as noted earlier, restraining and often oppressive experiences can sometimes ignite critical questioning and searching. This participant transcended the habitus when she became aware of her own socialisation and when she discovered alternative possibilities for her life as a woman.

Such awareness and when reinforced with liberatory experiences such as education or involvement in social movements was an important catalyst for participants’ choices. This insight also supports Giddens and Sutton’s (2014) theory (Chapter 5, Return to the Literature-Choice) that social structures and institutions are not necessarily dominant external entities in their own right. They can also be ‘enabling, not just constraining’ (p.25).

As such, creative action can sometimes be possible through ‘openings’ which can create conditions for resistance and change. For example, the enabling potential of ‘openings’ within social structures and institutions can be likened to the liberatory influences from progressive teachers, feminists and partners. These acted as alternative role models and offered exposure to different ways of seeing and living in the world.

Clearly, further research would need to be undertaken to establish more definite links between this substantive theory and more formal theory (Charmaz, 2014). However, the evidence from this study offers us a helpful insight into the complex nature of choice making for women. The commencement of this dialogue also offers us a useful framework to begin to understand more about the complex nature of choice and particularly its relationship to structure and agency. Specifically, the interplay and tensions between the internal (personal) and external (social) worlds and how these can both constrain and liberate. Most importantly, we can begin to understand more about the potential of liberatory experiences and how alternatives are possible for women within oppressive social structures.

**Choice and social class**

Having discussed the complex nature of participants’ choices and the importance of both restraining and liberating experiences, I will now discuss the influence of social class. Social class, although associated with the finding on choice and touched on in the previous section,
demands specific attention in its own right. The evidence from the study suggests an association between choice and social class that had significant restraining and liberating influences on participants.

For middle class participants at grammar school, social class was in the main a liberating experience. They found that their personal aspirations and desires were validated through engagement with formal societal institutions such as the education system. The important issue for them was to ensure that formal education facilitated their abilities to explore alternatives and exercise choice. For instance, at school, they looked to teachers as a means to facilitate their learning and progress their careers. As one participant stated, ‘teachers were there to help me achieve my goals in life’ (P6, p.9). Thus when they engaged with the world, they were aware they could at least exercise some level of choice. However, as young women, they were still subject to gendered expectations. As one woman stated, ‘they [parents] assumed that I would complete university, come home and after a short period, get married’ (P16, p.4). Despite this, their middle class backgrounds and experiences of education facilitated more liberating experiences in their lives that enhanced their capacity for choice (Chapter 3, The Complex Interplay of Choice).

Thus for middle class participants, there was an awareness of choice from an early age. From their class backgrounds, they knew they could make choices that allowed them at least to consider alternatives to the lives of their parents. They felt better equipped to resist societal expectations of education, marriage, and children. This resonates with Bourdieu’s notion of ‘cultural capital’ presented in Chapter 5, Return to the Literature-Choice. This referred to the capacity acquired as a result of coming from a particular class background. In this case, it was a key feature of their upbringing, a source of power and reinforced in the education system. It revealed that the more cultural capital they acquired the more capacity they had for choice. Therefore, while middle class participants were subject to gender expectations to follow the traditional path of motherhood and children, having access to cultural capital helped them to pursue alternative choices.

Similarly, working class participants at grammar school, while also subject to the gendered expectations of their class, developed at least some capacity to resist the dominant
expectations of families and communities. They were able to do this because of exposure to more liberating experiences such as the influences of some teachers as role models.

For working class participants (half of all participants) social class influenced early-lived experiences within families and communities. It was reinforced through social structures and institutions such as formal education. For those who attended secondary modern or comprehensive schools, class largely remained a restraining force. As young women, they found it difficult to challenge family, community, and societal expectations. They were unaware they could exercise choice and especially reproductive choices. Their peers did not discuss reproductive choices or for that matter considered any alternatives to motherhood and family. As one participant recollected, ‘in working class communities, having a family was a kinda given’ (P1, p.5).

Therefore, an awareness of choice, including reproductive choice did not come until much later for working class women. As one participant stated, ‘it took me a long time to realise I had choice, I didn’t realise you could choose such things’ (P11, p.4). For these participants, acquiring an awareness and the capacity for choice took a long time. It also depended on overcoming often difficult and restraining experiences in their lives and having access to more liberatory possibilities. For some, opportunities to engage in informal educational experiences and social movements proved crucial. Thus, despite the restraining early influences of social class and its reinforcement through family, community, and formal education, they felt liberated, albeit after a significant period in their lives, to exercise their own choices.

For working class participants, restraining experiences of class placed limits on choice. This seems to echo a recent comment by Walls et al (2015) on the implications of structure and agency for health and well-being. They argued that,

\begin{quote}
\textit{to swim against the tide of the cultural structure to which a person’s family and peers hold allegiance is a choice that is easier for more advantaged groups—the wealthy, men, the educated—to make than others} (p.52).
\end{quote}

This insight is also broadly in line with Kirkpatrick, Hirschmann, Finley and Baker’s views as outlined in Chapter 5, Return to the Literature-Choice. They argued that choice is more
relevant to the lives of middle and upper class educated women. For uneducated poor women, the notion of choice is not a key feature of their lives. They have little awareness of choice or do not see its relevance to them. In theory, they can make individual choices but the same time, their choices are severely limited. So, for the poorest women within a context of capitalist and patriarchal relations, there is often only the illusion of choice. It is also difficult to see how a woman’s capacity for choice can be isolated from concerns about power and access to resources. Less power means less choice, dependency on others and having to conform to the dominant expectations of her gender (Chapter 5, Return to the Literature-Choice). For these reasons, the evidence from this study supports theories that working class women have a prolonged journey to choice and have to overcome considerable obstacles on the way. In this regard, their journey to choice reflects more of a ‘clash’ (Allman, 2001) between restraining forces and liberatory possibilities.

**Women of lesser value**

The second finding revealed that participants feel they are perceived as women of ‘lesser value’. By ‘lesser value’, I mean that their lives and status are seen to be of lesser importance than women who bear children. These perceptions were conveyed through negative language. For example, they were described by others and particularly other women as, ‘oh you’re selfish’, ‘just selfish’, ‘career women’, ‘shrewish’, ‘cold’, ‘hard’ and ‘bitter’ women. They were perceived as being unable to empathise with the concerns of those who have children. It was also assumed that they led sad lives that were full of regret and loss, since a, ‘complete acceptable life involves having and rearing your own family’ (Chapter 4, Perceived of Lesser Value but No Regrets).

This finding reinforces previous research in this area as reviewed in Chapter 1, Introduction, Context and Literature Review. Women who choose not to have children are perceived as, ‘selfish’, ‘suspicious’, not ‘real women’, ‘bereft, desperate and unfulfilled’ (Letherby, 1999; Tobin & Aria, 1998; Baker, 2008; Edman, 2011). In a recent autobiographical essay from the US, Nunez, (2015) stated that they are viewed as objects, ‘of curiosity, pity, embarrassment, and scorn’ (p.109). Baker (2008), in an Australian study, found that four of the young
women who expressed a preference for not having children were considered selfish. As a result, they experienced strong criticism and censure from others.

So, while the terms may differ these negative perceptions and tone appear consistent across a range of cultures. This negative positioning was upheld and reinforced in families and workplaces. Participants were seen to have little or nothing of value to contribute to discussions in relation to families with children. One participant recalled, ‘oh there was a time when all the family, and this was hurtful, used to say, oh, X you can’t possibly understand, you don’t have children’ (P19, p.21). Participants in professional occupations working with children revealed that once parents and especially mothers, discovered they do not have children of their own, their expertise tended to be negated (Chapter 4, Perceived of Lesser Value but No Regrets). Thus, in certain contexts, parental knowledge, the lived experience of mothers took precedence over professional knowledge.

There was also an assumption that participants were not interested in conversations about children or indeed had nothing to offer. Consequently, some felt left out of particular experiences they valued. Participants tended to see such incidents as missed opportunities where they could at least offer an alternative point of view. As one woman said, ‘unless you have got your own children to talk about they don’t want to talk about theirs’ (P1, p.23).

There was also a false assumption within workplaces that women without children would not take annual leave during school holidays, Christmas and Easter. Comments such as, ‘why are you taking time off this week, you have no kids’ (P14, p.58) were commonly experienced. Such assumptions are consistent with Ramsay and Letherby’s (2006) work based on the experiences of women without children in academia. They found that women without children can be seen as having no other responsibilities in life, apart from their careers. As one of their participants stated, ‘there are other things as well about not being a mother and one of them is the expectation that you are available to work 24 hours a day if necessary ’ (Fiona, p.34). They suggest that these women can be a positive resource within organisations.
Consequences of an alternative choice

Taken together, both negative labelling and ‘othering’ suggests that there can be consequences for those who choose non-motherhood. Blame also tends to fall on women rather than men. The choice to assert and act out a different identity and to defy the forces of socialisation exacts a heavy price (Kabeer, 1999). Nunez, (2015) argued that this negative positioning is no surprise in a society where the expectation is that ‘its members shall reproduce’ (p.109). In other words, you can expect derision when you reject motherhood and the powerful ideological call to follow your sisters. Nunez also cautioned that, ‘resisters must be prepared for widespread disapproval and even, in some communities, isolation’ (p.109). This negative portrayal also concurs with the recent public controversies directed at ‘childless women’ from sections of the media and the Catholic Church (Chapter 1, Introduction, Context and Literature Review). For instance, women who chose not to have children and who are prominent in political life are fair game for derision from both women and men.

Why is one choice more socially acceptable than another?

All of this raises deeper questions as to why and how this happens. Why is one choice socially acceptable and lauded while another is negatively perceived and those who make it are seen as, ‘selfish, childlike’ (Letherby & Williams, 1999, p.722). Charmaz (2014) argued that in order to gain a deeper understanding of our topic we need to make visible the hierarchies of power and how they are perpetuated.

Based on the evidence from this and other studies, I would argue that the commonality of negative experiences and their replication across different cultures reveals an important issue. This is that women are still mainly defined and expected to perform in relation to their reproductive status. If some choose to resist and follow an alternative route they can as Nunez argued, ‘expect derision’. In this sense, the negative positioning of women who choose not to have children reveals an important aspect of the prevailing societal thinking on women. It resonates most with critical feminist views that the link between womanhood and motherhood is deeply embedded (Chapter 5, Return to the Literature-Choice). As Meyers (2001) argued, motherhood is depicted, ‘as the only creditable form of
fulfilment for women’ (p.759). It is still seen as a woman’s duty and by which she can attain fulfilment and social identity. Writing on motherhood, the American writer Rich (1986), stated that the pressure to be like other women overwhelmed any notion of personal choice for her,

\[ my \text{ husband spoke eagerly of the children we would have; my parents in law awaited the birth of their grandchild, I had no idea of what I wanted, what I could or could not choose, I only knew that to have a child was to assume adult womanhood to the full, to prove myself, to be “like other women” (p.25). } \]

It also reflects deeper societal beliefs about the primary roles of women and their portrayal as bearers and nurturers of children (Graham & Rich, 2012). One of the participants stated that the clear societal message is to replicate the nuclear family structure, ‘a full acceptable complete life involves raising a family’ (P2, p.29). Another said, ‘it is seen as normative to have children and if you don’t follow the norm then there is something wrong with you’ (P13, p.17). All of these voices seem to echo the words of Virginia Woolf (2004) when she stated that ‘the Victorian view of women as not fully realized, until you have a child, lingers’ (p.66).

**Motherarchy**

One way to understand this ‘lessening and ‘othering’ of women who choose an alternative path is what I refer to as motherarchy (Chapter 4, Perceived of Lesser Value but No Regrets). Motherarchy can be understood as an ideological idea that promotes and sustains the status of motherhood within societal institutions. It is different to the idea of top down oppression by men as in patriarchy. It is not dominance by women as in matriarchy. It can be seen as something experienced mainly between mothers and non-mothers. It is more a conceptual idea that can help us to understand what might underpin exclusive social practices that bestows on motherhood a higher status relative to non-mothers within societal institutions.

Motherarchy resonates with experiences of ‘otherness’ and shares some similarities with the experiences of sub groups defined through gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexuality, language and so on (hooks, 1981; Collins, 2000). The main distinction is that while
many of these oppressions are often overt, the stereotyping and labelling of women who choose not to have children appears more subtle and covert.

The workplace was revealed as a key area for this reinforcement and where the needs of women with children took precedence over childless women. We can see this more clearly, if we observe the introduction of family friendly policies in the workplace. On one level, such policies are designed to support equality. As such, they gain wide acceptance from both women and men as a means of supporting women to balance their home and work lives. However, at another level, such policies can promote and reinforce motherarchal ideas and practices. For example, when a mother questioned a participant’s expertise on children or when mothers assume they have priority over women without children for annual leave (Chapter 4, Perceived of Lesser Value but No Regrets). Examples include the sending of flowers to women who have given birth and the sharing of photos of new babies within the workplace. Such practices are often subtle, difficult to resist and become accepted as the norm. There is little consideration or sensitivity given to those whose identities fall outside these norms. The underlying assumption is that motherhood signifies a rite of passage, which has to be proclaimed publicly to others and especially other women.

Motherarchy thus reveals the power of pronatalist ideological ideas that are reinforced by a mothering rhetoric and underpinned by policies and practices particularly within the workplace. It requires motherhood to be extolled and celebrated while simultaneously diminishing and vilifying non-motherhood (Morrison, 2013). The interesting insight is that these practices are largely sustained by women. As such, women reinforce and sustain the centrality of motherhood. As hooks (1984) stated, it is often women and feminists who,

reinforce central tenets of male supremacist ideology. They imply that motherhood is a woman's truest vocation; that women who do not mother, whose lives may be focused more exclusively on a career, creative work, or political work are missing out, are doomed to live emotionally unfulfilled lives. They seem to be saying to masses of women that careers or work can never be as important, as satisfying, as bearing children (p.136).
Understanding the silence

*Motherarchy* can also help us to understand the nature of the silence around non-motherhood (Chapter 4, Perceived of Lesser Value but No Regrets). The dominance of *motherarchy* helps us to understand some of the difficulties involved in challenging negative perceptions of women who choose not to have children. Motherhood, family life, and children continue to be associated with notions of well-being, fulfilment, and happiness (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Gilbert, 2006). Motherhood is mainly seen as natural and beneficial to women and society (Chapter 5, Return to the Literature-Choice). This positive portrayal persists despite evidence that the family can hide inequalities and various forms of oppression such as rape and physical and sexual violence (Rosser & Harris, 1965; Mackinnon, 1987; Smart & Neale, 1999; Kelly, 2015; Jackson, 2015). Some women also experience very difficult pregnancies, births, and post-natal depression (MIND, 2016).

There has also been a long association between having children and happiness. Gilbert (2006), a US social psychologist, argued that human cultures have always promoted the idea that having children will make them happy. He stated that,

> When people think about their offspring—either imagining future offspring or thinking about their current ones—they tend to conjure up images of cooing babies smiling from their bassinets, adorable toddlers running higgledy-piggledy across the lawn, handsome boys and gorgeous girls playing trumpets and tubas in the school marching band, successful college students going on to have beautiful weddings, satisfying careers, and flawless grandchildren whose affections can be purchased with candy (pp.4-5).

He suggested that people tend to believe the idea that ‘children make you happy’, even when it is not borne out by evidence. When we measure the happiness of people who do have children, we find a very different story. While couples may start out happy, this happiness tends to decrease when they have children, returning only when children leave home (Appendix 5). Gilbert argued that the mantra that ‘children will bring you happiness’ becomes part of the cultural wisdom handed down through generations in every society. Thus, it is without challenge. To suggest that ‘children will bring you unhappiness’ would be a challenge to one of the most enduring beliefs in all societies. Therefore, people continue
having children because they are like, ‘nodes in a social network that arises and falls by a logic of its own’ (p.6).

Gilbert’s notion of ‘cultural wisdom’ resonates with prevailing ideological explanations and Bourdieu’s concept of doxa (Chapter 5, Return to the Literature-Choice). The dominant idea that womanhood and motherhood are synonymous prevails and there is little or no questioning of the traditional domains of family, marriage and motherhood (Oakley, 1974; Gilbert, 2006; Bradley, 2013). The primary role of the woman as wife and mother is still not open to any critical debate. Alternative views are largely absent or taboo.

Participants’ abilities or desires to challenge this societal culture depended very much on their own status within the hierarchy. Those who held powerful positions did not feel the need to challenge or to justify a life of their choosing. As one participant said, ‘I don’t really care what people thinks about my choice’ (P6, p.14). For others, there was also an awareness of the enormity of the task. As one participant put it, ‘oh, look at the mumsnet mafia, where if you disagree with anything you get stoned to death with cupcakes’ (P1, p.31). Those in less powerful positions were also more reluctant to challenge. As one participant stated, ‘you’ve just got to accept it’ (P13, p.23). On one level, they felt to do so may only reinforce existing negative perceptions. However, at a deeper level, they were conscious that without challenge such perceptions and practices are perpetuated by silence, ‘I know we should challenge, we have a duty to challenge inequality wherever we see it, but it is difficult to do so, and in many ways that reluctance is depended upon’ (P8, p.31).

Lesbian women were also silenced. They recalled that motherhood was seen as something more suitable for heterosexual women. Once they came out as lesbian women they were never asked about having children, ‘nobody wanted me to have children now I was a lesbian...well people don’t do they, it’s not normal, the moment I came out, no one ever asked me that again’ (P11, p.5). Di Lapi (1989) concurred with these experiences and observed that poor, single, and lesbian women were framed by others as unfit mothers and expected to remain childless. Woodward, (2003) agreed and stated that,
motherhood may be taken for granted and even assumed to be ‘natural’ but who is allowed to be a mother is strongly contested, whether in terms of having the right to adopt a child or to be permitted access to reproductive technologies...older women, lesbian women and women from ethnic groups have all had difficulty in obtaining access to assisted reproductive technologies (p.23).

Breaking the silence

An important question that arises from this finding is whether this silence can be broken for the benefit of all women. A first step may be to give a hearing to the voices of women who have chosen not to have children. They have challenged the powerful and pervasive myth that womanhood and motherhood are synonymous. They have chosen the alternative path of non-motherhood and challenged the cultural norms. At the same time, their choices are not anti-mother or anti-family. They are choices based on what is meaningful and fulfilling for them. As Hoge (2015) pointed out, it is, ‘a choice for something rather than a choice against something’ (p.2). In a similar vein, Wager (2000) recalled that, ‘when I look back, I realize that I did not choose childlessness but I chose other things that gave meaning to my life’. She goes on to say that women who have made the choice, ‘want to make something of themselves, their sexuality and their lives – something other than that which motherhood would bring’ (p.393).

Women who have rejected the all-invasive call to motherhood have important insights to offer this debate. As such, they represent both a challenge and a hope for the future, ‘childless women challenge other women’ (P1, p.30). Another participant noted, ‘I think we are admired and feared in equal parts’ (P19, p.17). Admired for the freedom to live a life of one’s choosing and feared for making difficult choices that go against the domineering norms of society (Chapter 4, Perceived of Lesser value but No Regrets).

This finding has important implications for the wider feminist movement. It challenges the traditional assumption that a woman’s primary role is to have children. Motherhood is not the only path for every woman. It calls for ‘freedom of choice’ to be extended to non reproduction and to choosing alternatives that go against the flow. Instead of vilification,
the choice not to have children should be understood, respected, and supported. Of course, it can be easier to place the spotlight on individual women who do not conform to the norms. It is much more difficult to look critically at societal culture and institutions that sustains motherarchy and the negative perceptions that flow from it. Clearly based on the evidence from this study, the struggle for ‘freedom of choice’ has still a long way to go.

Hakim (2000) argued that,

<pre>
preferences that go contrary to social norms can be actively concealed or left vague, so as to avoid argument and opprobrium. Thus the desire to have children is rarely stated explicitly because it is natural, obvious and unquestioned. But the desire not to have children may also be left unstated because it seems to invite an argument in ordinary social settings (p.16).
</pre>

Entering into a dialogue about the preferences of mothers and women who choose not to have children may be a <i>liberating</i> experience for all. In doing so, perhaps we can move towards the deconstruction of the perception that the lives of women who choose not to have children are somehow of lesser value than those who choose motherhood.

**Regret**

My third finding is that a majority of participants felt no regrets for choosing not to have children. A minority experienced some regrets (4 out of 22 participants). Only one participant expressed loss and regret at her choice. Participants also challenged ageist discourses in relation to care, which ignited both personal insecurities, and raised wider implications for social policies (Chapter 4, Perceived of Lesser Value but No Regrets).

Despite numerous searches, I could find no relevant empirical or theoretical studies from a sociological perspective on either the absence or presence of regret following a choice not to have children. However, I did source two psychological studies by Ireland (1993) and Landman et al (1995) on the nature and experience of regret to which I will refer in this discussion. Autobiographical accounts by US based authors, Nunez, Houston and Kelpfish also inform a discussion on regret (Ratner, 2001; Daum, 2015).
No regrets

Most participants did not experience any profound regret at their choices, ‘I have no regrets about not having children, definitely no regrets’ (P17, p.34). This finding must also be seen within a societal context where the common assumption was (and largely still is) that such choices would inevitably lead to regret. Participants wondered why others would assume that their choices would lead to regret. Indeed, many mothers reminded participants that their lives would be inadequate and meaningless without a child. Such perceptions were also experienced by Nunez (2015), ‘but you love children. People say to me. Meaning, surely I must have regrets’ (p.116). The interesting and important insight here is that participants overcame restraining experiences and liberated themselves to make their own choices. For them, there were other paths to follow. It was not necessary to become a mother to achieve fulfilment and happiness. It was more about the desire to live a different life to their mothers, to other women, and to reject gendered expectations (Chapter 4, Perceived of Lesser Value but No Regrets).

For others, children were never part of their life plans. There were other goals and activities to pursue. Houston (2015), sharing her own personal story from America also subscribed to these aspirations,

> What if I didn’t want to have babies because I loved my job too much to compromise it, or because serious travel makes me feel in relation to the world in an utterly essential way? What if I’ve always liked the look of my own life much better than those of the ones I saw around me? ...What if I simply like dogs a whole lot better than babies? What if I have become sure that personal freedom is the thing I hold most dear? (p.170).

Others had a more political and feminist view of life and felt such ideals were more important for them. As one participant stated, ‘politics, environment...we can’t have children, we are too busy saving the world’ (P1, p.21). This stance reflects a view that ‘saving the world’ is also an important project and maybe has equal or even greater social value than being a mother. Such sentiments are echoed in the work of Letherby (1999) and Shaw (2011) which revealed the impact of the feminist movement on their choices in life (Chapter 1, Introduction, Context and Literature Review).
For another participant it was her experience in education. There, she had the opportunity to engage with important global ideas of overpopulation, which ultimately influenced her choice (Chapter 3, The Complex interplay of choice). As she recalled, ‘my attitude changed into well really I should not add to the overpopulation and that was it’ (P3, p.3). The key message here is that motherhood is viewed as only one experience in this world. It was but one of many experiences on offer from a menu of other equally interesting and exciting possibilities. Participants overcame their restraints, pursued their own dreams and desires, and therefore had no reason to experience regret. Regret was framed in more feminist terms and echoes Houston (2015) who citing a friend, wrote, ‘I will never regret not having children. What I regret is that I live in a world where in spite of everything, that decision is still not quite okay’ (p.171).

Half regrets

Some participants acknowledged and accepted an element of regret from their choices. For these, regret was not having the experience of motherhood or rearing a child to adulthood (Chapter 4, Perceived of Lesser value but No Regrets). Landman et al (1995) referred to this as ‘counterfactual thinking’, which she defined as, ‘the process of imaging alternatives to reality, what might have been’ (p.87). This experience resonated with Nunez (2015) who told us that, ‘not too much time passes in the course of my days without my remembering that I have missed one of life’s most significant experiences’ (p.116). The important insight here is that the experience of regret can be expected where gendered expectations are deeply embedded within society and where motherhood has been the measure by which we define women (Ireland, 1993; see also Chapter 5, Return to the Literature-Choice). As Kelpfish (cited in Ratner, 2001) reminded us,

Motherhood bestows honour, respect, love, and comfort. Thus the only fool proof way to guarantee immortality is by having ‘blood’ children which, ... is not surprising since it is nurtured by everything around us, fostered by the media, by popular literature, by parents, by the questionnaires we fill out, Are you married? Do you have children? How many? (p.21).

In such a context, a choice not to have children goes against tradition and deeply ingrained biological, cultural, and societal practices (de Beauvoir,1972). Women who choose alternatives can find themselves on the outside, isolated and subject to derision.
Consequently, regret and loss may be inevitable for some women who make this choice and a woman can feel like, ‘a zero, a nothing...a gap...a blank...a space’ (P2, p.19).

Existentialist thinkers, such as Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), have drawn our attention to the relationship between choice making and issues of anxiety and responsibility. On the one hand, we experience a sense of freedom when we feel liberated to make choices for ourselves. On the other hand, the realisation can be accompanied by feelings of inner turmoil or ‘angst’ (Kierkegaard, 1980). Angst in this context may well be associated with the internalisation of the unending, enduring, and restraining myths around motherhood (Ireland, 1993; Safer, 1996; Kabeers, 1999; Daum, 2015). To choose not to have children involves a struggle against the restraining experiences in a woman’s life and the social expectations of motherhood. A certain amount of loss and regret may be an inevitable part of this process. As Lois (cited in Charmaz, 2014) stated,

While all emotion can be felt in the present, remembered in the past or anticipated in the future, there are few such as nostalgia and regret that cannot be felt without bridging the present to either the past or the future (p.233).

Challenging ageist discourses

This finding also challenged ageist discourses, which ignited personal insecurities about isolation and the loss of independence. This relates to dominant familial discourses framed in implicit ideological terms that continue to reinforce the message that having children is the preferred societal option and promises security and care in old age (Wenger, 2009; Letherby, 2002a). A consistent discourse is that the family is the place of love, warmth, comfort, and care in old age (Parsons, 1956; Young & Wilmott, 1957; Finch 1989; Bauman & May, 2001). This discourse also reverberates with recent statements from Pope Francis (Chapter 1, Introduction, Context and Literature Review). From his perspective, childless couples are a threat to the institution of the family, the primary vehicle for socialisation in Catholic teaching. It is the moral duty of the family to reproduce itself and to suppress personal desires that might challenge this doctrine. Those who choose to stay outside are condemned to solitude and loneliness in old age.
However, the evidence from this study runs counter to this thinking. Participants were very aware that having children does not mitigate against isolation in later life. One participant says that the idea that, ‘oh your children will look after you in your old age, is a load of rubbish’ (P5, p.27). Some recalled family and friends who have children but who do not see or hear from them and rely on friends and neighbours for support. Participants whose parents live in other countries also challenged the notion that children will provide for you when in need or when you are old. Their experiences demonstrated that any care or help they are able to offer is remote and virtual, rather than nearby and physical. Klepfisz (cited in Ratner, 2001) supported this view when she said,

children are not a medicine or vaccine which stamps out loneliness and isolation but rather they are people subject to the same emotions and fragilities as other friends...blood indeed might be thicker than water, but it too is capable of evaporating and drying up (p.20).

Critique of the nuclear family as the haven for solace for all its members dates back to the work of Laing (1971) and Cooper (1972) and continues to the present time (Bauman and May, 2001; Jackson, 2015). There have also been economic and social changes in family life, neighbourhoods, and communities. Such changes have had a significant impact on notions of ‘community care’ (Morgan, 1975; Pascall, 1986; Williams, 1989; Finch 1989; WRVS, 2012; Giddens & Sutton, 2014). Allied to this is the increased commodification of care and reduced forms of mutual support (Phillipson, 2013). In a world of increasing individualisation, commodification, and change, the rhetoric that stresses the value and sanctity of family life offers very little comfort for support in old age. At the same time, participants acknowledge real fears around ageing and the lack of social connectedness when older and frail. Such fears reveal important issues of insecurity and uncertainty in contemporary Britain and highlights the need for more inclusive social policies for all older people.
Summary

This chapter discussed the key findings that address my research aims.

All participants in this research chose not to have children. Their choices could not be understood solely in relation to specific influences but as part of a complex interplay between restraining and liberatory experiences within the context of their lives. Liberatory experiences helped and supported them to overcome restraining experiences, resist dominant societal expectations, and pursue alternatives to motherhood. The finding on choice both resonates with and transcends previous studies. Specific influences on choice such as negative mothering, career aspirations, and feminism were consistent with previous research. At the same time, the finding transcends the substantive research and points towards a more complex scenario at the heart of choice making for women who choose not to have children.

The finding challenges liberal and choice feminist perspectives and particularly the sole concern that personal agency is the crucial factor in choice making. It supports critical feminist views that we cannot ignore the restraints on women’s lives within families, communities, and societal institutions. In addition, it reinforces the view that it is necessary to understand women’s choices within a context of dominant gendered expectations that sees womanhood and motherhood as synonymous. The insight in relation to liberatory experiences also resonates with progressive educational, feminist, and other factors that can enable and support women to pursue alternative paths in life.

The dialectic nature of the finding best informs the sociological debate in relation to structure and agency. It supports those who argue that choices are not solely determined by either agency or structure but arises more from the complex interplay of human interactions and relations over time and within specific locations. Optimistically, this finding is in harmony with those who argue that restraining experiences and dominant gender expectations can be overcome. Essentially, by questioning and resisting restraining experiences and being open to alternatives. Moreover, it supports the idea that women can
be open to alternatives by having exposure to liberatory experiences both within and outside societal institutions.

Social class emerged as a key influence on choice. It was influential from early-lived experiences and reinforced through social institutions and structures. Experiences of class both liberated and restrained choice. Middle class participants found that their personal aspirations and desires were supported through formal institutions such as the education system. For working class participants, class remained a restraining force across most area of their lives. The acquisition of cultural capital helped to liberate middle class participants while working class participants were restrained by its absence. This interpretation supports those who argue that for many women and particularly those who are most excluded, there is often only the illusion of choice. In addition, it is consistent with those who argue that freedom of choice cannot be isolated from questions of inequalities and power.

Having made the choice not to have children, participants were perceived and constructed negatively as women of lesser value. This positioning was expressed through negative language and stereotyping, and reinforced in families, communities, and workplaces. This finding reinforces previous research on this topic. The important insight here is that there are consequences for women who defy the forces of socialisation. This negative positioning is broadly in line with critical feminist ideas that women are still seen in terms of their reproductive status. Motherarchy is a helpful concept to explain the elevation and higher status of mothers relative to non-mothers. This concept can be understood as part of an ideological discourse that prioritises and sustains the idea that womanhood and motherhood are synonymous. This process is largely sustained by women through subtle practices particularly in the workplace. Motherarchy can also help us to understand the difficulties in challenging the culture of silence around non-motherhood. An important implication is whether we can get beyond this silence. Can there be solidarity between mothers and non-mothers?

Having made their choice, the majority of participants did not experience regret. For them, and as already noted, motherhood is but one experience in life and children were never part of their plans. Maternity was not a universal value and not something they felt they must
accept. There were equally fulfilling and satisfying paths to follow. Despite restraining factors in their lives, participants liberated themselves to make their own choices and therefore have no reason to experience regret. A minority experienced some regrets and the ‘angst’ that goes with it. However, they accepted this as part of a life choice made within a context of deeply embedded gendered expectations and where women are expected to feel as and be mothers.

Participants also challenge ageist discourses in relation to care. They argued that the discourse, which conflates the notion that having children guarantees care when one is older, is a false premise. Their experiences reveal a more realistic picture that reflects the changing nature of families and communities. They argued that ageist and family centric discourses only transpire to feed insecurities. Their insights are consistent with studies that reveal significant changes within communities and the risks associated with the changing nature of social care. Their challenge also raises the question as to the need for more inclusive social policies, which consider the diversity of all older people.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

Introduction

In this thesis, I outlined the research journey undertaken to explore and address my research aims. I set out to explore why women choose not to have children and to consider the consequences of their choices on their lives. The aim of this concluding chapter is to look back but also to look forward. To do this, I will draw on the entire thesis. Firstly, I reflect on my learning from the research process. Secondly, I identify the contribution of the findings to new and existing knowledge. Thirdly, I consider the limitations of adopting a constructivist grounded theory methodology. Finally, in the light of the findings, I will propose how future research and current debates on this topic can be taken forward.

Reflections

I chose to reflect on five key areas of my research journey. I chose these as I learned most from the issues and questions that arose from these elements of the process. This learning can also inform the contribution and the limitations of the study (See later in this chapter). The five areas for reflection are:

- The ethical approval process
- Interviewing
- The analysis and interpretation
- The writing process
- Personal and professional change
- Support

I will discuss each of these in turn.

The Ethical approval process

To start with, an important stage was the process of obtaining formal ethical approval from the school’s ethics committee. This was a critical step since the committee were essentially
gatekeepers and had the power to accept or reject my application. At the outset, I was delighted and grateful to have the opportunity to undertake research on a topic of my choice. At the same time, I was mindful that I intended to explore an under researched and sometimes negatively perceived area of women’s lives. I was also unsure how my topic would be seen within a school that prioritised research on health and social care issues.

My anxieties increased when my initial application was rejected. The ethics committee decided that the aims and objectives of the proposal were not clear. Following resubmission, my proposal was returned with comments and requirements for amendments. Two comments in particular are worthy of reflection here. Firstly, the committee stated that as the research was, ‘potentially sensitive’ as the participants were at risk of ‘psychological stress or anxiety’. I was also required, ‘to address the issue of induced anxiety and stress’. It was anticipated that this might arise for example from congenital disease or experience of abortion. A memo I wrote at that time read,

"Wonder why this level of anxiety? Why would women over 45 who had made this choice be at risk of psychological harm? Women who did not make this choice are excluded from my research, so why the fuss? I wonder would these assumptions have been raised if they were male participants" (5th March 2012).

Secondly, the committee had concerns,

regarding the level of disclosure of personal information [of the researcher] in the participant information sheet. It was felt that this could introduce bias into the interview by stating personal experience. It was suggested that such information be introduced as third person scenarios at the interview in order to elicit responses if needed? (Ethics Application Feedback letter, 2012, 4th paragraph, Appendix B).

The personal information referred to my disclosure that I had chosen not to have children. Following a discussion with one of my supervisors, I resubmitted my application and questioned some of the assumptions that underpinned the comments. I did not consider the women as vulnerable in any way. I argued that participants had all made a choice not to have children and that their participation in the research was voluntary. I also argued that the inclusion of personal information was consistent with my methodology. As a woman
researching other women’s lives, I needed to be transparent (Chapter 2, Methodology, Design and Fieldwork). The committee eventually approved my ethics application.

On reflection, I believe the important thing is to learn from this experience. I acknowledge the important function of the committee and particularly their role as a vehicle for institutional protection. As we have seen in recent times, not all social researchers behave ethically. When Lord Hunt proposed radical changes to research governance following scandals at two children’s hospitals he stated that, ‘events have made us painfully aware that research can cause real distress when things go wrong’ (DoH, 2001, p.i). However, I was concerned with the recommendation to remove the personal information about the researcher. From my standpoint, it was necessary to take the researchers position, privileges, perspectives, and interactions into account. As a constructivist grounded theory researcher I would argue that I was not detached or a ‘third person’ but in fact central to the process (Charmaz, 2014).

On reflection, were the committee just being overprotective or was there more to it? Was it because most university and institutional bodies are used to dealing with quantitative research and consequently tend to assess all research proposals within similar criteria. In this respect, they tend to reflect the dominant institutional paradigms within university departments such as health sciences. This paradigm prefers clear aims, objectives, methodologies, and processes agreed at the outset (Hammersley, 2010). However, one of the consequences of the ‘one size fits all’ approach is that it can stifle the enthusiasm of the novice researcher and, ‘delimit academic freedom to roam critically and creatively’ (Boden & Epstein & Latimer, 2009, p.728). My main learning from this is to understand the mind-set, the context, and the politics of the prevailing ethical approval process. Members of ethics committees are also subject to the same social norms and pressures as everyone else. In a context, where proposed research challenges existing paradigms, novice grounded theorists and feminist researchers will need to be confident, patient, and tenacious (Richie & Lewis, 2003).
Interviewing

An important learning point for me was the need to balance a number of expectations, values, tensions, and roles throughout the research process. Reflecting on my method, my main intention was to create relationships with participants in which they could cast their stories in their own terms. I wanted to create conditions where they became more aware of the centrality and importance of their own stories, experiences, meanings, feelings, and understandings in our encounters. I was willing to answer any questions asked but I was clear that it was their stories I was looking for. In the interviews, I wanted to listen, be attentive to language, feelings, and emotions expressed and not to interrupt. I wanted the experience to reflect my individuality as well as my role as researcher. At the same time, I was conscious of ensuring I maintained professional boundaries throughout (Burgess, 1984). I was aware of the tensions between the need to be present in the process, attentive to participants’ stories while at the same time hoping I was getting useful data (Charmaz, 2014). My approach also necessitated some element of solidarity (Tanner, 2010). I did not want to come across as someone who was there solely to collect data for a PhD. I was after all relying on the women to share their experiences with me. Without their cooperation, I could not have carried out my research.

I allocated one day for each interview. The reason for this was that I realised early on that the planning and conducting of interviews while doing a full time job required significant time and resources. If I wanted to create positive experiences for participants, I had to plan and conduct the interviews ethically and effectively. The demands of planning, travelling, listening and engaging took enormous amounts of physical, mental, and emotional energy (Roberts 2007; Charmaz, 2014). In most cases, the whole day was taken up with one interview. This often involved traveling long distances by car but mostly by train. I stayed in Travelodge’s, took taxis, buses and the Tube. In order to ensure I was on time for interviews, I would try to get to the address as early as possible. However, as I discovered, arriving early for interviews can be as off-putting as arriving late. I arrived five minutes early for one interview and was duly admonished for ‘being early’ (very nicely, of course!).
I learned that the choice of a semi-structured interview schedule worked well. The first question in most interviews did indeed allow, ‘stories tumble out’ (Charmaz, 2014; p.91). It allowed participants the time to reflect on their own lives in their own way. I thought this was important as it generally set the tone for the rest of the interview. During interviews, I became more aware of the importance of reading the context. For example gauging whether the participant was anxious or relaxed and pacing myself before asking any sensitive questions. I allowed the ‘um’s’ and the ‘you know what I mean’s’, which often revealed important insights.

I offered participants a choice of face-to-face, telephone, or Skype interviews. I found face-to-face and telephone interviews most beneficial in gathering rich data. In face-to-face interviews, participants chose the time and place. For example, their homes or workplaces. I found that engaging in preliminary small talk was easier in such contexts. There was usually something visual within the setting on which to comment. For example, a beautiful garden or a pleasant view. This interaction helped to build rapport prior to interviews and facilitated more open communication.

I also found telephone interviewing rewarding. Participants choose the times that suited them. However, I found that telephone interviews required a very different skill set. Not having eye contact or visual props required active listening and being sensitive to words and sounds. In addition, as importantly, it was necessary to have the confidence to allow silences in the interview and to offer and facilitate ‘breaks’. I found offering ‘breaks’ very beneficial. Participants had time to reflect on their stories. In addition, breaks allowed me the time to reflect on my use of ‘prompts’ and the pace of the interview.

I found the use of Skype less successful. Despite the virtual presence, I found that responses to questions and follow up questions tended to be short. Another disadvantage was that if for some reason a participant or I swivelled in our chairs, the words were sometimes unclear in the recording.

I learned that the ‘personality’ of the researcher is also important. I wanted to communicate my research intentions in a medium that was both informative and encouraging while at the same time conveying my own humanity in the process. As a novice
researcher, it confirmed for me the value of liking people and the importance of engaging in substantial small talk at the start. It also confirmed the value of listening. I grew up in a culture where everyone talked a lot, but where listening was often in scarce supply. Throughout my professional and academic life, I learned the importance of developing good listening skills particularly when working with service users and students. I found I could draw on those skills for my research. While the purpose was different, the crucial elements of listening and respect were transferrable.

I was reasonably confident that I allowed participants to share their subjective understandings. They recalled their own stories, which led to their choices not to have children. Their stories did not always follow a linear form. They journeyed back and forth on their lives as they shared memories of family life, education, and work. At times, they took unexpected paths and recalled incidents they had not thought about since childhood. As they reflected more on the past, they were often quite surprised at how some of their experiences had influenced their life choices. I felt comfortable with this free flowing structure as it created a sense of an ‘ordinary conversation’ between two people (Tanner, 2010). I also felt it was a good experience for them. Following one interview, I was delighted when a participant emailed me the next morning to say,

> eeh Rose, what a big impact that quality of talking/re-seeing/hearing has. It was so hard to get to sleep and I've woken up happy but still thinking about not much else but all that passed between us. Thank you for this opportunity and for your integrity. You not only treated me absolutely like a human being, not a knowledge-mine to be quarried. You took the trouble to show me my value. So, I've grown, and I feel more self-respect. Thank you so much. That was really kind, helpful and respectful (22.01.2014).

The analysis

The research generated enormous amounts of data. Transcribed interviews ranged from 25 to 83 pages of text, which I read, coded, categorised, and interpreted. Initially I was scared stiff of the transcribed data. I had listened to the audio recordings many times but until I had the hard copies, the data did not seem real. Maybe it was because the electronic recordings did not have a physical presence that I could hold in my hand and therefore I did
not have to look at every day. Once I printed off the transcripts, I treated these as if they were the word of God. I read and re-read them but could not bring myself to code the data. I felt that to do so would contaminate participants’ voices. Charmaz’s (2014) advice to begin coding as soon as the data is collected did not initially resonate with me. I felt her advice did not sufficiently acknowledge the emotional investment I had with the data. At that point, I became increasingly aware that I could not analyse what I felt were important subtleties. For instance, how the interview felt to me, the unspoken gestures and the general mood of the participants. Neither could I analyse anything about the context such as the warm fire in one instance and the very cold room in another setting. I could not consider household furnishings or gardens. I was left with only words, which I then had to analyse (Birch, 1988).

For a while, I was reluctant to put myself into the mix. However, once I accepted the power invested in me as the researcher, I quickly made the leap into coding and analysis. At the outset, I was anxious as to whether I was using word or codes that reflected the words of participants. A memo at the time reflected this tension.

Why these codes, am I relying on my own knowledge and experience or am I actually coming to this without any preconceived ideas…don’t know…or am I asking what is her story here or am I making this up…need to rethink this one (May, 12\textsuperscript{th} 2012).

I was mindful of the dangers of ‘common sense theorizing’ and the importance of holding back from the explanation that most easily comes to mind (Charmaz, 2014). My anxieties were eased somewhat when I submitted a slice of data to my supervisor and to a colleague who had used grounded theory for her PhD research. All three of us came up with similar codes, which reassured me (See later, Evaluation of study). As my analysis progressed, I learned about the importance of my own power, subjectivity, and reflexivity in the process. I felt for the first time I was beginning to construct knowledge rather than just talking or writing about it.

I learned that it is often necessary to make practical decisions while doing research. An important principle of grounded theory is theoretical sampling and the importance of emerging categories. For the majority of my interviews, and in line with the principles of
constructivist grounded theory, I listened to the recordings and started coding. However, this was not always possible for practical reasons. For example, I recruited four participants who lived in and around the London area. In order to cut down on cost and time, I opted to take a week’s annual leave to conduct all four interviews. As a result, I was not able to code following each interview before conducting the next one. All I could do was to listen to each interview and write analytical memos and notes afterwards. When I had the transcripts, I compared these with my memos and notes. From this experience, I learned that as long as I could listen to the recordings, write analytical memos and detailed notes, I could delay coding the data. I also learned to trust my judgement that what I was hearing and writing in my memos reflected the interview itself.

I found raising codes to categories and the integration of memos quite challenging. This process took me a long time (over two years) as I had to go back and forth through the data hundreds of time. This was reflected in the stack of memos I wrote during this period. In September 2013, I attended a workshop delivered by Kathy Charmaz (Qualitative Methods in Psychology (QMIP) Conference, 2013). From her, I learned that there was no ‘right-way’ to do grounded theory. I could learn the general principles as advocated by theorists. In addition, I could study how individual researchers had coded, memoed and constructed categories. However, ultimately I had to shape my own study, to have confidence in the participants, my methodology and be guided by the data.

One of the most challenging aspects of the analysis was exploring the relationships between categories (Chapter 3, Findings -The Complex interplay of choice). For instance, I constructed three categories around choice but wanted to explore the relationships between them at a deeper level. This was a chaotic, messy process since I had to sift and sort through all the data again. During this stage, I learned of the value of memoing and critically reflecting on the complexity that I was unfolding. At times, I felt I was drowning in data. That my research had gone too deep and that categories were too encompassing. Other times, it felt like I was in grave danger of losing my focus. There was an ongoing temptation to isolate specific influences and factors. However, I remained true to my approach and over an intensive few days, the fog began to lift. Looking back, I believed it was necessary to consider the relationships between these categories both for the sake of
my own learning and to address my research question. My main learning from this stage was that I had reached a higher level of confusion (Salmon, 1992). I could see that I had scratched the surface of something highly complex and challenging but also exciting and liberating.

The writing process

I found the whole writing process excruciatingly difficult and challenging. Speaking at the Hay festival in 2014, the Irish novelist Colm Toibín stated that he, ‘can spend a whole day trying to write one sentence’. I was overjoyed. This admission resonated with my own personal experience of writing this thesis. The major difference is that Toibín is an established award-winning novelist. I, on the other hand, am a novice researcher.

When I began my PhD journey, I held contradictory feelings about the writing process. I struggled to find my place in the process of writing up research that is largely determined by academic and professional expectations within disciplines. As academics, we are expected to write within particular boundaries and to follow conventions. These largely determine the structure of our studies that flow from, ‘literature reviews to methods, results, and concluding discussion’ (Becker, 2007). These expectations forced me to reflect on my personal power in writing. I struggled with the tensions between the scientific and creative aspects of a PhD (Salmon, 1992; Dunleavy, 2003). How much is a PhD about the construction of a theoretical argument and how much is it about personal reflection? I found Charmaz’s (2001) advice to opt for a more literary rather than scientific style not very helpful to what I wanted to achieve in terms of both the research and my own learning.

As time went on, I changed as I started to write and redraft (countless times). I accepted that I needed to carve out my own writing style for the thesis and for the requirements for a PhD. I sought to balance the inherent tensions between creativity and science and to find a style that did not hide behind either the voices of the participants or indeed my theoretical knowledge (Ivanic & Roach, 1990). I choose to do this by trying to strike the right balance between academic requirements and personal commitment to a particular approach to participants and research. I wanted to present a coherent intellectual argument but I also wanted to present the voices of participants that reflected their varied experiences. I
attempted to do this in a number of ways. Firstly, by engaging with the relevant theoretical and sociological ideas that shaped and underpinned my topic and methodologies (Chapter 2, Methodology, Design and Fieldwork; Chapter 5, Return to the Literature-Choice). Secondly, by ensuring the voices of participants were prominent in the thesis. I felt it was important to give prime space to a full presentation of the categories. To this end, I allocated two chapters to these (See Chapter 3, The Complex Interplay of Choice; Chapter 4, Perceived of Lesser Value but No Regrets). Finally, to share my own personal biography (Chapter 1, Introduction, Context and Literature Review).

**Personal and professional change**

This research experience has changed me on two levels. On a professional level, it has changed my relationship to knowledge. I have become much more aware of taking a critical approach to all forms of knowledge. This includes both lived experiences and academic forms of knowledge. As a result, it has greatly enhanced my own learning and teaching. I am now more confident in my own ability to conduct research and pleased to contribute to research in this field.

On a personal level, I have become a more assertive feminist. I now see my own choice not to have children as both valid and valued. Talking with and listening to participants, interpreting the data and working with my supervisors has been the catalyst for this change. The process has also reinforced my belief that when women make choices in conditions of their choosing, they are positive and life affirming. As Hoge (2015) argued, choosing not to have children is ‘a choice for something rather than a choice against something’ (p.2).

My first category, ‘Experiences and influences of parenting’ revealed significant negative feelings towards motherhood. Within the study, such experiences were seen as one of the key influences on reproductive choices. These were best expressed in quotes such as,

‘I certainly did not want to live my mother’s life’ (P16, p.13).

*My mother hates children. She brought me up not to like children, so therefore I would not want to have children. I don’t have a great*
relationship with my Mum; she did not have a great relationship with her Mum, so it did not seem to me a good point to bring something into the world that would hate you (P6, p.2).

I am aware that this aspect of the finding could be understood as ‘mother blaming’. By this, I mean that negative experiences of mothers were a crucial factor in reproductive choices. At one level, it is possible to understand the sharing and expression of such experiences and how they could affect choices. Participants grew up in traditional nuclear families during the 1940s and 1950s when a woman’s primary role was seen as wife and mother. Their principal relationship within the family was with their mothers. They were telling it like it was for them and how the oppressive nature of these experiences led to a lack of confidence and feelings of powerlessness. At another level, an alternative discourse revealed an understanding of the gendered context of their mothers’ lives and the nature of their oppression at that time. It was a time of prescribed gendered expectations and when the idea of womanhood and motherhood was deeply embedded. As these participants recalled,

the nation expected you to have children (P21, p.30).

I was aware of the oppressiveness of family life and a consciousness of the role of women as nothing more than slaves (P6, p.15).

I believe these distinct but related discourses can be best understood in relation to the complex nature of choice. A range of complex factors, only one of which was parenting experiences influenced participants. Therefore, while parenting experiences can be seen as having a restraining influence on choice, they can also be experienced as liberatory. They enabled participants to question, resist, and ultimately understand the deeper societal factors that acted on and beyond their parental relations. This participant expressed clearly the relationship between the experience of an oppressive expectation and the liberatory emotion it provoked,

my mother constantly from the age of 16, I can’t wait to be a nana… you have children and I will look after them and mind them… and that used to make me angry because I used to think you should want more for your children (P20, pp. 21-22).
In hindsight, these diverse discourses within the data would benefit from further exploration. Further research is needed on the significance of mothering experiences and particularly their relationship to choice.

In relation to regret, the majority of participants had no regrets. This view was expressed forcefully as these quotes reveal,

Absolutely no regrets and I don’t feel I have missed out on anything (P14, p.53)

I have no regrets about not having children, definitely no regrets (P17, p.34).

In fact, one participant questioned why, ‘having made this choice...you might regret it’ (P6,p1). For them, they had no reason to experience loss or regret. It was a choice for something else in their lives rather than a choice against motherhood. For many, children were never part of their life plans while others prioritised goals and activities they wanted to pursue.

I am aware that this finding may be open to challenge. Some people may question whether or not having ‘no regrets’ is possible in this context. Indeed, feelings of regret may be inevitable in a choice of this magnitude. Moreover, such feelings may emerge, grow stronger, change, or recede over time. However, this challenge could be somewhat addressed by what I called ‘half-regrets’. A small number of participants (4) acknowledged the inevitably of regret from making a major life choice,

I think I hold contradictory views like most people do, which is I do have regrets; there is a lack of something I could have done [having children] that would have been creative and would have been satisfying (P15, p.64).

I knew I would regret not having children, because to imagine you can go through life and never have that feeling is unrealistic. I thought lots of time, will I regret it, but wouldn’t it be worse if you regretted having them (P4, p.31).

One participant also shared a deep sense of loss and personal failure at her choice. She was also regularly reminded by negative societal perceptions of women without children that her life choice must or would lead to regret.
At the same time, it is important to stress that making the choice not to have children was a complex process involving considerable introspection and the working through of competing influences. For some, the best way to deal with this tension was to take responsibility for their choices. As this participant stated,

> you know life is full of half regrets and ponderings over what it would have been like... it’s about taking responsibility for your choices. I mean god help me if I was dogged by regrets of not having children, what a waste of emotion (P4, p.31-43).

The important issue here is that an experience of regret cannot be abstracted from a society where motherhood has been the measure by which we define women and that there are consequences for those who defy these expectations. Further research in this area would be helpful to explore this experience in more depth. Particularly in relation to ambivalence towards motherhood and the consequences of choice.

**Support**

Supervision was a positive and supportive experience. Both my supervisors work in the Department of Applied Psychology and within the discipline of psychology. I feel I benefitted personally from their expertise and guidance. On reflection, I may have benefitted from having access to at least one external supervisor who was a sociologist or researcher from another university (Phillips & Pugh, 1987). I am also grateful for the informal support from some of my colleagues within my department and school. I believe that having a team member trained and skilled in the use of grounded theory methodology could be a valuable resource particularly as it is used widely in health and social care research (Dunne, 2012; Charmaz, 2014).

I found the PhD journey personally enriching and challenging. It offered me an opportunity to explore an area of my own and other women’s lives that is often silenced. I learnt a lot about myself, about other women’s lives, about conducting research and about writing. Finally, despite the hard work, the sleep deprivation and the endless worry, I enjoyed every moment of the journey.
Context and contribution

Context

Before discussing the contribution, I think it is important to remind ourselves again of the context to this study.

There has always been ‘childless’ women. Historically, most of these women were perceived as incomplete. To be complete, a woman had to be both wife and mother. While ‘childless’ women were subject to pity, women who were open about their choices were often seen as a threat to the dominant societal norms. They were the ‘other’ and in direct contrast to ‘mother’. This negative positioning is revealed through a discourse of deficit and is particularly evident in the media and organised religion, which gives prominence to mothers and motherhood. It is also commonly assumed that women who make such choices will lead lives of loss and regret.

The idea that womanhood equates with motherhood has persisted over time. Although it was not until the emergence of the feminist movement from the middle of the 20th century that there was any serious challenge to such ideological thinking. Feminists challenged gender inequalities that led to positive changes in some women’s lives and particularly in relation to employment opportunities. However, despite significant advances, women in the early 21st century are still expected to conform to the particular gendered norms of the societies into which they are born. One of the most enduring norms upheld is the powerful gendered expectation that womanhood and motherhood are synonymous.

One of the difficulties of opening up this topic to scrutiny relates to the language surrounding childlessness. Women are classified in terms such as ‘childless’ and ‘childfree’. The former denotes loss while the latter implies freedom from the burden of children in a pronatalist society. There is little space for a real debate outside of these categories. In addition, the vast majority of studies on childlessness in the UK were conducted within medical or psychological paradigms. Childlessness has tended to be seen as either a biological malfunction or a psychological dysfunction (Chapter 1, Introduction, Context and
Literature Review. A further difficulty is the lack of reliable information on the number of women who are actively choosing not to have children.

Women who choose not to have children is still largely a neglected area within both mainstream, sociological and feminist studies. Feminist researchers have tended to focus their attention on mother-centred issues such as infertility, employment, and childcare. There is however an increasing interest in this topic in recent times. Researchers have sought to identify single or multiple reasons why women choose not to have children. The main bulk of this work has focussed on the personal and the psychological. Recent biographical literature has also been mainly concerned with individual narratives. A noticeable gap has been the lack of sociological attention. This study aims to build on previous sociological contributions and act as a spur for future research in this field.

Contribution

The findings from this study make three important contributions to a deeper understanding of this topic. The first contribution relates to why and how participants choose not to have children.

The finding reveals that their choices are best understood as part of a complex interplay between restraining and liberating experiences in their lives. Social class is also identified as having a significant influence on life experiences and consequently on their choices. The finding suggests that the choice not to have children was the outcome of a complex interplay between participants’ personal lived experiences and the social structures that shaped them. From this interplay, they developed a critical awareness to exercise alternative choices. This awareness grew from the complex interplay between restraining and liberating experiences in their lives. Some developed this awareness early in their lives. For others and particularly working class participants, this awareness took some time. The important insight to note here is that once they achieved this awareness, they all exercised their choices not to have children.

This finding contributes to a deeper and more sociological understanding of the theories of choice. From this perspective, choice making is seen as both a personal and a social act. It
challenges liberal and postmodern feminist perspectives on choice, which suggests niceness with insistence will suffice to empower women to make choices. It supports critical feminist views that a woman’s capacity and freedom for reproductive choice cannot be isolated from the structures in the social worlds she inhabits. Restraining experiences on choices within families, communities, and societal institutions cannot be ignored. Furthermore, the importance of liberatory experiences on her journey to choice also support progressive educational, feminist, and other theories. However, this finding does not see structural factors as most significant. Instead, it reveals that it is the dialectical relations between our objective and subjective realities that is the crucial factor. Participants’ choices were not solely determined by restraining or liberatory factors in isolation from each other but arose more from the complex interplay between both over time and within specific locations. Thus, it seeks to offer an original contribution and which informs the sociological debate in relation to structure and agency.

Participant’s social class emerged as a significant influence on their awareness of and capacity to exercise choice. This finding confirms sociological and feminist theories that class can be both restraining and liberating. In particular, it supports Bourdieuan concepts of ‘habitus’ and ‘cultural capital’. The acquisition of cultural capital as embodied in the habitus increased awareness of alternatives. In contrast, the absence of cultural capital particularly among working class participants led to decreased awareness of choice. Families, parenting, education, relationships, and communities were all experienced and mediated though social class positions. Hence, this aspect of the finding resonates more with radical feminist and other perspectives who argue that freedom of choice cannot be abstracted from class, inequalities, and power. For the poorest and most excluded women, there is often only the illusion of freedom of choice.

My second contribution relates to the finding that most participants who choose not to have children feel they are perceived as of lesser value. I devised the concept of motherarchy to understand more about how mothers are elevated and given a higher status relative to non-mothers. I believe this concept offers a fresh contribution by offering a deeper understanding of what might underpin exclusive social practices that bestows on motherhood a higher status relative to non-mothers. Motherarchy can be understood as
part of an ideological discourse where womanhood and motherhood are synonymous. It promotes and sustains practices that give precedence to mothers over non-mothers. Such practices are often subtle and covert, difficult to resist and become accepted as the norm. They mirror patriarchy, sustain the silence, and limit opportunities for resistance. Little consideration or sensitivity is given to the impact of such practices on those whose identities fall outside these norms.

While supporting and confirming previous research that identifies the negative stereotyping of childless women, *motherarchy* extends these analyses by exposing pronatalist ideas that are reinforced by a mothering rhetoric. It exposes policies and practices particularly within the workplace that extoll and celebrate the virtues of motherhood while simultaneously lessening non-motherhood. It also raises important questions for further work as to whether it is possible to transcend the culture of silence around non-motherhood and if there can be a solidarity of mothers and non-mothers.

**My third contribution** relates to the finding that most participants do not regret their choice not to have children. Instead, they acknowledge the potential for regret as a feature of any life choice of this magnitude. Motherhood is seen as just one of the many possible life experiences open to women. The finding supports the limited mainly autobiographical literature on loss and regret. It also refutes the unquestioned and widely believed assumption that women who choose not have children will live to regret it. Motherhood is but one choice from a menu of many others. It is a choice for something else rather than a choice against motherhood. Consequently, participants had no reason to experience loss or regret.

This finding also challenges the discourse, which implies that children will ensure care in older age. It presents a challenge to the myth that the family is a haven of happiness in an ever-changing world. The dominant discourse negates the significance and importance of non-biological connections, such as strong personal relationships, rewarding friendships, good neighbours, and community involvement. Instead, the findings reveal a more realistic picture of the changing nature of family and communities. Crucially, it supports calls for more inclusive policy making to address the care needs of all older people. These insights
resonate with studies and Third Sector concerns about later life care to meet the diverse needs of older people.

The adoption of a positive ethical stance in this study could be considered an additional contribution. A positive ethical stance involves being able to challenges existing practices. I was clear from the outset what values I held and which were non-negotiable. For example, as a woman researcher my own biography was central to the whole process. I acknowledged that I was not a detached neutral observer in the research process but a social being interpreting the world in my own distinct ways. In making this clear from the outset, feminist researchers add to scholarship that challenge traditional approaches to research. A positive ethical stance also means that research participants have a central place in the study. For example, giving sufficient priority to their stories in the presentation and dissemination of data.

Adopting a positive ethical stance is also important when required to fit into often-rigid institutional guidelines. For example, the challenge of gaining ethical approval for this study (See earlier, Reflections). This required a belief in my study and the integrity and passion to defend that challenge. In such instances, supervisory support is important.

Taken together, the three findings from this study contribute to a deeper and more complex sociological understanding of why women choose not to have children. They reveal that any exploration of choice cannot abstract a woman from the context of her life and the interplay of her personal and social experiences. Women who made the choice not to have children continue to be perceived as of ‘lesser value’. This ‘lessening’ uncovers the dominant societal gendered expectations that womanhood and motherhood are synonymous. It also exposes motherarchal ideas and the practices that sustain it. The most important contribution and optimistic message from this study is that the dominant expectations in women’s lives can be overcome. Crucially the message from the participants is that women can question and resist restraining experiences in their lives and be open to liberatory possibilities that can facilitate alternative choices and fulfilment.
Limitations

It is important to state that I am not claiming that the findings can be directly generalizable to all women who choose not to have children. Women’s personal biographies are inherently unique to them. In addition, while women may share both restraining and liberatory influences across nations and cultures, these can take different forms depending on the context. For instance, women in Ireland may experience the restraints of Catholicism very differently from women who live in England or Wales. Other researchers using different methodologies in such contexts may also come to different interpretations and conclusions. What I can say is that the findings from this study seek to offer a deeper and more critical understanding of what is a neglected and hidden area of study.

I would argue that while the study has made an important contribution (See earlier), it also presented a number of personal, and methodological challenges (See earlier). In the light of my study, I will now consider some of the possible limitations of conducting research of this nature while using a constructivist grounded theory methodology. In doing so, I will relate the discussion to some of the limitations of grounded theory approaches identified earlier in the thesis (Chapter 2, Methodology, Design and Fieldwork).

An important limitation noted by (Layder, 1994, 2006) was that grounded theory studies can be ‘inward looking’ and tied to subjectivist and interactionist accounts. As a result, structural and ideological factors tend to be played down. From the outset, I wanted to approach the research as openly as possible. While my question was broad and had a number of aspects, it nevertheless gave me the necessary focus to pursue the enquiry. At times throughout the study, and now at the end, a part of me wonders whether the scope of my thesis was too broad. Was I trying to cover too much ground in one project? Some aspects of my topic may have been worthy of more in-depth study in their own right. The implications of taking a wide berth also generated a vast amount of data, which required considerable time to analyse and write up. Other researchers have already identified this feature of grounded theory as a limitation (See Chapter 2, Methodology, Design and Fieldwork).
At the same time, I found that the methodology enabled me to explore my topic in its totality and to give attention to both lived experiences and wider social processes. I could explore knowledge from both the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ (Charmaz, 1995, pp. 30-31). I wanted to value the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of participants. Moreover, I was also as the researcher interpreting what I was hearing and relating this to wider social processes within the data. I found that both the method and the philosophy offered me the opportunity to go beyond personal stories and to explore deeper factors. It led me to explore the complexities of relationships between categories and in particular the links with structure and agency theories that were crucial to a deeper understanding of choice.

Nevertheless, a grounded theory study that adopts this approach generates its own levels of complexities and large quantities of data. Therefore, I do agree that it demands a lot of the researcher in terms of both experience and expertise. In addition, it can involve significant time and personal commitment. It is something that novice researchers need to be aware of when adopting this methodology for exploring more sensitive and complex topics of this nature. Clearly, it also raises issues about the resources required for those who seek to challenge the traditional boundaries of knowledge.

Another limitation identified was that the language and methods of grounded theory could be too deductive and prescriptive (Chapter 2, Methodology, Design and Fieldwork). Overall, I did not find this the case with this study. On the contrary, I found the initial stages of line-by-line coding, developing codes and raising categories a very inductive and interactive process (Charmaz, 2012). It was helpful to have a framework and clear method of analysis when coping with so much data. However, one issue worth considering here relates to the analysis of the categories. Grounded theory requires the researcher to raise the level of analysis. As Mills, Bonner and Francis, (2006) stated,

> grounded theory does not aim to provide full individual accounts as evidence; rather, it seeks to move a theoretically sensitive analysis of participants’ stories onto a higher plane while still retaining a clear connection to the data from which it was derived (p.12).

I felt a certain tension here. On the one hand, I wanted to remain true to the stories of participants. On the other hand, and in accordance with constructivist grounded theory, I
wanted to develop a conceptual analysis leading to theoretical insights. As my analysis deepened, I was mindful of the risk of moving further away and being detached from participants’ stories. This raises the question as to how to create a ‘clear connection’ between participants’ stories and the researchers deepening levels of analysis as the study progresses. On reflection, it might be helpful to add a further stage to the process, which would enable participants to validate and comment further on my interpretation of the data. As the research progresses, tentative categories could be represented to participants for further comment and dialogue. Clearly, this would have resource and time implications and it would be necessary to disseminate information in an accessible form to participants. However, I would consider introducing this addition as part of a future study of this nature. For example, maybe deploying focus groups to explore and to dialogue around emerging tentative categories.

A further limitation identified was in relation to the controversy surrounding the timing of the literature review (Chapter 2, Methodology, Design and Fieldwork). Some theorists argued that a literature review is not required prior to undertaking fieldwork (Glaser, 1998). Others such as Charmaz (2014) took a different view and justified an early or minor review to provide some context to the study. I found Charmaz’s advice helpful for two reasons. Firstly, it was not possible to know at the start what literature was most relevant. Secondly, conducting an early review gave me a sense of the substantive research on the topic and of recent and current debates. Shaw and Letherby’s work, which called for a deeper understanding of choice, also helped my thinking at that stage (Chapter 1, Introduction, Context and Literature Review). It also enabled the theoretical framework to take shape from the data and the analysis. When choice emerged as a key concept for further exploration, I felt guided by the data rather than by the substantive research or my pre-existing theories. I could then return to the relevant literature with a clear focus and to stimulate my own thinking around this important concept.

In hindsight, the discussion may have benefitted from a more in-depth sociological discussion of motherarchy. Similarly, in relation to the finding on ‘regret’. While I would argue that there was some literature to draw on, the finding on ‘regret’ raised important questions and conceptual issues that need further exploration. In particular, the concepts
of choice, motherarchy, and regret are central to a more critical understanding of why women choose not to have children. Taken together, my learning here is that the grounded theory approach raises difficult issues for the researcher. To be guided by data rather than literature raises methodological issues about what is relevant, where to situate discussions and conforming to academic requirements.

Finally, another feature of the research design that may have had some impact on the findings relates to the recruitment stage of the main study. Six out of my 22 participants were recruited from the Older Feminist Network in London. These women shared a largely feminist view of the world. Their feminist consciousness was a key liberatory factor in their own personal journeys towards choice. Conversely, other participants did not identify as feminists or share a feminist analysis of the world. Consequently, while acknowledging the importance of this shared perspective, I was mindful it did not exert undue influence on the analysis and interpretation (see Reviewing the sample).

Overall, I found that adopting a constructivist grounded theory methodology enabled me to collect rich data from participants who were central to my approach. By using the tools of grounded theory, I was able to explore the personal and social lives of participants and most importantly consider the complex relations between both. The approach to literature was both empowering and challenging, as I had to critically engage with the key concept of choice. At the same time, a constructivist grounded theory study presents many challenges for the novice researcher. It can generate a huge amount of data and the analytical requirements of the process can create distance between the researcher and the data. As the analysis deepens, the researcher can struggle to keep faith with the participants’ stories and lived experiences. The important thing for me at this stage is to learn from my experience of doing research. I learned I could test out new ways to improve the methodology to both achieve the research objectives and most importantly to embrace it as a key approach to social change.

**Evaluation of study**

Whilst acknowledging that there is no ‘one size fits all’ evaluation for grounded theory studies, Charmaz (2014) recommended that we need, ‘to look back into our journey and
forward to imagining how our endpoints appears to our readers or viewers (p.336). With that in mind, she proposed four criteria for evaluation: (i) Credibility, (ii) Originality, (iii) Resonance and (iv) Usefulness (p.337-338). I will deal with each of these in relation to my study.

Firstly, Charmaz proposed that credibility is concerned with whether the results of your study are plausible in terms of the familiarity and presentation of data, the process of analysis and the evidence for claims made. I believe that throughout the research process has been rigorous and transparent. From the outset, I made it clear to everyone involved that the area of research was of both personal and academic interest to me. In the introductory chapter, I located myself in the study and placed my research within a wider context (Chapter 1, Introduction, Context and Literature Review). My choice of methodology, Charmazian constructivist grounded theory also sought to help with this transparency. I clearly outlined my own ontological and epistemological position and how I viewed my relationship with the study (Chapter 2, Methodology, Design and Fieldwork).

The grounded theory process followed both in the analysis of data and in the presentation of findings is clearly outlined. The development of codes and categories has been explained and evidenced using quotes from participants. A sample of my coding was shared and checked by my supervisor and a colleague. Both are very experienced in the use of grounded theory methodology. Relationships between categories were presented and discussed. Visual representations were employed to illustrate these connections. My findings revealed an in-depth familiarity with the data (Chapter 3, The Complex Interplay of Choice, Chapter 4, Perceived as of Lesser value, but No Regrets).

Secondly, Charmaz suggested that the focus on ‘originality’ referred to whether categories are fresh and offered new insights into the topic area. She asked whether the grounded theory challenged, extended, or refined existing ideas, concepts, and practices. As outlined in the contribution earlier, this research is original in that the categories presented offer new insights. For instance, the category No Regrets helps to dispel the myth that women who make the choice will live to regret it. The categories also challenge some of the conventional ideas and discourses on the lives of women who chose not to have children.
(Chapter 4, Perceived as of Lesser value, but No Regrets). Many of the categories presented are innovative and suggest fresh perspectives to inform the findings. As importantly, they offer new insights into the relationship between personal agency and structural influences on choice making (Chapter 6, Discussion of Findings).

Thirdly, Charmaz noted that the key feature of ‘resonance’ is whether the researcher has drawn links between larger collectives or institutions and individual’s lives. She asked whether analysis offered participants and others a deeper understanding of their lives and their worlds. The analysis of the data highlighted collective experiences of structures and institutions that contextualised participants’ choice making. Through involvement, participants could reflect, revisit, and gain fresh insights into the structural influences on their choices. They shared familial, education and other experiences and the impact these had on their lives (Chapter 3, The Complex Interplay of Choice).

Finally, Charmaz advocated that ‘usefulness’ is concerned with whether or not the theoretical finding is useful for people to use in their everyday lives. Furthermore, how it contributes to knowledge and to making the world a better place. I believe the theoretical findings are useful for a number of reasons. They offer a fresh way of thinking, talking and hearing about choices not to have children. They challenge powerful discourses, which helps to break the silence surrounding this choice (See earlier). They invite the reader to accept that some women actively make alternative life choices to motherhood. Thus, they offer a platform to further develop these findings and to hear more from women themselves. Hence, they offer opportunities to break open silences on important life choices. In particular, that our choices are made within the context of our lives and are a product of the interplay between restraining and liberatory forces within an unequal world.

**Suggestions for future research**

Previous and current research in this field across a range of disciplines has aided our understanding of the complex factors influencing women’s and men’s reproductive choices. Academics, feminists, and politicians are challenging the negative portrayal of women who in increasing numbers are making choices not to have children. In recent times, there has also been some positive media attention on this topic (Chapter 1, Introduction, Context and
Literature Review). Furthermore, we have also seen a growth in online communities of ‘childfree’ women who seek to counter negative stereotypes and offer support (Day, 2012; Childfree Women UK and Ireland, 2016). Taken together, new research and the formation of new networks within and between countries reveal a more liberatory ethos and an opening up of the debate that must be welcomed.

Despite this progress, and based on the findings from this study, I would argue that considerably more work needs to be done. This is an area crying out for more research to both increase understanding of the topic that can inform a movement of women to support alternative choices and address their marginalisation.

Firstly, we need a deeper and more critical understanding of choice. More research is needed to understand the complex nature of the choice making process for women who choose not to have children. The evidence from this study offers some initial insights into this complexity. Specifically, the interplay and tensions between the internal (personal) and external (social) worlds and how these can both restrain and liberate our choices. How do restraining and liberatory factors compel women to accept, adapt, or resist societal influences and pressures? Women may also have different experiences across cultures. More research would help to gain greater insights into for instance institutionalised influences such as religion on women’s choices. In addition, to study and compare influences within and across nations and cultures. We need to understand more about the potential of liberatory experiences and how alternatives can be possible for women within oppressive social structures. Such research would also need to examine more closely the links between substantive and more formal theory and particularly the long standing contested relationship between the structure and agency dilemma (Archer, 2003).

Secondly, an important question that arises from the findings is whether it is possible to get beyond the silence around non-motherhood on this issue. Can there be solidarity between mothers and non-mothers? These questions present significant challenges for the feminist movement. On the one hand, liberal and choice feminists aspire to foster more ‘agency’ for individual women and call for more dialogue between mothers and non-mothers. The challenge here is to enable these voices, move towards the deconstruction of negative
perceptions, and create more awareness, respect and support for a diverse range of women’s choices. For instance, what are the implications for women who choose not to have children in establishing a new habitus? Can they create new identifies and mutual forms of social support?

At one level, it is possible to see the value of further research and work that can facilitate more liberal feminist aspirations. Certainly, women need to be enabled and supported to share their individual stories. There is also a need to support the creation of more dialogue between women and address marginalisation particularly in the workplace. However, an important insight from this study and from the work of critical feminists is that the potential for choice is limited in conditions of oppression. Therefore, any further work needs to also understand and work to address the societal cultures and institutions that sustain ideological ideas of motherarchy and the negative perceptions that flow from it. An important question that could be asked as part of this is what might underpin social practices that bestow on motherhood a dominant status within societal institutions.

Thirdly, a more critical understanding of choice and motherarchy cannot be divorced from ontological, epistemological, and methodological issues. The voices, stories, and experiences of women who choose not to have children are central to understanding their choices and addressing their own status of ‘lesser value’. Their often-courageous choices and example in a context of dominant societal expectations offers hope and challenge to all women. It is an alternative choice for something meaningful within lives that offer multiple possibilities. The learning from this study is that a constructivist grounded theory methodology that starts with women’s stories can contribute to a more critical understanding of the context and consequences of their alternative choices. To gain a more in-depth understanding of both restraining and liberating experiences on women’s choices, it may be helpful to consider the use of more autobiographical approaches to research. This would allow women to narrate their individual life stories within the changing contexts of their social worlds. This could enable greater insights into the complex nature of women’s choices.
Final thoughts

I set out on this journey unsure and at times fearful of pursuing this area of women’s lives. I was acutely aware of the negativity and silence surrounding this choice. Having given almost five years of my life to studying this issue, I am happy to say, it has been a worthwhile endeavour. The participants themselves were inspirational. Their stories gave me the confidence to believe in my research. Consequently, I am proud to have been able to contribute to the lives of women who chose not to have children. In particular, how the complex relationship between our personal biographies and powerful societal influences can shape both our lives and our choices. In closing the hermeneutic circle (Heidegger, 1972; Lorde, 2007), I also found this experience helped me to understand and validate the complex nature of my own choice.

There is hope. Cracks and splinters are appearing in the wall of silence. More and more women are exploring alternatives. Some are openly acknowledging their choices and are prepared to challenge their marginalisation. However, there is still much work to do. Of particular concern is the need to ensure that poor and excluded women across the world can develop an awareness of choice and their liberatory possibilities. Optimistically, the central message from this study is that dominant expectations and oppressive restraining experiences can be overcome. We need more research and work to increase our understanding of choice, to challenge negative perceptions and ensure our alternative choices not to have children are equally respected, supported and validated.
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Appendices
Appendix 1: OECD Database on Childlessness
Appendix 1A

Trends in childlessness among women by cohort

Panel A: The proportion of childless women at age 30

Panel B: The proportion of childless women at age 40

Countries are ranked in descending order of childlessness for the women born respectively in 1970 (Panel A) and 1965 (Panel B)

Sources: Gobbi (2011); except for Portugal and the United Kingdom which has been obtained through EU New Cronos (2014); New Zealand: National Census of Population; and, Japan: National Census; percentage for non-married women.
Appendix 1B

Definitive global childlessness

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Appendix 1C

Definitive childlessness and completed fertility rates of women born in 1965

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1964 for childlessness
## Appendix 1D

### Percentage of women in households without children, 2011

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1 Date refer to 2005 for Australia; 2009 for Mexico
2 Footnote by Turkey: The information in this document with reference to “Cyprus” relates to the southern part of the Island. There is no single authority representing both Turkish and Greek Cypriot people on the Island. Turkey recognizes the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Until a lasting and equitable solution is found within the context of United Nations, Turkey shall preserve its position concerning the “Cyprus issue”.
3 Footnote by all the European Union Member States of the OECD and the European Commission: The Republic of Cyprus is recognized by all members of the United Nations with the exception of Turkey. The information in this document relates to the area under the effective control of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus.

Appendix 2: Paperwork - Preliminary Study
Appendix 2A

Ethical approval

Friday, 04 May 2012

O’Driscoll, Pucke

MPhil/PhD
Cardiff School of Health Sciences
Llandaff Campus
Cardiff CF5 2YB

Dear Applicant

Re: Application for Ethical Approval: A study into how and why women who chose not to have children are represented and constituted in society.

Ethics Committee Application Reference Number: 4462

Your ethics application, as shown above, was considered at the meeting of the School Research Ethics Committee on 20/04/2012.

I am pleased to inform you that your application for ethical approval was APPROVED subject to the conditions listed below – please read carefully.

Conditions of Approval

Your Ethics Application has been given a reference number as above. This MUST be quoted on all documentation relating to the project (e.g. consent forms), together with the full project title.

Any changes in connection to the proposal as approved, must be referred to the Panel/Committee for consideration.

A full Risk Assessment must be undertaken for this proposal, and be made available to the Committee if requested.

Any untoward incident which occurs in connection with this proposal must be reported back to the Panel without delay.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Dr Louise Fielding
Director of Research
Chair of School Research Ethics Committee
Cardiff School of Health Sciences

Tel: 029 20414656
E-mail: l.fielding@uwic.ac.uk

Cc: Mercer, Jenny

PLEASE RETAIN THIS LETTER FOR REFERENCE
Appendix 2B

Feedback from Ethics Committee

From: Mercer, Jenny
Sent: 22 March 2012 11:25
To: O'Driscoll, Rose
Subject: FW: Ethics Application Feedback Rose O'Driscoll

Importance: High

From: Lewis, Jane E (Staff HSS)
Sent: 22 March 2012 11:15
To: Mercer, Jenny
Cc: Fielding, Louise
Subject: Ethics Application Feedback Rose O'Driscoll

Dear Jenny,

Rose’s ethics application was considered by E-meeting yesterday and was Approved in Principle. The Committee required the following amendments and made the following comments:

3. It was felt that as the project is about a potentially sensitive theme (at least for some) the possibility of psychological stress or anxiety needs to be acknowledged. It is requested that in Section A - Project Details, you answer “yes” to the question on anxiety. In addition, Section B1 also needs to address the issue of induced anxiety and stress, for example, the woman who has chosen not to have children because her family has a history of congenital disease, or another who has had an abortion, or another who was raped as a teenager – these are all potentially sensitive topics. It is acknowledged that the concerns are addressed implicitly in the information sheet, but need making clear in the application.

4. The Committee had concerns regarding the level of disclosure of personal information in the participant information sheet. It was felt that this could introduce bias into the interview by stating personal experience. It was suggested that such information be introduced as third person scenarios at the interview in order to elicit responses if needed?

In general, the Committee felt it was a very interesting study. I would be grateful if you could discuss the above with Rose and resubmit the application to me with these revisions. These can then be considered on chairs action so as not to delay the research.

If you have any queries please do get in touch.
Regards
Appendix 2C
Participant information sheet 2013/14

Participant No:

Invitation to participate
I would like to invite you to participate in my research project, which I am conducting as part of my PhD degree at Cardiff Metropolitan University.

Title of Project: Women who choose not to have children

The Aim of the Project
The aim of the study is to explore with women who choose not to have children, why and how they reached that decision, their personal experiences arising from this decision and the impact on their lives.

Background to the Project
I became interested in this area of study about five years ago as I was regularly asked the question: “Do you have children? Sometimes the question asked was “How many children do you have?” The response to: “I have no children” was usually followed up with a question to try to find out why I had no children. My response: “I have never wanted children” was met with either a sympathetic look or one of disapproval. Because of these exchanges, I became interested in why women who choose not to have children are seen as ‘different’ and how these women are constituted in society. For the purposes of this study, I am hoping to interview a number of women who have made the choice not to have children.

Why you have been asked
You have been selected as someone who has also made a choice not to have children.

What happens if you want to change your mind?
You can change your mind any time up to and including the interview stage. I will fully respect your decision. Moreover, there will be no penalties for non-participation.

**What would happen if you join the study?**
If you agree to participate, then I would conduct a semi-structured interview with you. This interview would be conducted at a time and place that is convenient for you. I will ask you a series of questions based around your decision to make that choice and your experiences having made that decision. I plan to record and transcribe each interview.

**Are there any risks?**
The research will involve asking you questions of a personal nature about your decision/choice not to have children. This will involve some personal reflection on your life and your history. I do not anticipate that this will generate any undue distress to you and I do not foresee any risks to your participation at this time. However, should you as a participant experience distress I would encourage you to visit the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) website where you will find a list of qualified counsellors who would be able to help ([www.bacp.org.uk](http://www.bacp.org.uk)). At all times during the interview, I will endeavour to work with integrity and honesty and follow the principles and guidance expected of researchers at Cardiff Metropolitan University.

**Your rights.**
You have the right to withdraw at any time up to and during the interview. This also includes your right to elect not to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

**What happens to the semi-structured interview results?**
The data will be transcribed, password protected and secured on my personal computer. A copy, also password protected, will be kept on a memory stick. This data will only be used for the purposes of the study and for any related academic work. You as a participant will not be identified in any publication. However, anonymised quotes from your interview will
be included in the thesis and any academic articles. I am hoping to progress this study to PhD level.

**Are there any benefits from taking part?**

No direct and tangible benefit will arise from your participation. I hope that this research may lead to the creation of new knowledge and ways of thinking about, representing, and constituting women who make this choice. Your interview will make a material and valued contribution to the research project, for which I am grateful. I would be happy to send you a summary copy of the final report.

**How we protect your privacy:**

The information I get from you is strictly confidential and all data will be anonymised. As a researcher, I agree to abide by the Code of Ethics set out by the School of Health Sciences, at Cardiff Metropolitan University. I will keep your name and contact details completely separate from all other forms and there will be no information on either the recorded or the transcribed data that could identify you.

As per University requirements, a copy of the form with your name and contact details plus the attached consent form will be retained for ten years. Once I have finished my study, the data and all the relevant paperwork will be destroyed.

Thank you.

**PLEASE NOTE: YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS SHEET TO KEEP, TOGETHER WITH A COPY OF YOUR CONSENT FORM**

Contact Details: Rose O’Driscoll
Tel No: 029 20 201572
Email: rodriscoll@cardiffmet.ac.uk
Appendix 2D

Semi-structured schedule and questions: Preliminary study

Introduction
Introduce researcher
Talk through Participation information sheet and Consent form
Clarify any queries on these forms.

The Interview
Clarify the aims of the study
Talk through the procedure
Check that participants can commit the time - 1.5 hours.

Recording
Taped interview
Request whether or not the participant objects to be recorded. (This is for my benefit so as not to miss anything)
Invite the participant to complete the consent form
Reaffirm anonymity and confidentiality again.
Reassure participant that the only material used will be anonymised quotes for the purposes of the study.
SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

INTRODUCTION

1. Can you tell me about yourself; your life now, who you live with, job, family, friends please?

CHILDREN/MOTHERHOOD

2. Can you remember when the idea of having children/motherhood first came into your mind?

3. Can you remember when you first became aware that you did not want to have children?

4. At what stage in your life did you make the choice/decision not to have children and what helped you/influenced that decision?

CHOICES/IMPACT

Prompt: What are your experiences of not having children? Positive/Negative/Neither

5. When people ask if you have children, do you tell them that you have made a choice not to have any? If so, how is that received? If not, why not?

6. As a woman without children, how do you think you are perceived? What impact, if any, has your decision had on your life; personal and professional/public?

7. How do you think we might overcome these perceptions (+ -)

CLOSING THE INTERVIEW

8. These are all the questions I have. Is there anything you would like to add to your answers?

Thank You.
Rose O’Driscoll
Appendix 2E

Participant consent form (Preliminary study)

Study ID Number:  
Participant No: 

Title of Project: A study into how and why women who choose not to have children are represented and constituted in society

Name of Researcher: Rose O’Driscoll

Participant to complete this section: Please initial each box.

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. 

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

3. I agree to take part in the above study

4. I agree to the interview being audio recorded

5. I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications

_______________________________________    ___________________
Signature of Participant  Date

ROSE O’DRISCOLL

_______________________________________   ___________________
Name of person taking consent   Date

Signature of person taking consent

* When completed, 1 copy for participant & 1 copy for researcher site file
Appendix 3: Paperwork - Main Study
Appendix 3A

Ethical Approval

O’Driscoll, Rose
PhD
Cardiff School of Health Sciences
Llandaff Campus
Cardiff CF2 2YB

Dear Applicant

Re: Application for Ethical Approval: An exploratory study with women who choose not to have children.

Ethics Committee Application Reference Number : 5441

Your ethics application, as shown above, was considered by School Research Ethics Committee on 10/16/2013.

I am pleased to inform you that your application for ethical approval was APPROVED, subject to the conditions listed below – please read carefully.

Conditions of Approval

Your Ethics Application has been given a reference number as above. This MUST be quoted on all documentation relating to the project (E.g. consent forms), together with the full project title.

A full Risk Assessment must be undertaken for this proposal, as appropriate, and be made available to the Committee if requested.

Any changes in connection to the proposal as approved, must be referred to the Panel/Committee for consideration without delay. Changes to the proposed project may have ethical implications so must be approved.

Any untoward incident which occurs in connection with this proposal must be reported back to the Panel without delay.

This approval is valid for 12 months from the date of approval. Please set a reminder on your Outlook calendar or equivalent if you need to continue beyond this approval date. It is your responsibility to reapply / request extension if necessary.

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Dr Louise Fielding
Director of Research
Chair of School Research Ethics Committee
Cardiff School of Health Sciences

Tel: 029 20416456
E-mail: rfielding@cardiff.ac.uk

Cc: Mercer, Jenny

PLEASE RETAIN THIS LETTER FOR REFERENCE
Appendix 3B
Participant Information sheet – 2013/2015

Background

I am currently doing my PhD research with women who choose not to have children. I am exploring how and why they reached that decision and their experiences arising from their choice. During the first stage of the project, I conducted four interviews with women who choose not to have children. From an analysis of these interviews, four key messages emerged. These are:

1. All participants had no desire to have children. This choice was influenced by their own childhood and family experiences.

2. As younger women, they prioritised their personal adult relationships over motherhood.

3. All participants were wrongly perceived by others as disliking children. This perception was based on the fact that they did not have their own children.

4. Most participants acknowledged loss and regret at not having the experience of motherhood. However, this was no greater than any other loss or regret experienced as normal elements of everyday life.

Why you have been asked
You have been asked as you fit the profile of the women I would like to interview and you have personally expressed an interest in the study.

Your Participation in the Research Project
Participating in the project involves agreeing to be interviewed. This can be either a face-to-face interview or a telephone/online interview. I expect individual interviews to take about 1½ hours. I would like to audio record the interview, which will be professionally transcribed. I would be happy to provide you with a copy of the interview transcript. I will not be using your name or indeed collecting any data that might reveal personal information. If I discover that I need more data and that there are a number of similar categories emerging from a number of interviews, I may ask you to participate in either another individual interview or a focus group discussion at a later stage.

What happens if you want to change your mind?
Taking part in an interview is voluntary. You can change your mind at any point. I will completely respect your decision.

**Are there any risks?**

I do not think there are any risks involved. I have asked a group of women similar questions to what I propose to explore with you. The questions will be based around the main findings from stage one (listed above). The overall response from the previous participants was positive and not at all stressful. If you were to experience any stress during the interview process you can withdraw at any time.

**What happens to the recorded interview?**

The interview will be professionally transcribed. A copy of the audio recording will be kept on file. This will be password protected. There will be nothing on either the audio recording or the written transcript that attributes this material to you personally. Anonymised quotes from your interview will be used to support my research findings.

**How do I protect your privacy?**

All the information I get from you is confidential, and my supervisors and I respect that confidentiality. I have taken very careful steps to make sure that you cannot be identified from any of the forms with confidential information that I ask you to complete. I will keep your name and personal details completely separate from the other forms. There is no information on the other forms that could allow anyone to identify who you were. When I have finished the study, hard copies and electronic copies of all the data will be destroyed. However, I will keep the form with your name and email address and I will keep a copy of the attached consent form for ten years, because I am required to do so by the University.

**Are there any benefits from taking part?**

There are no direct benefits to you for taking part. However, this study will reveal an aspect of some women’s lives that has received little attention to date. When the study is complete and I have written up the results I will let you know the main findings from the research. Please feel free to email me if you have any other questions.

I look forward to meeting/talking to you.

Rose O’Driscoll  
PhD Student  
Cardiff Metropolitan University  
Email: rodriscoll@cardiffmet.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr. Jenny Mercer  
Cardiff Metropolitan University  
Email: jmercer@cardiffmet.ac.uk  
Mobile Telephone number provided
Appendix 3C

Semi-structured interview schedule and questions:

Main study

Introduction
Introduce researcher
Talk through Participation information sheet and Consent form
Clarify any queries on these forms (mention the 4 prelim categories)

The Interview
Clarify the aims of the study
Talk through the procedure
Check that participants can commit the time - 1.5 hours.

Recording
Taped interview
Request whether or not the participant objects to be recorded. (This is for my benefit so as not to miss anything)
Invite the participant to complete the consent form
Reaffirm anonymity and confidentiality again.
Reassure participant that the only material used will be anonymised quotes for the purposes of the study.
SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

INTRODUCTION

1. Can you tell me about yourself; your life now, who you live with, job, family, friends please?

CHILDREN/MOTHERHOOD

2. Can you remember when the idea of having children/motherhood first came into your mind?

3. Can you remember when you first became aware that you did not want to have children?

4. At what stage in your life did you make the choice/decision not to have children and what helped you/influenced that decision?

CHOICES/IMPACT-

Prompt: What are your experiences of not having children? Positive/Negative/Neither

5. When people ask if you have children, do you tell them that you have made a choice not to have any? If so, how is that received? If not, why not?

6. As a woman without children, how do you think you are perceived? What impact, if any, has your decision had on your life; personal and professional/public?

7. How do you think we might overcome these perceptions (+ -)

CLOSING THE INTERVIEW

8. These are all the questions I have. Is there anything you would like to add to your answers?

Thank You.
Rose O’Driscoll
Appendix 3D
Participant Consent form

Study ID Number: Participant No: Phase 2.

Title of Project:
The aim of the study is to explore with women who choose not to have children, why and how they reached that decision, their experiences arising from this decision and the impact on their lives.

Name of Researcher: Rose O’Driscoll

Participant to complete this section: Please initial each box.

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

I agree to take part in the above study.

I agree to the interview being audio recorded

I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications

Signature of Participant Date __________________________

ROSE O’DRISCOLL
Name of person taking consent Date __________________________

Signature of person taking consent

Further Interview: If I needed to follow up on any emerging categories, would you be willing to participate in another interview?

Focus group: Would you be willing to participate in a focus group interview?

Copy of Interview transcript: Would you like a copy of your interview transcript?

* When completed, 1 copy for participant & 1 copy for researcher site file
Appendix 4: Fieldwork
Appendix 4A

List of organisations approached for participants

1. Older Feminist Network, London
2. Platform 51, Cardiff
3. Black Association of Women Stepping Out, Cardiff
4. Women’s Network, Cardiff
5. Women’s Workshop, Cardiff, Wales
6. Women’s History Network, UK.
7. Marsh Marketing, UK
9. Minority Ethnic Women’s Network, Wales
10. Gateway Women, UK
Appendix 4B

Sample email request seeking participants (websites)

My name is Rose O’Driscoll. I am a PhD student at Cardiff Metropolitan University, Wales. I am undertaking research with women, aged 45 and over, who have chosen not to have children. I am trying to find out why and how women make that choice and the perceived impact, if any, on their lives. I am seeking participants to interview, from as wide a range of backgrounds as I can. Since your website Gateway women has access to a diverse group of women, I am writing to ask if you would publish this request in the webpage please.

If so, I can send you a more detailed synopsis of my proposed research (about 250 words). This piece will also outline what participation involves and my contact details. I do hope you will be able to help. I look forward to hearing from you.

With kind regards
Appendix 4C

Sample email - requesting participants (organisations)

My name is Rose O’Driscoll. I am a PhD student at Cardiff Metropolitan University, Wales. I am undertaking research with women, aged 45 and over, who have chosen not to have children. I am trying to find out why and how women make that choice and the perceived impact, if any, on their lives. I am seeking participants to interview, from as wide a range of backgrounds as I can. Since your organization works directly with a diverse group of women, I am writing to ask if you would publish this request in your newsletter please.

If so, I can send you a more detailed synopsis of my proposed research (about 250 words) for inclusion in your newsletter. This piece will also outline what participation involves and my contact details. I do hope you will be able to help. I look forward to hearing from you.

With kind regards

Rose O’Driscoll
Appendix 4D

Poster

Standing outside motherhood

Women who choose not to have children

My name is Rose O’Driscoll. I am a PhD student at Cardiff Metropolitan University, Wales. As part of my study, I would like to interview women, aged 45 and over, who have chosen not to have children and the impact, if any, on their lives. I am carrying out this research, as there is a lack of information on these women’s lives. As someone who has made that choice, you would be contributing to our understanding of these women’s lives.

Taking part in my research would involve either a face-to-face interview or an online/telephone interview. The interview would be at a venue or a time, which is most convenient for you. It should last no longer than 1½ hours. The interview would be audio recorded.

If you decide to take part, you would not be identified personally on the recordings or in any subsequent written work. Quotes from the interviews, which support my findings, when used, will be cited anonymously. All data will be treated confidentially and destroyed once the research is completed.

If you are interested in participating or would like to chat before you make your decision, please email me. Alternatively, text me a telephone number where you can be contacted and I will ring you back. In addition, if you know someone else who might be interested, could you please pass on this information? I would be happy to answer any queries you may have. I look forward to hearing from you.

My email address is rodriscoll@cardiffmet.ac.uk — Mobile number provided
**Appendix 4E**

**Sample email declining participation**

To: 

Sent Items  
21 February 2014 21:16

Thanks for getting back to me. Wish you both & GW all the best for the future.  
Kind regards  
Rose O’Driscoll

Sent from my iPad

On 21 Feb 2014, at 19:10, "chloe.cunningham@gmail.com" wrote:  

Dear Rose,

 has her hands really full at the moment and cannot do this. She is back at college and also running Gateway Women sessions, as well as administrating for GW. I really do apologise that neither of us got back to you.

Kindest Regards

Chloe Cunningham  
Mobile: 07976 786489

O'Driscoll, Rose

In response to the message from 12/11/2013

To:  

21 February 2014 16:08

Hi  
I wondered if you ever managed to discuss or think about my request. Please see below.  
With kind regards  
Rose O’Driscoll
O’Driscoll, Rose
Many thanks, appreciate that.
Kind regards Rose O’Driscoll

13/11/2013
You replied on 21/02/2014 16:08.
Dear Rose,

I will of course ask and either she or I will get back to you.
Regards

Sent from my iPhone

On 12 Nov 2013, at 17:39, "O'Driscoll, Rose" <rodriscoll@cardiffmet.ac.uk> wrote:

Hi ,
My name is Rose O’Driscoll. I am a PhD student at Cardiff Metropolitan University, Wales. I am undertaking research with women, aged 45 and over, who have chosen not to have children. I am trying to find out why and how women make that choice and the perceived impact, if any, on their lives. I am seeking participants to interview, from as wide a range of backgrounds as I can. Since Gateway women has access to a diverse group of women, I am writing to ask if you would publish this request in the webpage please. If so, I can send you a more detailed synopsis of my proposed research (about 250 words). This piece will also outline what participation involves and my contact details. I do hope you will be able to help. I look forward to hearing from you.

With kind regards
Rose O’Driscoll
Cardiff School of Health Sciences / Ysgol Gwyddorau Iechyd Caerdydd
Cardiff Metropolitan University/ Prifysgol Metropolitan Caerdydd
Llandaff Campus / Campws Llandaf
200 Western Avenue / 200 Rhodfa’r Gorllewin
Cardiff / Caerdydd
CF5 2YB / CF5 2YB

[Redacted]
Appendix 4F

Sample email to prospective participants

My name is Rose O’Driscoll. I am a PhD student at Cardiff Metropolitan University. I am undertaking research with women, aged 45 and over, who have chosen not to have children. My colleague, XX has given me your details and indicated that you may be interested in participating in my study.

I am trying to find out why and how women make that choice and the perceived impact, if any, on their lives. I am seeking participants from as diverse a range of women as I can.

Participation would involve a face to either face, or an online or telephone interview. The interview would be at a venue and a time, which is most convenient for you. It should last no longer than 1½ hours. The interview would be audio recorded. Participants would not be identified personally on the recordings or in any subsequent written work. All data, audio and written would be treated confidentially and destroyed once my study is submitted. I would be happy to provide you with a transcript of your interview.

If you are interested in participating or would like further information before making a decision to participate, please contact me via this email address, rodriscoll@cardiffmet.ac.uk or by telephone 02920 201572.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you in anticipation and I look forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards

Rose O’Driscoll
Appendix 4G

Sample of initial contact email to participants

Thank you again for your interest in my research, this is very good news. As promised, I am attaching some additional information on my study and a consent form. I would also like to add that I will not be asking any questions about your sexual history or your sexuality. The questions centre mainly on your life journey and how and why you have chosen not to have children.

I am happy to do a Skype interview or a telephone interview whichever is most convenient for you. If you are still willing and happy to participate, perhaps you can email me with the following please:

➢ Which day and time is best for you?

➢ Telephone or Skype and whichever one you choose, please let me have your contact name or number.

Once again, thank you for your interest. I very much look forward to talking to you.

With kind regards

Rose O’Driscoll
Appendix 4H

Sample of emails thanking participants for taking part and their responses

From: "O'Driscoll, Rose" <rodriscoll@cardiffmet.ac.uk>
To: [redacted]
Sent: Wednesday, 26 February 2014, 10:42
Subject: Good to meet you

Hi

Many thanks again for a great interview, I listened to it again last night, and I am really pleased with it. Hope you had a pleasant afternoon.
With kind regards
Rose O’

From: [redacted]
Sent: 26 February 2014 18:57
To: O'Driscoll, Rose
Subject: Re: Good to meet you

Hi Rose

It was very good to meet you too and I am glad I was able to contribute to your research; and to think all I could think of when XX first approached me was “well I don’t like kids”...

all the best

From: O'Driscoll, Rose [mailto:rodriscoll@cardiffmet.ac.uk]
Sent: 06 March 2014 17:05
To: [redacted]
Subject: Just to say...
Hi

Many many thanks for an excellent interview and lovely to meet you.
Will let you know my findings in time!!
With kind regards
Rose O’

Hi Rose

It was a pleasure! – I’ll look forward to hearing about your findings. Sounds like a really fascinating piece of research!
Good luck with it! Regards
Appendix 4I
Flyer

**WOMEN WHO CHOOSE NOT TO HAVE CHILDREN**

My name is Rose O’Driscoll. I am a PhD student at Cardiff Metropolitan University. I am doing research with women aged 45 and over who have chosen not to have children.

I am trying to find out why and how women make that choice and the perceived impact, if any, on their lives. As part of this research, I hope to identify and interview a number of women.

If you are a woman who has chosen not to have children, and are interested in being involved in this research, I would very much like to hear from you. Your experience and knowledge would make a worthwhile contribution to this research.

**What does taking part involve?**

Taking part in this research would involve either a face-to-face interview or an online or telephone interview. The interview would be at a venue or a time, which is most convenient for you. It should last no longer than 1½ hours. The interview would be audio recorded. All data, audio and written will be treated confidentially and will be destroyed once the research is completed. Participants are welcome to have a transcript of their interview.

**Yes, I would be interested**

If you would like more information before you make your decision to get involved, please contact me (details below). If you know someone else who might be interested, could you please pass on this information.

My email address is: rodriscoll@cardiffmet.ac.uk; Mobile number provided
Appendix 5: Marital Satisfaction and Children

Fig. 23. As the four separate studies in this graph show, marital satisfaction decreases dramatically after the birth of the first child and increases only when the last child leaves home.

Rose O’Driscoll

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